A consideration of the changing focus on the sustainable development in higher education in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this article is to analyse the implementation of the sustainability factor in Polish higher education after the amendment to the Law of Higher Education. On the one hand Poland participates in European environmental politics, takes part in international forums, on the other hand the application of sustainable development for concrete sector policies is weak, if not insufficient, which attests to the discontinuity of transmission between declarations and political actions. The first part of this article shows the key challenges to the concept of a "sustainable university" as well as the level of its implementation within the Polish higher education system. The next section deals with Poland. Its purpose is to demonstrate the possibility of sustainable change in Polish tertiary education institutions according to the Law of Higher Education. The last part presents two case studies: The University of Warsaw (UW) and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (AMU), the leading Polish institutions of knowledge. This part of the paper also presents institutional obstacles to the implementation of sustainability in the Polish tertiary education system.

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1. Towards the idea of the sustainable university

Since decade, the role of the sustainable development in European higher education has been increasing (see: Adomssent and Beringer, 2008; Adomssent et al., 2009; Adomssent et al., 2006). Researchers have underlined the role of the sustainable change within the higher education system by creating a network between university and region (Arbo and Benneworth, 2007, p. 79–84). The main aim of the paper is the analysing of the sustainable change of the university. The reconstruction of the idea of 'sustainable university' follows that of the group of German researchers, who have described the models of sustainable transformation of knowledge institutions (see: Adomssent and Michelsen, 2006; Michelsen, 2011). At the beginning, two issues have to be distinguished: the university's education to sustainable development from the creation of the institutional concept of the "sustainable university". What does "sustainable university" mean? Adomssent and Beringer (2008) point out:

"A sustainable university project tackles the challenge of sustainability in higher education at the institutional level. To modify higher education as an institution, in its entirety, towards sustainability remains a huge challenge. Only a few universities worldwide have taken on this challenge" [4, p. 610].

The crucial issues related to sustainable development strongly affect the mission of the university, its system of research and education, and its relation to external stakeholders. Several case studies prove that sustainable change occurs around the world (see: Fihlo, 2010). Today a university is expected to be engaged in crucial social problems, and to find innovative solutions. Universities are expected to be involved with social, technological and environmental issues. It is important to highlight another aspect, which meets these various expectations towards the modern university halfway: transdisciplinary, which is an attribute of sustainable development (Scholz, 2011). Transdisciplinarity is especially significant in times of crisis, when the need for universities to be engaged economically and where their innovative suggestions are emphasised. Scholz explains the meaning of transdisciplinarity:

"Transdisciplinarity [...] organize mutual learning among members of science and society that can generate socially robust knowledge. For the most part this mutual learning takes place in transdisciplinarity processes in which members from the scientific community and the community in general interact with decision makers, stakeholders, or the public at large", (p. 375).

Another matter is the ethical expectations. The modern university, in Humboldt's, Newman's or Jefferson's version has always highlighted the mission of axiological and civil formation. In our present day, environmental values are included amongst civil axiology. Modern societies are becoming increasingly aware of the need of a certain respect towards environmental issues and human diversity, which are marked out by the concepts of liberal democracy (see: Nussbaum, 1998; Rawls, 2005). Sustainable development is associated above all with ecology and social justice, but also with a healthy lifestyle, living in harmony with nature, an eco-friendly development approach, which means that there is a need for education in this field and the commitment of public institutions. Yet, it is not sufficient enough to limit oneself to ecological expectations. Adomssent and Beringer (2008) explains a wider ethical challenge, e.g. a resignation from utilitarian consumer ethics and a movement towards a new model of human action, a so called "environmental justice", based on the protection of and respect for nature:

> "One can argue that current challenges of unsustainability exist because previous and existing ethics have not kept pace with scientific-technological developments; that dominant modes of anthropocentrism and utilitarian ethics which emphasize resource use over the rights of nature − environmental justice, care, and respect − have failed to reign in human induced environmental degradation and its associated and interwoven social implications" (p. 618).

The idea of sustainable development joins these expectations in a modern form, that is why it is necessary to introduce it on a wider scale to the discourse concerning the role of universities today. Marco Rieckmann (2012) ascertains education for sustainable development as an element of knowledge, decisions and long-term cultural consequences:

> "The concept of HESD can be linked to the future at least in two ways: On the one hand, it aims to develop sustainability key competencies and, thus, to enable students to deal with difficult problems and to contribute to a sustainable future. On the other hand, it is about the future of higher education itself, because it raises the question of how higher education should look in the future in order to be able to take part in the sustainable development of (world) society." (p. 128).

Sustainable development becomes a new point of reference for current global problems marked out on three levels: nature, economy and social justice. These issues have a strong influence on public institutions, as well as universities. A university's commitment to these issues entails its commitment to future global problems:

> "Discourses concerning sustainable universities and Higher Education for Sustainable Development give some guidance as to what strategies could be used and what measures could be taken to ensure that universities can meet these challenges. One important element is that universities create these kinds of teaching and learning environments in which future professionals will be able to cope with issues of sustainable development and to deal with difficult problems in their future fields of work and thus contribute to a sustainable future" (6, p. 134).

2. Sustainable development and the institutional change in the university

In what areas are institutional changes introduced in a university leading in the direction of sustainable development? The University has to acquire new educational tasks, which include formative tasks, directed at students as well as the University's environment. Nevertheless, accepting the model of a 'sustainable university' implies implementation of complex institutional reforms. Michelsen (2011) indicates two basic institutional tasks for a sustainable university: 'design of sustainability indicators in/for higher education' (which is a means of transformation of a university into more sustainable institution) and 'initiating and assessing transformative learning processes' (which means seeking good practice and suitable designs for a sustainable policy for universities).

The first, and probably most important area of sustainable changes, is the *university's mission*. The contemporary European university is in a state of serious mission crisis. Europe's secularized societies see no common reference point neither in religion (in the case of Newman's model), nor in the national state (in the case of Humboldt's model). Contemporary universities based on globalized civic values, which include the expectations of sustainable development policy. Since Clark Kerr, the president of the UCLA and his concept of the university as a multiversity, focused on business, commercialisation of the results, the meaning of knowledge institutions has been changed (Kerr, 2010; Newfield, 2011). A concept of the sustainable university meets these dilemmas halfway, allows discovering new growth rates in economic as well as ethical action. Below the selected areas of university sustainable transformation are analysed.

First and the most important sustainable change should be the *mission of the university*. The mission is proof of the will of the academic community and the main direction of the change. The 'sustainable mission' can be considered in two dimensions. The first, the institutional dimension, implies providing the university with institutional support in the form of accepting its activity and values leading towards a policy of sustainable development. The second, the formative dimension, implies an educational policy; the mission level then comes into being, a prominent symbol of the university's educational priorities. It should be added that introducing SD to the mission creates the possibility of implementing a sustainable strategy according to the 'top down' method.

The next sphere will be *the process education*, the aim of which is to bring the subject matter of sustainable development closer, as well as to increase competencies, understood as skills of moving trans-disciplinarily through knowledge and social practices, and ethical competencies, the skills of acting responsibly and reflectively. According to Barth et al. (2007) education in the field of the sustainable university should include the following competencies:

> "[…] Competency in foresighted thinking, competency in interdisciplinary work, competency in cosmopolitan perception, transcultural understanding, and cooperation, learning participatory skills, competency in planning and implementation skills, a capacity for empathy, compassion, and solidarity, competency in self-motivation and in motivating others, competency in reflection on individual and cultural models" (p. 256).

The education of students must assume an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. demonstrating various aspects of knowledge connected by the denominator of environmental protection and the development of economic resources. The education of sustainability must be designed in wider interdisciplinary contexts, methodologies and disciplines, from biological, through social finishing with the arts and humanities (Burton and Dlouha, 2011; Agenda 21). Here trans-disciplinarity entails lack of a dominating discipline and flexibility in joining different disciplines:

> "[…] The 'Sustainable University' project can be described as an actor- and problem-oriented project, and as a discipline-spanning project. In order to do justice to the diversity of