Sustainable development as social equity: Policy contradictions and their impact on higher education

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Abstract

Common discourse on sustainable development (SD) in higher education places emphasis on caring for, as well as protecting, the environment and natural resources. This conceptualisation negates the two other crucial pillars, namely, social equity and economic development. In South African higher education efforts for sustainable development are gaining popularity, although the focus is still on environmental sustainability. The thrust of this article is to analyse South African higher education policy for its pronouncement on SD in general and on social equity in particular. The article argues that although education underpins the success of SD, higher education policy shows minimal concern for SD. The article argues that SD found little space, if any, in the broad policy transformation agenda in 1994, yet it depends – and greatly so – on relevant, rigorous policy intervention and steering, not only for advocacy, but more importantly to curb the prevalence of factors that threaten sustainable education.

Keywords: sustainable development, social equity, South African higher education, policy implications, transformation, sustainable education

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although ensuring sustainable development (SD) is unquestionably a critical aspect worth pursuing for any nation of the world, it has only become an important topic for debate in the last two to three decades. These debates have been and continue to be skewed in many ways, since they still do not focus on the concept in its entirety and they further display a lack of consensus on what SD really means globally.

In South Africa, common discourse on SD in higher education places emphasis on caring for, as well as protecting the environment and natural resources. This conceptualisation negates the other two crucial pillars of SD, namely, social equity and economic development. In South African higher education, efforts for sustainable development are fast gaining popularity, although the foci are still on environmental sustainability.

The aim of this article is to analyse the South African higher education policy for its pronouncement on SD in general and social equity in particular, as well as and establishing the role of policy and milestones covered in implementing sustainable development. Policy analysis is not only an integral part of higher education systems worldwide, but it is an imperative that ensures that policy follows its course by evaluating its appropriateness, objectives and rationale (Blamey and McKenzie 2007; Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela 2009; Van der Knaap 2004). Policy analysis precedes its review and improvement.

The article argues that although education underpins the success of SD, higher education policy shows minimal impetus for SD. It further argues that SD found little space, if any, in the broad higher education policy transformation agenda and framework in 1994 and in all other higher education policies that followed. This is contrary to the fact that the implementation and success of SD activities, like all other transformation efforts, depend on rigorous policy intervention and steering. Policy as a lever is supposed to provide an overarching plan to guide, direct, incentivise or sanction its stakeholders in order to steer any system to achieving set goals.

In order to derive an understanding of why SD efforts have been slow to realise given global and national policy goals and frameworks, the following crucial questions are posed and an attempt is made to provide answers: How is SD understood in the higher education context? What do the three pillars mean for higher education and all its stakeholders and actors (students, academics, institutional leadership, society and government)? What are the policy challenges, contradictions and progress with regard to SD implementation in higher education?

In the article, five contradictions identified in the higher education policy and implementation of SD and particularly its social equity component are discussed, namely:

- Contradiction 1 argues that the SD concept is still elusive in higher education.

- Contradiction 2 avers that social equity is understood differently in different disciplines and areas of study.

- Contradiction 3 states that higher education policy shows minimal thrust for SD regardless of intensified global mandates.

- Contradiction 4 contends that efforts for social equity in South African higher education are still limited.

- Contradiction 5 states that efforts in the pursuit of SD in higher education in South Africa are skewed and mainly focus on the environmental aspect of SD.

An understanding and appreciation of social equity as an aspect of SD and the gaps in understanding this concept by higher education institutions (HEIs) are also interrogated. The article is non-empirical, theoretical and analytical in nature. It entails an analysis of multiple sources of data, namely policy documents, missions and visions of 22 of the 23 South African HEIs available online. Additionally, a review of both international and national literature on SD and the extent to which

it gives cognisance to SD in its three facets is provided. The study was based on documented evidence regarding the extent to which SD and social equity, in particular, is implemented. The choice of documents and data sample for analysis were purposive, focusing on higher education policies, global policies on SD, documented SD work and examples of SD implementation in the United Kingdom (UK), Germany and the United States (US).

The article concludes by suggesting strategies that can be adopted by HEIs in advancing SD and social equity.

CONTRADICTION 1: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT IS STILL ELUSIVE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SD is a visionary development paradigm and over the past 20 years governments, business, and civil society have accepted SD as a guiding principle; thus making progress on SD metrics, and improved business and non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) participation in the SD process (Drexhage and Murphy 2010). Yet, the concept remains elusive and the implementation thereof has proved to be difficult. Unsustainable trends continue and SD has not found the political entry points in order to make real progress (Drexhage and Murphy 2010).

Broadly and globally, SD means 'any form of development that ensures that environmental, economic and social equity needs of the present people are met without compromising their availability to future generations of the world' (Drexhage and Murphy 2012). Key words essential to defining SD are: development; sustainability; environmental; economic; social; equity; present and future needs; the world and world populations. Any serious attempts to pursue SD should pay special attention to the convergence of all these key factors.

While the concept of SD seems to have many interpretations and is elevated to different levels of importance by different countries, organisations, institutions and individuals, the realities of non-sustainable global worlds, communities, schools, and institutions are evident. According to Jabareen (2008), a critical review of the multidisciplinary literature on SD reveals the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding sustainable development and its complexities. This review shows that the definitions of sustainable development are vague; there is the lack of an operative definition and a disagreement about what should be sustained to make a global impact. The concept is unclear in terms of emotional commitment; it 'remains a confused topic' and is 'fraught with contradictions' (Jabareen 2008).

Drexhage and Murphy (2010) argue that while SD is intended to encompass three pillars, namely, the environmental, economic and social equity factors, over the past 20 years it has often been compartmentalised as an environmental issue. Added to this, and potentially more limiting for the SD agenda, is the current orientation of development as purely economic growth (Drexhage and Murphy 2010). Most HEIs talk about and deal with these aspects in total isolation, with reference to social equity as equity and access or sometimes equity and quality or excellence or even

equality. Equity as access has placed almost the entire focus on redressing inequities in accessing higher education in certain fields of study, growth in student enrolment, as well as the appointment of designated groups of people in positions which were, in the past, reserved for whites and especially for white men.

Dealing with the three components of SD in isolation has reduced social equity to a non-existent component of SD. It is sometimes argued that SD encompasses various concepts, such as: environmental, social and economic justice; social equity; equal rights for development; quality of life; equal economic distribution; freedom and democracy; public participation; and empowerment (Drexhage and Murphy 2010). However, its consideration in the South African higher education policy context refers to availing equal educational opportunities to all race groups by mainly addressing the imbalances caused by apartheid. This stance is void of the social aspects of SD and has compromised efforts for achieving SD.

CONTRADICTION 2: SOCIAL EQUITY IS UNDERSTOOD DIFFERENTLY IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES AND AREAS OF STUDY

There is an acceptance that social equity has multiple definitions, since it is seen as a new term and thus different organisations and industries have attached a different, but context-fitting connotation to the term. The lack of consensus and use of various connotations has caused the concept of social equity to be elusive and undoubtedly hard to implement. According to the literature on SD, social equity refers to two types of equity, namely intergenerational and intragenerational (Stymne and Jackson 2000). Intergenerational equity refers to fairness in the allocation of resources between current and future generations; while intragenerational equity means allocating resources between competing interests at the present time (Stymne and Jackson 2000). The most frequently used definition of SD, especially in South Africa, is that of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) which emphasises intergenerational equity: 'Development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. For Robert Solow (1991, 3), sustainability is simply a matter of distributional equity; about sharing the capacity for well-being between present people and future people. Unfortunately, South Africa as a country, and its higher education system in particular, is clouded by lack of balance between different interest groups which should still enjoy fair and equitable distribution of resources. Thus, more focus is needed on intragenerational social equity.

The specific approach and pursuit of social equity is taken up by various disciplines, depending on how the concept is conceptualised. This results in the implementation being different in those disciplines that have been relatively proactive in the pursuit of SD. In education, social equity is regarded as a synonym of social equality and claims that all people, regardless of race and social class, have the same status, equal rights, security, voting, freedom of speech, and property rights, together with access to social goods and services, such as education, health care, other social securities,

equal opportunities and obligations (Wikipedia 2012). Nonetheless, practice in education, particularly in South African higher education, has never been able to fully address and conform to all these issues. Shortfalls include, among other things, inequalities in access and financial resources. Access continues to be a problem not only for students, but also for staff who are regarded as previously disadvantaged. Access seems to fail in many respects; for example:

- The majority of black learners accessing higher education still come from schools which are resourced differently. These schools are not only underprivileged, but they also lack resources, have poor management, as well as unqualified or poorly-prepared teachers. For as long as this hiatus exists, access with success and thus sustainable social equity for these learners will remain an illusion, regardless of the academic development efforts that HEIs have been putting in place since 1994.

- The manifold support endeavours in place in HEIs have proven to have achieved very limited success. Large numbers of students still drop out in their first year of study and most of them in the very first quarter of the year. More of these students continue to drop out in the second and third years of study and ultimately, almost 50 per cent do not make it to graduation. This is without doubt a clear indication of an unsustainable education system and a lack of resources.

- Problems of access and social inequity are also rife among staff members in HEIs. These are marked by, among other things, the following:

  * Massive salary inequalities and discrepancies among people who are doing similar jobs and, sometimes, between males and females, with females often occupying the lower percentiles of salary scales.

  * Positions that do not wield much power are still occupied by blacks and women, with men continuing to occupy positions of authority in large numbers. This inequality pursues the apartheid *status quo* and a patriarchal philosophy further implying that the participation of women and blacks in governance and decision-making in higher education is only peripheral.

According to Boyce (1994), a more equitable distribution of power would contribute to an improvement in environmental quality. According to this author, power implies an income equality index, literacy, political rights and civil liberties, as well as other geographical factors. I argue that power equality would lead not only to environmental emancipation, but also to educational emancipation, financial/economic emancipation and sustainable livelihoods.

Economic conservationists regard social equity as access to livelihood, education and resources; full participation in the political and cultural life of the community; as well as the self-determination of involved stakeholders to meet the fundamental needs of all communities (Herman and Cobb 1989). According to Herman and Cobb

(1989), social equity cannot be maintained for a few people at the expense of many. However, in South African HEIs this is still the case. Not only is resource allocation still skewed among the race groups, but also between the genders, and even amongst people of the same race. As apartheid categorisation is slowly disappearing, new cliques are being formed which ensure that inequalities persist in different forms.

Frederickson (2010), a renowned theorist in public administration, advocated his social equity theory as the 'third pillar' of public administration in 1968. He was concerned that those in public administration assume that all citizens are the same and ignore their social and economic conditions and differences. His theory advocates procedural fairness, access, quality and outcomes as four critical dimensions in public management. Social equity demands the provision of consistent conditions and the non-denial of rights (gender, income, race, ethnicity, age, etc) (Svara and Brunet 2004, 1–2). The theory further entails a fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public, either directly or by contract, as well as the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and the implementation of public policy and commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy (Svara and Brunet 2004, 1–2). However, management and governance of HEIs, especially at institutional level, still leaves much to be desired. This is evidenced by the placement of several of South Africa's universities under administration in the period of less than five years.

Three other fields of study which articulate themselves clearly in terms of social equity are: ecological, environmental and green economics. In ecological economics the main focus is on academic trans- and inter-disciplinary research that should be undertaken to address the interdependence and co-evolution of human economies and natural ecosystems over time and space (Durlauf and Blurne 2008). Strong sustainability, nature, justice and time are emphasised. This kind of social equity equates to intergenerational social equity which emphasises fairness in the allocation of resources between current and future generations. Environmental economics deals with the analysis of the environment and undertakes theoretical or empirical studies of the economic effects of national and local environmental policies around the world. Its emphasis is care for natural capital (Wikipedia 2013). Green economics is concerned with improving human well-being; reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities; and minimising the excessive depletion of the natural capital (UNEP 2011, 1).

Most of the efforts of HEIs regarding SD globally, although still minimal, seem to revolve around three types of social equity, namely, ecological, environmental and green economics and concern themselves with sustaining the natural capital/resources for humankind.

The argument of the current article is that in order for HEIs to maintain their function as significant role players in SD efforts and make a more significant impact, the concept of social equity should first be well understood. An evaluation of this concept at national policy, institutional and individual levels is a prerequisite for bridging the gap between social equity theory and its practice.

CONTRADICTION 3: HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY SHOWS MINIMAL THRUST FOR SD REGARDLESS OF INTENSIFIED GLOBAL MANDATES

Global policy perspectives on SD

SD has a relatively long-standing history, with the initial mandate which commenced in Stockholm at the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environmental Sustainability in 1972. This conference set the scene for SD and for society's efforts to achieve social equity. The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which convened in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, reaffirmed the decisions of the UN Declaration on Environmental Sustainability from Stockholm in 1972, and sought to build upon it with the goal of establishing equitable partnerships at global level. Amongst other notable global forces for SD and the reaffirmation of Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro's Agenda 21, are the UN Decade for Education for SD, which is set to run until 2014; the Millennium Development Goals; and the Johannesburg Declaration of 2004, to mention only a few global commitments. What is common to all of these, is a commitment to advance social equity and to build equitable global societies which recognise human dignity for all people. Government initiatives worldwide, although not uniformly, have attempted to redress and bring underrepresented groups of people on par.

However, progress in achieving the goals by these forums is minimal and fragmented. At the global level, 'the lack of rigour in implementing the principles of SD since 1992 may be attributed in part to the fragmented responsibilities of United Nations (UN) environment agencies and the flimsy resources of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)' (One World 2012, 10). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2011) global monitoring report of the millennium goals regards the state of education in Africa and other conflict-stricken parts of the world as appalling, with about 28 million children living in poverty and 4 million learners in South Africa without desks, libraries and computers. 'In 2008, 67 million children were out of school' (UNESCO 2011). The status cannot have changed much since then, given the slow progress of policy implementation in various areas, including education. This defeats the goals set by 192 UN member states and 23 international organisations at the Millennium Summit in 2000, where the UN Millennium Declaration was adopted, asserting that every individual has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, and a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence. Seemingly, the 15-year timeline that was set for the achievement of these goals will not be reached, as most countries have not made sufficient progress.

South African higher education SD policy before 1994

The greatest, but most worrying, paradox with SD is the position that the South African higher education policy has taken since the renewal of the system in 1994. An analysis of various critical policies clearly shows that SD found little space, if

any, in the broad higher education policy transformation agenda and framework in 1994 and in all other higher education policies that followed. This is contrary to the fact that SD is acclaimed as a critical global issue and that the implementation of SD activities, like all other transformation issues depends – and greatly so – on relevant, rigorous policy intervention and steering. The role of policy as a lever is supposed to outline plans, guide, and monitor, incentivise or sanction, in order to steer any system to achieve set goals. However, there is little or no evidence that higher education policies have set out clear plans and guidelines for HEIs to implement SD. HEIs draw direction on SD implementation from policies outside their sector. This implies that the slow advancement of SD in higher education is not due to policy misunderstanding, contestation, or resistance, but rather its relegation to chance.

The pre-1994 South African higher education system, by its very nature of oppression, segregation and colonialism of selected members of society, fell short in advancing development in general, and SD in particular, through the convergence of the three pillars of environmental, economic and social equity. The economic and social equity needs of the black majority were the highest compromised needs of the three. The system strongly reinforced the dominance of white rule by excluding blacks from, among other things, quality education (NCHE 1996, 29). Universities served the needs of a separate development policy, exclusively training, developing and effectively placing whites on a higher economic level, while blacks assumed a lesser status socially and economically.

Policy transformation debates in 1992 advocated the abolition of apartheid, inclusivity and equity in the distribution of resources. Social, political, economic and cultural issues affecting South Africans, particularly black South Africans, underwent a major rethink and appropriate redress strategies were documented. This preceded far-reaching policy development during the late President Mandela's term of office. According to Asmal (2001, 3), South Africans became heroes nationally and internationally in the eyes of educationists.

South African higher education SD policy after 1994

At the national level, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (RSA 1996, 1–6) highlights the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights, acknowledging all forms of equality as imperative. Social equity, as a component of SD, is therefore enshrined in the Constitution.

In 1996, the NCHE (1996, 4) presented a framework for transformation suggesting guiding principles for transformation, namely: equity and redress; democratisation; diversity; development; quality, effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom and institutional autonomy; as well as public accountability. Of these principles, equity, redress and development have a close relationship with SD. The most important recommendations of NCHE that aimed at addressing equity were:

- expanding student enrolment and broadened access for all social groups and classes;
- improving responsiveness of education to societal needs;
- designing, planning, managing and funding the higher education system as a unified system;
- strategic funding of the system, taking into account the number of students in different fields and levels of study, and addressing the special needs of institutions such as equity, redress and research infrastructure; and
- establishing the higher quality committee responsible for programme accreditation, institutional auditing and quality promotion.

These NCHE guiding principles and recommendations translated into several higher education legislative frameworks after 1996 which are clearly outlined, in among other policies: the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE 1997); the report of the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2000); the National Plan for Higher Education (MoE 2001); as well as the Higher Education Act, No. 101 of 1997 (RSA 1997). The Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997, 3) mentioned that South Africa's transition required that all pre-1994 practices, institutions and values should be viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for the post-1994 era. The role of higher education in the social, cultural and economic development of society was regarded as crucial, although the state of inequality among people of different races, gender, and so on, posed major challenges towards achieving these goals; serving society equitably; and meeting the national needs. The expectation was that higher education would lay a foundation by stimulating, directing and mobilising the creative and intellectual energies of all its stakeholders towards meeting the challenges of reconstruction and development. Thus, the inequities and shortcomings that were experienced by segregated groups in particular, would be addressed (DoE 1997, 3).

A close link was to be established between SD and the White Paper in its intention to ensure that there was a political and economic transition that would include political democratisation, economic reconstruction and development, as well as redistributive social policies aimed at equity. Although it was evident that the pre-1994 system of higher education was limited in meeting moral, political, social and economic demands, social equity as SD does not seem to have received much attention during this planning stage and later in other higher education policies that followed. This is argued to have reduced all SD efforts, particularly social equity by higher education, to a secondary status.

The absence of a clear reference in several of the higher education policies developed since 1994 of the need for SD in higher education is problematic. It must be assumed that the broad term 'equity in higher education' also encompasses social equity and thus SD. If reference is made under this guise, the following questions become pertinent: Is SD a policy imperative in South Africa, and in the South African

higher education sector in particular, or does it operate on an ad hoc basis and through voluntary engagement? Ad hoc activities observable at different universities are testimony to this stance. What should the higher education sector do in relation to SD? What should it do to achieve SD or a sustainable higher education system?

In 2004, 10 years into democracy, the CHE acknowledged government and higher education policy limitations in various areas. One of the challenges noted at the time was the poor progress made by HEIs regarding the advancement of social equity. The CHE recognised the political will and the will of actors and stakeholders involved in policy implementation in higher education to implement policy, but it nevertheless saw institutional and external environmental factors as debilitating and regressive. In particular, the CHE (2004, 243) argued that the contribution of higher education to social equity and economic and social development was reduced if the fiscal environment was unduly constrained. Following this era, government intensified its efforts for financial support to HEIs and instituted mergers to ensure the sharing and equitable distribution of resources between previously advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. Notwithstanding this move, equity challenges remained a top priority in the sector in particular, and in society in general. Currently, there are still pronounced challenges in HEIs.

In 2007, the CHE acknowledged the fact that the higher education sector needed to renew its focus and its role in national development, including economic, social and cultural development and inclusiveness. This was not a novel idea, but a reiteration of what the NCHE (1996), the White Paper 3 (1997), CHE (2004) and other policies had already stated. Important questions to consider are: Is there evidence that this status has changed since 2007? To what extent have these goals been achieved and has sufficient progress been made that is good enough to ensure that the needs of all people today are met, before becoming preoccupied with ensuring equity for future generations?

Jabareen (2008) argues for an integrative approach to achieve sustainability. This, according to Agenda 21, seeks to bring together all stakeholders. It furthermore argues that the responsibility for bringing about changes lies with governments which should then form partnerships with stakeholders, such as the private sector, local authorities and national, regional and international organisations. In addition, national plans, goals and objectives, national rules, regulations and laws, and specific situations in which different countries are placed should consider having overall frameworks in which such integration takes place. The contradiction in the South African higher education policy is that there is little emphasis on SD as part of the planning process.

CONTRADICTION 4: EFFORTS FOR SOCIAL EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE STILL LIMITED

The South African government and its higher education's understanding of equity seems to be quantitative and places emphasis on getting numbers/figures right

where certain groups were previously not represented or were underrepresented. It emphasises the fair distribution of available educational resources, as well as the availability of infrastructure and funding. In this regard, the system has made some significant strides, although it has been unable to break substantively with pre-1994 enrolment and distribution patterns (CHE 2007, 2). The government has been doing its part in steering the system to ensure that the set equity policy targets are met. A few notable ways in which this has been achieved include: the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) enrolment planning; planned funding and subsidy allocations; merging institutions and doing away with a fragmented system; setting time limits for progression and graduation rates; availing student financial aid; introducing extended curriculum programmes; supporting capacity development in research; teaching through research and teaching development grants; and introducing quality audits to ensure the credibility of academic programmes, as some of the steering mechanisms.

Prior to 1994, the commitment of South African higher education to equity and to most of the people in South Africa was virtually non-existent, with the lack of action being condoned by intentional stratification that the apartheid rule legislated in the Bantu Education Act, No. 47 of 1953. The vast majority of the population was ignored in terms of educational, economic, and other social opportunities, thus creating an unsustainable way of life for blacks in particular. The effects of apartheid today (almost 20 years into a democratic dispensation) still hamper efforts for the creation of a sustainable livelihood for all South Africans and in particular, for equity in educational resources and offerings in higher education.

South African higher education can be commended for its transition from a highly segregated, non-equitable system to a more inclusive system:

> The system has expanded through greater participation of black and women students and staff, although there are still huge imbalances with respect to the levels of academic appointments, the distribution of black and female staff across all disciplines, and participation in the production of scientific output (CHE 2007, 160).

Notwithstanding this concern, the system is seen to have made 'a valuable contribution to the lives of individuals, to the economy and to broader society both in producing graduates and producing knowledge' (CHE 2009, 94). This said, it still cannot be stated unequivocally that South Africa has a sustainable higher education system as yet, particularly with regard to social equity. Achievements made so far are not indicative of worthwhile progress in matters of sustainability.

Almost two decades into democracy, higher education's performance in South Africa with respect to equity goals and achievements can boast of only a few successes and many shortfalls as outlined below (CHE 2007, 160):

• Demand for education keeps on increasing.

• Ensuring that access is successful is still a problem for most universities, if not

all; with evidence of a number of uncoordinated, fragmented support activities within universities.

- The quality of the school sector is deteriorating regardless of notable increases in, among other things, pass rates.

- Retention rates for selected groups are low due to poor preparation and support, as well as their economic backgrounds.

- There are still grave inequities in the salaries of staff doing similar jobs.

- Women continue to be underrepresented in engineering and in the hard sciences.

- Hundreds of thousands of young graduates are unemployed in South Africa.

- White males still dominate the research landscape in terms of total research outputs, such as publications.

The country's preoccupation and struggle with social equity seems to be intergenerational and is focused on fairness in the allocation of resources between competing interests at the present time. Its enormity seems to cause a loss of focus on the importance of intragenerational equity. According to Stymne and Jackson (2000, 219), the concept of intragenerational equity has received even less attention in the literature on SD and particularly in ecological economics.

Some proponents of social equity, such as Rawls (1971), contend that in achieving social equity, some people must be losers theoretically, while others (those that must be brought on par) must be winners. Moreover, this author opines that the distribution of benefits and opportunities aimed at addressing social equity should take on individualised consideration and should be arranged to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

Taking the concept of intragenerational equity and Rawls's theory of equitable distribution of benefits and opportunities into consideration then, higher education's approach to equity is obviously fraught with difficulties.

CONTRADICTION 5: EFFORTS IN THE PURSUIT OF SD ARE SKEWED AND MAINLY FOCUS ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT OF SD

Universities globally have varying conceptualisations of SD and its three pillars, with nearly all of them overplaying environmental sustainability and missing its key link with economic sustainability and social equity. This is seen in a variety of approaches to implementing education for SD with a mix of projects, case studies, elective and course specialisations (Barth and Rieckmann 2012, 29). While some universities are realigning their visions and missions to clearly assert SD, others are silent. This lack of consistency promotes a fragmented approach and slow progress in SD implementation and its impact on higher education.

For universities in the UK, SD has become an increasingly important issue (Chalkley and Sterling 2011, 666). In the last decade, the UK took education for SD (ESD) to significant heights by setting up Resource Centres of Teaching and

Learning Excellence, focusing solely on Education for Sustainable Development. In 2005, an audit of subject communities showed that ESD was a minority area and that engagement was highly uneven across disciplines within universities. This analysis led to the development of an approach to SD by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) which entailed a strategic statement, a 10-year vision and an action plan. The vision stressed the importance for HEIs to use skills and knowledge learned by graduates for practice in addressing SD (HEFCE 2008).

The HEFCE provided support to these universities regarding policy, the setting out of their own visions and aligning these with the national SD mandate. At institutional level, individual academics, subject departments and communities of practice in the various disciplines were supported by: setting up websites; distributing newsletters, publications, briefings, and research outputs; learning and teaching guides; case studies; staff development programmes; and collaborative partnerships. Each discipline or cluster of cognate disciplines had its own centre with six staff members and an annual budget of half a million pounds (Chalkley and Sterling 2011, 669). This investment is evidence of the commitment that the UK higher education system had for SD efforts.

Furthermore, the HEFCE supported HEIs and subject communities to develop curricula and pedagogy that could equip students with knowledge and skills to live and work sustainably. The focus was on research and support for the development of ESD in HE sector; building capacity amongst individuals; subject communities and institutions to embed ESD in curricula and pedagogy; and the coordination and dissemination of policy, research and practice relating to ESD in institutions (HEFCE 2008).

In the US, Shippensburg University's role in SD is notable. The stronger part of SD at Shippensburg University, in particular, is its view on social equity. For this university, social equity implies ensuring equal opportunity and access to educational, employment and contract opportunities for all persons including students, faculty, staff and administrators of the university, regardless of race, religion, sex, national origin, ancestry, age, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, or veteran status (Shippensburg University 2012). The concept refers to a set of standards which apply to personal and social relationships with other individuals and/or groups and the rights and duties which apply to members of certain 'protected classes' in society. Such groups have been designated as protected because of certain injustices which have occurred against them in the past and in the present. Thus, social equity is mainly used as a redress mechanism.

Social equity at Shippensburg University covers the protection of certain fundamental rights which all university members should enjoy as citizens of a free society. In contradiction to Shippensburg University, at Harvard University (2012) the focus of SD is environmental, with a strong pledge made in 2008 which set a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent in 2016. Harvard University (2012) set itself a vision for environmental sustainability, namely: 'All of us share a compelling interest in confronting the challenge of environmental sustainability'. Not

many universities have clear goals or visions set specifically for the advancement of SD, and according to Barth and Rieckmann (2012, 29), only a few HEIs have dared to tackle the challenge of reorienting their entire university educational mission to focus on the SD curriculum.

At Harvard University, SD is the responsibility of all students and staff/ researchers, with its emphasis on energy, waste, food, laboratories, water and the greenhouse effect. A shortfall in SD implementation at this university is its silence on the other two pillars of SD; namely, the economic and social equity aspects (Harvard University 2012).

Some universities focus on staff development for sustainable education as the starting point, based on the premise that most academics are not experts in SD education and that knowledgeable academics will fast-track SD implementation through integration with curricula. The Universidad Tecnicadel Norte (UTN) in Ecuador and the Leuphana University of Luneburg in Germany have collaboratively developed a formally accredited one-year academic staff development programme with a total of 720 hours. This time-frame is split into seven modules done over two semesters to facilitate a broader implementation of sustainability in the curriculum of UTN (Barth and Rieckmann 2012, 30). The programme targets academics interested in sustainability issues and focuses on a basic understanding of the principles of SD and ESD; using virtual learning in ESD; methods of ESD; information and communication technologies; designing a new ESD module or re-designing an existing module along ESD principles; as well as two workshops (development and implementation of ESD modules and an evaluation of the modules). Topics covered by these modules include: industrial security; sustainable tourism; biodiversity; renewable energies; energy efficiency; education for SD; climate change policy; textile production; sustainable management; nutrition; and sustainable agriculture. The modules encourage real problem-solving and an applied trans-disciplinary approach to problem solving between students and communities and other stakeholders. This programme promotes university-wide awareness and acknowledgement of SD as a 'cross-cutting topic at the institution' (Barth and Rieckmann 2012, 34).

South African HEIs are undoubtedly occupied with SD efforts of a various nature; however, in the current article and as a basis, only their vision and mission statements are analysed for the extent to which they make reference to SD. The outcome of this analysis shows a bleak outlook for SD and its three components (environmental, social equity and economic development). These are hardly elevated to the level of a vision or mission. Of the 22 universities out of 23 in South Africa, only two give cognisance to all the three components of SD in their visions or missions; another two refer to two aspects (one social and economic, while the other highlights social and environmental SD). Ten universities make reference to one aspect (eight universities focus on social equity and two on the environmental aspect). The remaining eight universities supply no reference whatsoever. This argument should, nonetheless, not be mistaken to imply that South African HEIs do not engage in SD.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND STRATEGIES

For as long as there is unresolved tension between policy theory and practice, SD will remain 'the El Dorado of modern times, a vaguely charted dream of everlasting prosperity' which will be remembered only by inspiring discourse rather than deeds (Green Peace International 2012). There are indeed many contradictions between the policy and practice of SD in South African higher education, contrary to the fact that the sector by its nature as a field of study concerned with teaching, research and community engagement has a critical role to play in SD. Better collaborative planning and a systematic approach at policy level are critical to bridging the gap between policy and practice. Therefore, SD in HEIs should not be left to chance and choice, but guiding principles at national level should be carefully thought through and monitored. Higher education by its nature as a place concerned with teaching and learning, research and community engagement, can make an immense impact in SD. It can achieve this through, among other things, the following activities:

- equipping students with skills, knowledge and attitudes (competencies) that include thinking and reasoning, intellect, problem-solving, planning and organising, time management, conceptualisation, judgment, and life skills;
- developing and reviewing the curriculum to make it relevant;
- researching and using diversified teaching methods and strategies; and
- producing graduates who are employable; who can solve societal problems; and who can compete internationally/globally.

Apart from playing a critical role through teaching, the curriculum, research and engaging actively with society, it can also contribute through its social values which underpin the demands and expectations of society, namely, social justice and equity, quality, democracy and accountability (Fourie 1996). If these values are translated into equity activities and strategies for disadvantaged or side-lined communities, results will be achievable. Today, the mission of the university has expanded to serve not only the elite or specific groups, but accords universities the opportunity to serve society better, without fear of a loss of identity. Unfortunately, nobody can contest the fact that for all universities in South Africa, service to society is still the weaker leg of the triad mission. Through policy steering, higher education can focus more intensely on critical national problems through close engagement with society and thus become more relevant to people (Pratt 2000, 1).

Teaching and learning as the most important leg of the triad mission of higher education should also play a critical role in ensuring SD, that is, in creating environmental awareness and ensuring economic development/sustainability, as well as equity in the social needs of communities. What and how students are taught has a direct effect on their performance, on throughput and the graduation rate, as well as their transition to the world of work and in communities. This further

determines what students contribute to national and societal needs. The latter needs should be inclusive of environmental, economic, and social equity needs. However, this can only be realised if HEIs make a conscious decision to prepare students adequately in the three aspects of SD. The inclusion and development of a sustainable developmentally focused and conscious curriculum is essential. Additionally, appropriate teaching modalities, such as problem-based teaching and learning which can enhance awareness of SD among students and staff, and the utilisation of educational technologies, as well as the integration of technology in curriculum, are but a few teaching and learning activities through which SD may be advanced.

Although education underpins the success of SD, current higher education efforts can be argued to be sub-minimal and fragmented in nature. Some universities have made significant strides and have set up centres/units/departments that drive SD activities. In other universities, special visions and missions encapsulating SD have been set. Yet others have opted to develop staff development programmes for academics to better integrate and deal with SD as part of the curriculum. A number of universities have developed courses for SD and some have opted for the project-approach to SD in which they have earmarked funding for the university communities to participate in SD projects with internal and external partners. Nevertheless, in most of these projects and activities, the aspect of social equity is not elevated as an SD component.

The research component of the higher education mission also has a major role to play. In higher education, research is commonly undertaken for various reasons, including, being part of postgraduate studies and qualifications, for publication by academics and as part of commissioned projects. These reasons are not necessarily advancing SD, but do provide an avenue for its promotion and support. Further research focusing on SD should be undertaken in the following areas:

- growing SD as a field and area of study;
- environmentally-focused research;
- research for SD awareness-raising;
- research to solve social problems, including social equity and economic development issues; more inquiry focused on SD, the production of knowledge dissemination and its use is necessary; and
- encouraging Mode 2 research (knowledge production). A rapid shift from disciplinary (Mode 1 knowledge production) to interdisciplinary mode (Mode 2 knowledge production) as argued by (Gibbons 1998) should be enforced by HEIs.

Since most South African academics are not experts in SD, training and development are imperative. HEIs have to face the following training and development implications to make significant strides in SD advancement:

- curriculum reform and integration of SD activities in curriculum;
- developing SD elective modules and projects (awareness, conceptualisation and solution finding) for students;
- professional development of academics in research and ESD;
- re-defining the roles and general responsibilities of academics towards contributing to ESD advocacy and awareness; and
- re-orientating academics and researchers regarding knowledge production dissemination and its use towards comparability with SD needs, as this could improve the impact of the sector in SD.

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