

ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF ISSUES AND THEMES

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ABSTRACT

The environmental issue has become the important agenda of development discourse. The depletion and degradation of natural resources and global warming have caused concern. In this context, environmental education becomes imperative. The role of universities and higher education institutions in providing environmental education and ensuring sustainable development may be crucial however, such institutions are not well prepared. The paper attempts to explore the role of universities in environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Introduction

Environment is today the concern of everyone. The environmental issues have moved from a peripheral to central concern of the global agenda. With the depletion of resources on the one hand, and extensive pollution of land, air and water on the other, the very existence of mankind on this planet is threatened. Global warming and the change in the pattern and timings of seasons have already begun wreaking havoc.

The time has come to analyze the role of higher educational institutions to the solution to protect the environment, minimize pollution and also to lay down an international policy towards environmental conservation and sustainable development.

The role of universities as 'a centre of knowledge' in terms of 'achieving quality of life' through information about the new discoveries, initiation into new technology and imparting of employable skills is unquestioned. This knowledge leads to achieve excellence with value-based and modern monoquent techniques in its whole ambit of activities.

Evolutionary changes have been taking place in field of environmental

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policy, and the significance of the higher education institutions lies in influencing development decisions and actions by providing the concepts, strategies, solutions, options and lessons from experience. These institutions can play an important role by providing expertise and knowledge base pertaining to environmental conservation policies, planning, programmes and projects. The educational institutions especially universities will promote the understanding of how systems interact on the principles of rigorous research based on reason and scientific principles. This will help towards excellence and to understand the relationship between policy and action, devise methodologies for integrating environment and development of different hierarchies of institutions and bring about reconciliation between different scales of problems and opportunities.

Environmental Studies and Higher Education

World is changing at a fast pace. It is changing because there is rapid development of science and technology which is affecting life of man-social, economic, cultural, national and international. Population growth is another important factor that creates problems in the field of environmental protection and development throughout the world. This changed scenario is creating numerous problems to the society. Thus, the education in general and higher education in particular is the only unalterable fundamental factor shaping the spirit of individual human being, society and state as well as civilization. Following are various approaches to the development of environmental education adopted by the higher education institutions to solve the environmental problems:

1. Environmental education in higher educational institutions is offered as a type with a distinct bias for ecology.
2. Higher education is engaged to provide environmental education through various subjects in its curriculum. This approach will help to make aware the society towards environmental problems through curriculum successfully.
3. Environmental education is given a fresh style of education in the universities which will seek to make students fully aware of the problems connected with environment and teach them new attitudes and behaviour to enable them together with the other members of their community to contribute to their solution.
4. To develop new attitudes and behaviour pattern in the students to take decision required for environmental protection and development.
5. To increase awareness of responsibility among the students about immediate and long-term repercussions.

6. The higher education institutions help to bring about a technological world which is consistent with the 'real needs' of development and 'solutions to problems'.

Universities and Environmental Problems

Higher educational institutions are probably better and more effective instruments of ensuring equity, social justice and sustainable development than many other direct measures. Higher education adds to the stock of knowledge of the society and widens its horizons which is very important. For environmental conservation and sustainability these areas of the study are much importance. To manage the environmental problems it needs educated and trained manpower for manning different positions both for institutions of innovative processes and for exercise of surveillance. In fact, the university system is believed to be in a position to assure the required support of trained citizens, leaders, administrators, teachers, doctors, technologists, managers, scientists, etc. essential for better living standards and for betterment of environment.

Information about the environmental concepts flows through formal, informal and non-formal channels. Environmental problem analysis in the form of environmental scanning provides the stimuli. The university must recognize environmental purposes and pulls to gain and hold environmental related problem support. The very existence of a university is highly conditioned on the clues and responses extracted from the environment issues and action. Hence, environmental problem related analysis is essential not only for evaluating performance of a university, but also for diagnosing its failures and for introducing changes to enhance its future effectiveness.

The universities have an important role of policy in generating public awareness, protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development-"that seeks to meet the needs of aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability to meet those of future generations." As John Berry (1993) puts it ". . . . universities are the best source of expertise to conduct the necessary research and guide the development of policy framework. They are also the training ground for the next generation of society's leaders who need to be educated regardless of their discipline, with a broad and sensitive understanding of the issues."

The role of universities was discussed at a conference of 'Universities Acton for Sustainable Development' held at Dalhousie University Halifax, Canada in December 1991. The Declaration issued at the end of conference emphasizes that "Universities and their graduates must be significant actors if (human) demands (upon the planets) are to be shaped into sustainable and equitable forms necessary for a wholesome future environment".

The Halifax Declaration (IAU/UNU4/AUCC/DU, 1992) asked the universities to:

- “Ensure that the voice of university is clear and uncompromising in its ongoing commitment to the principle and practice of sustainable development within the university, and at the local, national and global level.
- Utilize the intellectual resource of the university to encourage a better understanding on the part of society of the inter-related physical, biological and social dangers facing the planet Earth.
- Emphasize the ethical obligation of the present generation to overcome those current malpractices of resource utilization and those widespread circumstances of intolerable human disparity which lie at the root of environmental un-sustainability.
- Establish whatever programmes are necessary within the university to generate the capability and the capacity necessary to develop appropriate environmental technologies and practices as well as to diminish environmental illiteracy and enhance ethical awareness on the part of faculty, students, and the public at large.
- Cooperate with one another and with segments of society in the pursuit of practical, effective revision and reversals of those current practices which contribute to environmental degradation.
- Employ all channels open to the university to communicate these undertakings to UNCED, to governments and to the public at large.”

Importance of Research and Development

Higher education institutions are engaged to provide the best means of training and sharpening of intellect for betterment in the field of science and technology. Three most important areas stated to be determining the course of 21st century are: advanced material, biotechnology and information technology. Universities are making all efforts in building up of R & D in these areas for betterment in environmental conservation issues. A good level of high quality research in basic science is characteristics of all developed economies. Although these institutions of present suffers from several weakness such as:

1. Proliferation of substandard institutions, (2) failure to maintain academic calendar, (3) outdated curriculum, (4) disparities in the quality of education, and (5) lack of adequate support for research. This apart, the system of education research faces three major challenges in the field of R & D in the changed scenario. They are: (a) to cope up with the inadequate resources situation, (b) to respond adequately to the demand of

providing (i) competent manpower and (ii) high quality of R & D support, and (c) uphold the value system. These challenges imply the following imperatives:

- (a) resource mobilization,
- (b) optimal utilization of resources,
- (c) collaboration, networking and sharing of facilities,
- (d) undertaking international interaction, and
- (e) seeking excellence and relevance in the R & O efforts.

The universities have a crucial role to play by educating people at all levels, conducting research, making objective assessments and advising on learning matters. The universities can play an important role in meeting environmental challenges by undertaking R & D, training and extension programmes aimed at raising public awareness about environment development and conservation activities. Sound environmental policies, strategies, and practices, on the part of the administration, will go a long way in influencing and motivating all sections of the university community—students, teachers and administrative staff.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The role of universities towards environmental conservation and sustainable development have enunciated defined goals to achieve support and promote general welfare and to create and maintain conditions under which man's activities and nature can co-exist in harmony. The responsibility of the environmental decision maker and planner is to serve the major goals outlined in the environmental policy. The universities have a big challenge to achieve this environmental issue and themes through integrated planning approach to develop public policy programmes to environmental quality and control. The universities have a crucial role to play in educating people at all levels, conducting research, making objective assessments and advising on policy matters.

Environment would remain an important dimension in the years to come and it is time to develop a common paradigm for research in the field. Although universities are trying hard to meet these challenges both in formal and non-formal part of environmental education, but the concept of global will is still not there to achieve the desired objective. The problem of environmental degradation is so serious that it needs acceptable and useful global approach with reference to environment education. The environmental education should be made more dynamic and functional by

undertaking programmes of higher educational institutions involvement and participation.

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