

# Introduction



There are over 351 public and private institutions of higher learning educating thousands of young men and women to be successful in their future careers on the African continent (Guide to Higher Education in Africa (IAU/UNESCO/AAU, 2004). Graduates from these higher education institutions ought to be able to apply their learning to improve their lives, make responsible decisions and influence others for the better. Graduates from these institutions have an important role to play in Africa's future.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) together with its partners, drawing on experience gained from previous programmes of working with universities in Africa, and with universities worldwide, is supporting a partnership programme to **mainstream environment and sustainability** concerns into the teaching, research, community engagement and management of universities in Africa.

The MESA (Mainstreaming Environment & Sustainability into African Universities) Partnership includes the following:

- An **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Innovations short course** developed and implemented by partners (to strengthen capacity to establish ESD innovations in universities);
- **Seminars for university leaders;**
- A **biennial conference** providing an opportunity for universities to report on ESD innovations associated with the university's triple mission of research, teaching and community engagement, and to engage in North-South dialogue; and
- **Pilot programmes** linking universities, communities and business and industry in sustainable development partnerships.

The MESA Universities Partnership strengthens UNEP's special focus on Africa and is constituted as a major contribution to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD). The MESA Universities Partnership also supports the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) environmental action plan and the objectives of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment. The NEPAD Environmental Action Plan (UNEP, 2003) indicates that the state of the environment is a major determinant of the growth and development objectives of any nation



and has a pervasive effect on the safety and standard of living of the populace. One of the strategic actions in the NEPAD Environmental Action Plan is the 'development of capacity in all aspects of environmental issues in Africa' (UNEP 2003). Universities will have a key role to play in strengthening capacity for sustainable development through ESD initiatives.

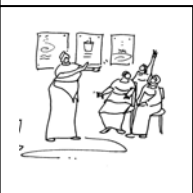
UNESCO, in its role as task manager for the UNDESSED, explains ESD as follows:

*ESD prepares people of all walks of life to plan for, cope with and find solutions for issues that threaten the sustainability of our planet ... Understanding and addressing these global issues of sustainability that affect individual nations and communities are at the heart of ESD. These issues come from the three spheres of sustainable development – environment, society and economy. Environmental issues like water and waste affect every nation, as do social issues like employment, human rights, gender equity, peace and human security. Every country also has to address economic issues such as poverty reduction and corporate responsibility and accountability. Major issues that have grabbed global attention such as HIV/AIDS, migration, climate change and urbanisation involve more than one sphere of sustainability. Such issues are highly complex and will require broad and sophisticated educational strategies for this and the next generation of leaders and citizens to find solutions. Educating to deal with complex issues that threaten planetary sustainability is the challenge of ESD. Education reform alone will not accomplish this. It will take a broad and deep effort from many sectors of society (UNESCO, 2005:3).*

The overall goal of the UNDESSED is:

*To integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This education effort will encourage change in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations (UNESCO, 2005).*

The goals of the UNDESSED are to: 1) facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction amongst stakeholders in ESD; 2) to foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development; 3) help countries make progress towards, and attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through ESD efforts; and 4) to provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts (UNESCO, 2005).



One of the major thrusts of ESD, which is underscored by the UN Implementation Scheme for the UNDES D is **re-orientation of education** at all levels (including universities). This involves the strengthening of institutional and operational capacity for a consistent and systematic mainstreaming of ESD into policies, programmes and learning activities. It is these broader objectives for ESD that are directly addressed by the MESA Universities Partnership.

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# The MESA Universities Partnership objectives

The MESA Universities Partnership aims to enhance the **quality** and **policy relevance** of university education in Africa through the implementation of sustainability as an underlying topic in diverse curricula and as practice in all other aspects of university life. The overarching goal is to create a scientific knowledge base about Education for Sustainable Development in Africa, for all students and staff, and to develop action competence and awareness which will benefit the lives and careers of the direct programme participants. The objectives are:

- To enhance the **quality and policy relevance of university education** in Africa in the context of sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals;
- To **increase knowledge on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**, so that the future business managers, scientists and political leaders of the continent will incorporate values and principles of sustainable development in their decision-making;
- To raise awareness and **spread a new way of thinking about environment, development and society**, beyond the university boundaries inside the many other social circles in which students, teachers and managers live;
- To offer unprecedented **opportunities for collaborative projects** between universities/civil society/communities and the private sector; and
- To contribute to the **revitalisation** of Africa's higher education system, and to strengthen African scholarship and African partnerships for sustainable development.





## Involvement of multiple actors in universities

Introducing ESD innovations into African universities will require the commitment and action of multiple actors. The MESA Universities Partnership therefore addresses several actors in and outside universities:

- **University Management:** decides on university ESD policy so can set an example and can also encourage private sector involvement.
- **Teaching Staff:** need to mainstream ESD into curricula; mentor students on subjects such as consumption patterns, use of natural resources, climate change, gender balancing and brain drain; and undertake projects with many actors.
- **Students:** are taught ESD in their curricula, they are expected to be creative and develop initiatives on ESD in campus life and projects, and be an example in their communities. The programme is designed for mainly upper level university students (senior undergraduate and postgraduate students). They will develop student initiatives, be a bridge between staff and students, and plan ESD-related activities.
- **The Private Sector and Civil Society/Communities:** participation means there will be outside input from the beginning of the process and output for the outside world at the end.





# Universities in Africa and the MESA Universities Partnership

The MESA Universities Partnership is an initiative that seeks, through its partnership with the African Association of Universities, to support all universities in Africa to strengthen their contributions to sustainability. In doing this, the MESA Universities Partnership recognises the complex history of universities in Africa, and acknowledges recent debates on the problems associated with pre-defining narrow 'developmentalist' approaches for universities in Africa (as described in the brief history of African universities that follows).

The MESA Universities Partnership ESD Innovations in African Universities will need to grapple with history, if they are to be relevant in contemporary and future contexts. In this process, these innovations will need to 'reach beyond' some of the historically constraining factors that shape institutional practice in universities, and look outwards to the broader community of life for new partnerships and new ways of working with communities that are more sustainable and that provide options for a better life for present and future generations. As Mamdani (1994:15) argued more than 10 years ago " ... it is time to begin to think of how we can root African universities in African soil", signalling an interest in re-thinking **the nature of the institution itself**, and its role in society (Mamdani, 1996).

## The history of universities in Africa

### - influencing innovations in sustainable development today -

African society has a long and rich tradition of intellectualism, which included the formation of early universities. Despite this long history, 'modern day' institutions of higher learning in Africa have a relatively short history, with many complex factors influencing the African university, and its response to sustainable development today.

These include:

- The **relatively short history of modern day African universities**. Colonial powers only took an intermittent interest in higher learning after the Second World War before which only a few 'University Colleges' existed.
- African Universities were **established in the colonies to reproduce the patterns characteristic of British, French and Belgian universities**. Therefore the curriculum and institutional forms of African institutions of



higher learning were heavily influenced by their direct affiliations with universities in Britain, France and Belgium.

- While the University Colleges established in the colonial era became autonomous and independent institutions after independence, many of the 'special relationships' that existed with the University of London, the Universities of Paris and Bordeaux and the University of Louvain continued after independence. For example, at the University of Dakar, degrees were still issued by France's Ministry of National Education until 1968 (Africa Watch, 1991), indicating that **becoming autonomous and independent required more than political change.**
- A **relatively rapid expansion** of higher education institutions took place after independence in the early 1960s as "... **the forces of nationalism confronted the academic heritage of the colonial period**" (Africa Watch, 1991: 10). This expansion of higher education institutions resulted from nation state investments in human resource development to strengthen emerging government institutions and implement development priorities. As Mamdani (1994:1) explains, higher education in Africa is "... basically a post-independence phenomenon", as only a handful of African universities existed at the end of the colonial era. The post-independence nationalist agenda influenced debates on the curriculum and the institutional form and purpose of African universities. A key curriculum issue debated at the time, was the relationship between 'pure' theoretical work and the practical solutions required for the development needs of the newly emerging independent state. This led to a proliferation of 'development studies' in various faculties in African universities.
- Many universities found themselves working primarily at producing and implementing research and knowledge to further the development agenda of the state as **state control of universities shaped (and in some cases constrained) possibilities for academic freedom** in post-independent states. This, in many instances, led to a somewhat 'utilitarian' model of Higher Education (Africa Watch, 1991:12). Unfortunately, protests against this model sometimes led to violence and human rights abuses. The utilitarian agenda of the development state, while supporting developmental objectives, also had the effect of **curtailing academic freedom and some forms of critical engagement with political, social, economic and environmental issues affecting broader society** (Africa Watch, 1991; Mamdani, 1994).
- In the 1970s many universities were hard hit by the impact of the global oil crisis and the subsequent recession and financial crisis in Africa. This was exacerbated by World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s that reduced spending on education, health and social services. Despite a rich pool of critical and intellectual debate in Dar es Salaam, Kampala and other centres, **higher education was viewed as a secondary priority in education systems**, as most government funding was allocated to basic education. **Universities experienced a severe funding crisis.** At



the same time, demand for higher education increased as post-independence spending on basic education produced more people wanting access to higher education. **The result was expanding numbers of students with insufficient resources to service their needs. This placed university staff, courses and administration systems under severe stress.** It also led to a **weakening of research.** With high levels of dependence on government funding, the academic system was vulnerable to **the pressures of political conformity, self-censorship and a significant brain drain,** which together had negative consequences for intellectual development in African Universities (Africa Watch, 1991; Diouf & Mamdani, 1994).

- The World Bank stepped into the university scene in Africa in the late 1970s and 1980s providing an injection of much-needed finance in return for budgetary discipline and academic relevance. This introduced an era in which **donor funding became influential in defining research and teaching programmes and university management systems** (this also influenced academic freedom, but in a different way). Two key responses emerged. In Nigeria, academics called for a restructuring of the state budget to release more funding into education, and in other contexts universities turned to the private sector for funding. Mamdani (1994:14) noted with interest that African universities did not turn to communities of working people to seek partnerships. He indicated that this may well be a resource for African universities to create new partnerships with their communities.
- In the past two decades, African intellectuals have begun critically to define the parameters of their own practice, and **to argue strongly for academic freedom and a re-definition of the role of higher education in Africa** (Africa Watch, 1991; Mamdani, 1994). They have criticised practices in which governments and donors impose 'notions of relevance' and developmentalist approaches for reducing the potential of higher education institutions. Academic freedom gatherings in Dar es Salaam (1990) and Kampala (1990) argued for the goal of higher education to be defined as "scientific inquiry, the pursuit of knowledge and the search for the whole truth in the interest of social transformation and human emancipation" (*ibid*, Diouf & Mamdani, 2004). Academics at these gatherings argued that the responsibility of institutions of higher education was to act as "catalysts for social transformation, to initiate the necessary struggle, to agitate for democracy ... and to defend academic freedom". This same gathering argued that more attention should be given to environmental issues in Africa (Diouf & Mamdani, 2004). In recent years much progress has been made in securing human rights and academic freedom in African universities, but many of these important gains are still being undermined by continued financial difficulties (Zezeza, 2004).

New developments in broader society continue to shape and influence African universities, the most recent being **globalisation of the capitalist economy** following the end of the Cold War. A report has been released in which the World Bank (Hopper, 2002) has recognised **a new role for universities in building capacity for**



· participation in the so-called “knowledge-based world economy”. It is being widely argued that there is “... a need to transform African systems of higher education to make sure that higher education will contribute to economic development within a globalising economy” (Moja, 2004:22). International rivalry is now centred around ‘intellectual property’ (Scott, 2000), which has led to **increased government interest in higher education around the world**. This brings to the fore **an emerging relationship between higher education and knowledge-based economies**. African universities are therefore being placed under increased pressure to respond to both government and the business sector in their demands for systems to meet the needs of the global capitalist economy (Moja, 2004). Universities themselves are also being put under pressure to operate more as ‘businesses’ within liberalisation and privatisation models (Mamdani, 2005). There is also an emerging recognition that neo-liberalism is having a new and different impact on the structure and outputs of universities (Zezeza, 2004). Questions are arising as to whether higher education is to be perceived as a private or a public good (Singh, 2001; Stumpf, 2005).

· Singh (2001), for example, claims that higher education has ‘multi-purposes’ and she argues that there is a need to invoke the connection between these purposes and the ‘public good’ as a means of “... finding a way back to **the idea of social responsiveness**” in which transformation of higher education, “... in fidelity to its claimed radical roots, must incorporate goals and purposes which are linked, even if indirectly, to **an emancipatory and broad-based social and political agenda**” (Singh, 2001:9). She argues that responsiveness to the economy is only a sub-set of a broader notion of responsiveness, and that care should be taken not to allow social [and socio-ecological] responsiveness to be subsumed by economic responsiveness. The African Union in its synthesis report prepared for the recent African Union Meeting on Revitalisation of Higher Education in Africa (March 2006) also sets out a ‘multi-purpose’ agenda for higher education. It addresses the needs of society (particularly in response to the burgeoning health crisis in Africa) and the need to strengthen science and technology and economic growth in Africa.

· Neo-liberal academic reforms and new debates about the role of universities in the service of the ‘public good’ are therefore introducing a new set of tensions and challenges which African universities are beginning to confront. The complexity of these challenges is likely both to contribute to, and provide challenges for, sustainable development in Africa. Recently the Chairman of the NEPAD Steering Committee urged Africa’s institutions of higher learning to create a culture of developing new knowledge and skills that will be appropriate for generating solutions to Africa’s development challenges. He called for African universities to create a platform for intellectual rigour and enhanced capacity (Nkuhlu, 2005). Following the historical outline provided here, it would seem that this needs to be wide enough to encompass **multiple perspectives and a broad-based dialogue on sustainable development**.



As outlined in this brief history, a 'new role' for African universities to be more socially, environmentally and economically relevant is being defined. Academics in Africa are grappling with the implications of this role for their 'triple mission' of research, teaching and community engagement/outreach. The MESA Universities Partnership signals an interest in the social relevance of universities in defining and contributing to the quality of life of African communities through development that is sustainable, that protects ecological integrity and ensures sustainable utilisation and management of Africa's great wealth and diversity of natural resources. The MESA Universities Partnership seeks to establish an open dialogue in universities on Africa's development path, in ways that do not constrain academic freedom, contribute to further environmental degradation or narrow options of a good life for current **and** future generations. The brief history reveals that defining a broader critical and democratic role for higher education in Africa has not been an easy process, and is likely to remain an ongoing challenge for African societies.

### How should universities respond to the imperatives of sustainable development?

Deciding how to respond to global policy imperatives is not a simple matter for universities. As one Vice-Chancellor in the UK recently wrote in response to sustainable development imperatives being introduced by the government:

It is not the job of universities to promote particular political orthodoxy [in the form of sustainable development for example]; it is their job to educate students to examine critically policies, ideas, concepts and systems, then to make up their own minds. (Scott & Gough, 2006)

In a university response to the same government policy (which was 'forcing' universities in the UK to implement the values of sustainable development into their strategic planning, one university noted:

... Not only would the development of 'values, skills and knowledge' be inappropriate and contrived for many academic disciplines, but it is arguable that, in purely intellectual terms, the concept of sustainability is still essentially contestable. Perhaps the most fitting role for universities is to provide space for debate about the concept of sustainability, rather than to implement a strategy and action plan which seem to presume that many of the basic issues around the concept are settled (University 1, cited in Scott & Gough, 2006).

Scott & Gough (2006), commenting on these debates about the introduction of sustainable development as a 'policy imperative' into higher education in the UK, comment further that:

Too close a focus on society's *present* expectations for the future – based on



presently available knowledge – may have the effect of limiting that future, through a failure to encourage students to test or challenge those expectations. Under these circumstances higher education would have failed not only society, but also, more specifically, its students ... More fundamentally, it may be asked whether sustainable development itself is a set of pre-determined policy objectives to be implemented once-and-for-all, or a *process of adaptive individual and collective learning in the face of shifting environmental and social circumstances*. (ibid., our emphasis)

What is your view on this debate?



## Re-orientation towards sustainability

As we have seen in the brief historical sketch, African universities have been engaged in a long and complex struggle to establish themselves as knowledge generators and disseminators, as partners to the state and their communities, and as critical voices of, and in, society. Through this extended struggle, there has been an ongoing and reflexive search for platforms that enable meaningful contributions to society. As Mamdani and other African intellectuals warn, to continue with this project does not simply involve an 'adoption' of institutional rhetoric on sustainable development, or development of new structures and projects in universities. It requires a deeper engagement with the remaining institutional legacies of colonialism (and neo-colonialism) in Africa. This includes an examination of the current institutional form of the universities themselves, and contemporary trends to market and privatise university services in society. It therefore involves **a broader post-colonial intellectual project of reconceptualising African universities, and their relationship to democracy and to the societies and environment in which they are embedded.**

Reorienting universities to respond more effectively to equity, poverty alleviation and environmental degradation and risk (the 'sustainable development' agenda) would therefore seem to require **the creative effort of African intellectuals**. This involves proactive engagement with the multiple transformations taking place in African universities and societies, and their meanings and modalities. Key amongst these is coming to grips with the implications of globalisation, the emergence of knowledge-based economies in which intellectual capital is increasingly valued, increased use of technology in teaching, research



and administration, changing student populations and their needs and changes in the way that institutions are funded (Zezeza & Olukoshi, 2004). As mentioned, there is a broadly acknowledged view that **higher education must play a role in development, and in changing development strategies towards sustainability.**

Sustainable development is on the agenda of many of societies' key institutions, including the full range of educational institutions. Many would argue that sustainable development is not a 'fixed' concept which is already predetermined, and that sustainable development is therefore *a process* of ongoing problem-solving and learning. Reorienting universities towards sustainability would thus seem to require **conceptualising an open and reflexive agenda for researching and learning about sustainable development.**

The international literature on reorienting education towards sustainable development is replete with other implications for higher education. Key amongst these are recommendations to:

- **broaden participation** in sustainable development activities and initiatives;
- be more **explicit about the values and ethics** that shape and guide practice and decisions;
- consider issues of **quality and relevance** in educational work; and
- develop and support initiatives that **engage proactively with change and transformations** in education, society and the environment that are both practical and theoretically informed (UNESCO, 2004).

These, and other aspects of ESD proposed by UNESCO and others will be discussed in more detail in Modules 1, 2 and 3 of the ESD Innovations course.





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