



Rio+20 Earth Summit, what is next for the Further and Higher Education sector?

The outcome document: 'The Future We Want'

Even if the UN member states did not manage to make a brave collaborative commitment towards a transition of the economy and sustainable development, civil society is getting on with the job. It is clear that the agreements in the document will not lead to the 'future we want'; however it was evident at the summit that civil society (NGO's, businesses and educational institutions), are stepping up the pace of innovation, collaboration and education for sustainability. Rio+20 was very different from the previous two Earth Summits.

This was the first time that civil society was invited to actively participate in a summit at a grand scale and people's movements also worked together to initiate action outside the formal negotiation process. It was also good to see that some international businesses were calling on governments to take action, a significant change from 20 years ago. For example, at the Summit, Virgin's Richard Branson called for an end to fossil fuel subsidies and Puma showcased how it is leading the way with *Integrated Reporting* by publishing its *Environmental Profit and Loss* statement, which shows that the business has drawn down €145m of value from ecosystem services.

It was also the first time that citizens all over the world were invited to participate in the Summit Dialogues via Internet technologies including social media, online voting and video conferencing. The collective creativity and determination of civil society felt electric at times; it has given the participants a real buzz and drive for galvanized action, with or without governmental support.

Rio +20 and Tertiary Education – Engagement and Legacy

In the months leading up to the Summit, civil society stakeholders had an opportunity to engage with the drafting process of the output document *The Future We Want*. The EAUC was also part of that process: earlier this year members were consulted on a statement from Tertiary Education NGOs that fed into the Zero Draft.

The role of Tertiary Education was firmly put on the agenda at Rio+20 through various initiatives and events, to name a few:

- Presentation of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development report
- Higher Education Sustainability Initiative and Declaration
- Peoples Sustainability Treaty on Higher Education led by Prof Daniela Tilbury and Ingrid Mula from the University of Gloucestershire
- Aiming Higher, Tertiary Education Side Event (Co-organized and hosted by the EAUC)
- Global Universities Partnership for Environment and Sustainability initiative (GUPES)
- Earth Charter Initiative Events



Harriet Sjerps-Jones, Board member of the EAUC, spent a week at the Earth Summit in Rio contributing to negotiations, co-hosting a UN Side Event and participating in the Sustainable Development Dialogues. In this report she reflects on the outcomes of the Summit and the opportunities for the sector following from the Future We Want output document and collaborative initiatives.

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Also very noticeable were the commitments of Business Schools to transform how business is taught through:

- Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative
- UN Global Compact (UNGC)
- Rio50+20 initiative

These initiatives are particularly significant because businesses are set to play a major role in transitioning to a green economy. The main business lobby, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development and the UN Global Compact, argued for a level playing field in reporting and regulatory regimes, and are largely responsible for the drive towards natural capital accounting and integrated reporting. Just one example is the UK's requirement for all London-listed companies to disclose their annual green house gas emissions. These corporate lobby groups also pushed for national measures of wealth 'beyond GDP', a prominent element of the final document. These are clearly just steps in a transition towards a green economy – another key idea, sponsored by UNEP and articulated in the 'TEEB' report by Pavan Sukhdev, Chief Economist of Deutsche Bank. Business Schools are expected to contribute both research and teaching in this regard.

The EAUC's Side Event, "**Aiming higher, unlocking tertiary education's potential to accelerate sustainable development and the transition to a fair and green economy**", organised in collaboration with sister organisations from across the globe, was well attended and attracted representatives from Universities from all over the world. The panel discussion was opened by *Prof Sir Robert Watson*, Chief Scientific Advisor to DEFRA. In his statement he emphasised that HEIs should demonstrate how institutions can be sustainable. He also stressed the importance of interdisciplinary research and education. He said: "*Students need to learn deep disciplinary expertise, but also need to learn to relate to other disciplines. We need to make disciplines work together*". He further urged universities to teach students advanced communication skills. Students need to learn to differentiate in their communications, they need to learn to communicate effectively to other disciplines, but also policy makers and the press.

Although the event lasted only 90 minutes, it is the collective lobbying effort of the partner organisations prior to the summit and the engagement of governments in the event that will have made a lasting impact. As *Professor Eui-Soon Shin* from KAGI (Korea) commented "*I am sure that our concerted efforts definitely affected the final draft*". In the months leading up to the event, the EAUC has had discussions with *Rt Hon Michael Gove* (Education) and *Rt Hon Caroline Spelman* (DEFRA) and the UK negotiators. This was made possible through the support of *Bicton College* and the *University of Exeter*. Because of my Dutch roots, I was in a fortunate position to also engage with the delegation from the Netherlands. Our partner organisations further engaged governments of China, Japan, South Korea, Australasia, USA and other European countries.

Where do we go from here?

Education for Sustainable Development has significant support in the outcome document and there is a will to take ESD beyond the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The *Peoples Sustainability Treaty on Higher Education* and the *Higher Education Sustainability Initiative and Declaration* will hopefully further invite commitments from Universities and Colleges and inspire transformation of the sector.

UN State Secretary Ban Khi Moon commented in his remarks to General Assembly on outcome of Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (28 June 2012):

"The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative attracted hundreds of endorsers and commitments from 250 universities in about 50 countries. This initiative is transformative, global in reach and could reach thousands of graduates from universities and business schools."

Towards the end of the summit, I caught up with Dep. PM Nick Clegg and we discussed how the tertiary sector could take a lead in the green economy. His reply was encouraging and offers an opening for the EAUC to follow up. There are plenty encouraging statements in the outcome document that we can build on and we will ask our government how they are going to turn these aspirations into reality.





Each individual EAUC Member should feel encouraged to take ESD further in their own institutions and organisations and support the Treaty and Declaration if they can. It is over to us to take action and remind our government that building the 'Future We Want' starts today, not tomorrow.

Inspiring the Future

To me, the Earth Summit was a firm confirmation that we are moving into a new era of grass roots movement and empowerment. Change is not going to be initiated by governments or international agreements. Policy makers will be the followers not the trailblazers of a sustainable future. My personal highlights were to see Gro Brundtland as fiery and determined as ever, to hear Dasho Karma Tshiteem, 'happiness' minister of Bhutan, arguing that the time we can spend with family and friends should be valued in GDP, and to talk to Severn Susuki who inspired the Summit 20 years ago as a child, now holding her 4 month old baby in her arms. There is still plenty of room for optimism.

Education in the Future We Want document

- 229. We reaffirm our commitments to the right to education and in this regard, we commit to strengthen international cooperation to achieve universal access to primary education, particularly for developing countries. We further reaffirm that full access to quality education at all levels is an essential condition for achieving sustainable development, poverty eradication, gender equality and women's empowerment as well as human development, for the attainment of the internationally agreed development goals including the Millennium Development Goals, as well as for the full participation of both women and men, in particular young people. In this regard, we stress the need for ensuring equal access to education for persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, local communities, ethnic minorities and people living in rural areas.
- 230. We recognize that the younger generations are the custodians of the future, as well as the need for better quality and access to education beyond the primary level. We therefore resolve to improve the capacity of our education systems to prepare people to pursue sustainable development, including through enhanced teacher training, the development of curricula around sustainability, the development of training programmes that prepare students for careers in fields related to sustainability, and more effective use of information and communication technologies to enhance learning outcomes. We call for enhanced cooperation among schools, communities and authorities in efforts to promote access to quality education at all levels.
- 231. We encourage Member States to promote Sustainable Development awareness among youth, inter alia, by promoting programmes for non-formal education in accordance with the goals of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.
- 232. We emphasize the importance of greater international cooperation to improve access to education including through building and strengthening education infrastructure, increasing investment in education particularly investment to improve the quality of education for all in developing countries. We encourage international educational exchanges and partnerships, including the creation of fellowships and scholarships to help achieve global education goals.
- 233. We resolve to promote Education for Sustainable Development and to integrate sustainable development more actively into education beyond the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).
- 234. We strongly encourage educational institutions to consider adopting good practices in sustainability management on their campuses and in their communities with the active participation of inter alia students, teachers, and local partners, and teaching sustainable development as an integrated component across disciplines.
- 235. We underscore the importance of supporting educational institutions, especially higher educational institutions in developing countries, to carry out research and innovation for sustainable development, including in the field of education, to develop quality and innovative programmes, including entrepreneurship and business skills training, professional, technical, vocational training and lifelong learning, geared to bridging skills gaps for advancing national sustainable development objectives.

Other recommended documents and resources:

- For anyone who would like to read a more fair assessment of the Rio Summit than the commentary in the UK press, I would recommend to read the *Huffington Post's* [analyses](#).
- All Rio+20 documents, reports, video recordings and governmental statements are available on the [Rio+20 website](#)
- Full [The Future We Want document](#)
- The High-level Panel on Global Sustainability's report ["Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing"](#)
- [Monitoring and Evaluation Report](#) on the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development
- Richard Branson's [Carbon War Room](#) project
- All the Rio news on [EAUC website](#)