



# Rethinking higher education for sustainable development in Serbia: an assessment of Copernicus charter principles in current higher education practices



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current and future potential of higher education for sustainable development in the Republic of Serbia drawing upon years of engagement in national sustainable development strategic planning and monitoring activities. Paper is structured as follows: first part is assessing the current developments in theory and practice of higher education for sustainable development, and possible implications on Serbian higher education practice. Following that, the criteria for the assessment of current situation in Serbian higher education space, including weakness and possibilities, are developed in the second part. Criteria are developed based on Copernicus charter. Conclusions and recommendations are drafted in the third part, based on the assessment results.

The paper argues that it is appropriate and desirable to accelerate the efforts on internal integration of Serbian Universities, as a precondition for further activities on the introduction of sustainability. Besides that, public sector and academic community must quest for innovative way of connection between higher education institutions and the community, predominantly through modernization of curricula and new research agenda. Education of educators for sustainable development may be the starting point for further steps in Serbia.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has been gaining a well-deserved recognition over the past decades, proving to be the path to adopt when aiming toward a genuine social and economic development (Rodgers et al., 2008; Dalal-Clayton and Bass, 2003; Milutinovic, 2012). One particular factor – the quality of the human capital – has proven the most important condition for a successful transition toward a sustainable model of development.

The vision of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2005; Hopkins and McKeown, 2002; Landorf et al., 2008) is a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviors and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. ESD equally addresses all three pillars of sustainable development – society, environment and economy – with culture as an essential additional and underlying dimension. By embracing

these elements in a holistic and integrated manner, ESD enables all individuals to fully develop the knowledge, perspectives, values and skills necessary to take part in decisions to improve the quality of life both locally and globally on terms which are most relevant to their daily lives.

Republic of Serbia is currently in the process of drafting the Strategy of Education Development to 2020+. It may be seen as first comprehensive and “umbrella” policy document in Serbian education area. The strength of this strategy should be the fact that it treats education in close connection with other sectors and that the changes cover all education levels from preschool to lifelong learning, with a strong emphasize on higher education (Ivic and Pesikan, 2012). It is of crucial importance to embed the principles of ESD into the existing participation planning process and drafts produced. This paper aims to assess current ‘state-of-the-art’ in ESD and accordingly to provide recommendations for decision makers involved in above mentioned strategic planning process, as well as to contribute to the visioning exercise of future HE in Serbia. The assessment emphasize is given more on embedding HESD into the strategic decisions and institutional setting at the country level. Main research question is what the weaknesses of Serbian higher education system make the constraints for ESD and what strategic

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intervention can make these weaknesses less influential. To answer that question, we analyzed the current performance at meso level (i.e. at the level of organizations – Universities and faculties/departments, including their internal links and links with the Serbian educational authorities), with the primary aim to draw conclusions at macro level (policy implications).

## 2. Higher education for sustainable development – theoretical background

Recent research provides evidence of an increasing focus by higher education institutions on incorporating the concepts of sustainability into research and operations, globally (Adom̂bent et al., 2007; Stephens et al., 2008; Lozano, 2010; Karatzoglou, 2013; Copernicus Campus, 2012), as well as in the Republic of Serbia (Loncar, 2011; Nadic, 2011). Moreover, universities are not only the place where professionals are to be trained; many scholars argue about their more important role and responsibility for sustainability by virtue of its influence on societies (Davies et al., 2003; Sibbel, 2009). However, there is also an evidence to suggest that higher education does not fully understand the true nature of the challenge (Abdul-Wahab et al., 2003; Ferreira and Tilbury, 2011; Cotton and Winter, 2010; Nomura and Abe, 2009) and that sustainable development is still considered as an innovative idea in most universities (Lozano, 2006), and has not yet permeated all disciplines, scholars, and university leaders (Fien, 2002). The introduction of sustainable development education in higher education arena is closely related with the predominant understanding of higher education role within the society: is it the primary role of University to develop individual skills and integrative knowledge of students, required for their better position on the job market (Stelmack et al., 2005), or to contribute creating a democratic and ecologically just world (Wals and Jickling, 2002).

Majority of countries (including Serbia) have committed themselves to follow the sustainability pathways by different strategic documents (National Sustainable Development Strategies, strategies for the education for sustainable development and many more). To a great extent those strategic papers in South-Eastern Europe strictly followed the orientation toward the “education *about* sustainable development”, instead the “education *for* sustainable development”. The difference was not only linguistic: education *for* sustainable development underlines the promotion of values and behaviors in line with sustainable development principles. On the other hand, education *about* sustainable development means teaching and learning about the concept itself, politics, policies and sustainable development theories, including the parallels with similar concepts and theories. Societies in transition (as Serbian) clearly need the mixed approach (Wals, 2009), particularly in higher education area:

- Education for sustainable development as a means of knowledge transfer and values creation;
- Education for sustainable development as a means of human capacity development and the development of personal abilities to choose sustainable alternative.

Science, education and researches are (and should increasingly be) the driving force for enhanced sustainability (Barth et al., 2011). If one acknowledges the fact that education, beside the transfer of knowledge, aims to release and strength creative potentials of each individual, as well as to enable his or her development, than the nature of education itself should be encouraging, benevolent, liberated and stimulating. Allegiance and discipline are often the impediment for changes, innovations and the creation of new social democracy. Given that, the ultimate goal of education policies in

XXI century, including Serbian, should be the development of critical thinking, dogma- and prejudices-free. To create creative individuals, enthusiastic for innovations, who think independently and act cooperatively, means to create individuals with emotional intelligence (i.e. the ability for self-motivation, the using of emotions and self-control) (Boyatzis and Saatioglu, 2008), interpersonal intelligence (i.e. the ability to understand others) (Campbell et al., 2004) and social intelligence (i.e. the ability to use knowledge to solve social and life problems). Thus educational reform needs to give precedence on the creativity, critical thinking, personal choices through elective contents and interdisciplinarity. Moreover, the reform should introduce learning-by-doing and life-long learning principles as an important precondition for better adjustment to job market.

## 3. Research methodology

How to assess ESD depends to a great extent of the purpose and the context of assessment itself. When discussing about indicators of HESD, Siemer *et al.* structured the ESD assessment issues with respect to three key interdependent areas or levels (Siemer *et al.*, 2006):

- the area of political-regulative guidelines, laws and programs, as well as national or international strategies,
- the area of appraisal and/or evaluation guidelines with respect to sustainability assessment tools,
- the area of universities themselves as educational institutions, to specifically include their own sustainability indicators,

that is in line with Rode's macro (at the level of federal, regional and national structures), meso (within institutions) and micro (at the classroom level) assessment indicators (Rode, 2006; cited in Capelo et al., 2012: 99). Majority of assessment tools have been developed for meso and micro level assessment (Roorda and Martens, 2008; Pollock et al., 2009; Lozano, 2010; Wigmore and Ruiz, 2010; Mader, 2012). However, macro-level assessment, i.e. assessment of overall higher education system, vision, strategy and institutional setting at the national level is still most applicable to be done according principles drafted in international commitments and declarations (Talloires Declaration, Halifax Declaration, Swansea Declaration, COPERNICUS University Charter for Sustainable Development, Lüneburg Declaration, Turin Declaration, COPERNICUS 2.0, etc). As pointed in Grinsted (2011), international commitments and declarations have been significant for at least three reasons: it have contributed to the emerging consensus on the university's role and function in relation to sustainable development; it have influenced national legislation; and universities are beginning to compete to become a leading in sustainable campus performance. As concluded in Lozano et al. (2010), key elements that must be integrated systemically in the HEIs in order to provide SD transition include curricula, research and operations; outreach and engagement with stakeholders; collaboration with other universities; assessment and reporting; institutional framework; on-campus life experiences; and ‘educate the educators’ programmes. Our opinion is that the principles listed in COPERNICUS charter<sup>1</sup> are currently most applicable for macro assessment of Serbian higher education area. Moreover, three from six Serbian Universities (Belgrade, Nis and Kragujevac) endorsed the Charter.

<sup>1</sup> COPERNICUS 2.0 was not yet published officially at the time of this research (September 2010).

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