



the sustainability literacy test

Graduates of higher education institutions take decisions which have an impact on their environment. How can we guarantee that they are well-equipped to take sustainability into account in their future careers and able to assume the consequences of their choices with full knowledge of the facts?

By Jean-Christophe Carteron

Higher education institutions (HEI) have a fundamental place in the development of human capital and the societies in which their graduates evolve. We often boast that we ‘produce’ outstanding researchers, Nobel Prize geniuses, great thinkers, captains of industry and social and economic actors who construct our future day by day. And it’s probably true.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that almost all the crises that the human race experiences – social, economic and environmental – are mainly the consequences of decisions made by human beings in a professional context, and for the most part, graduates of our higher education establishments.

Naturally, universities are not responsible for all consequences of the behavior of their graduates. But if the potential promoters of sub-primes, creators of overconsumption or originators of social or environmental dumping pass through our institutions, we undisputedly have a role to play.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Conference in Rio in June 2012 represented a major turn-

ing point in the perception of education. For a long time, education has mainly been seen as a “fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and yields important development benefits”.⁽¹⁾ During the Rio+20 conference, the international community finally acknowledged the major role that higher education can and should play in the construction of a sustainable world.

In order to assume responsibility, you have to define the context first. The final text of the Rio Conference (paragraphs 229-235) and the Rio Declaration for Higher Education (Higher Education Sustainable

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Initiative) outline the framework.⁽²⁾ The Scope of Responsibility diagram, developed by the Global Compact Academic Working Group, and presented in the 2013 UNEP report (Greening Universities Toolkit⁽³⁾ – June 2013) shows that our responsibility has a wide scope which includes research, pedagogy, the social and environmental management of our campuses, and governance.

Rio was a turning point. But fortunately, there have always been individuals who are conscious of society's stakes in all our HEI. These people take daily battles for their institutions to integrate such stakes as fully as possible via research, a specialized master's program, or even a superb 'green campus' or innovative social policy. Nevertheless, it is rare that establishments systematically integrate all aspects of sustainable development in their strategies.

Just as in any other sector of activity, the deployment of sustainable development in our institutions will only happen on a grand scale when the HEI performance evaluation systems integrate sustainable development. As long as we do not change the way we reward or sanction, actions will remain either declarations of intent, or limited to a few militant activists. In the world of business schools, accreditations and rankings are the two major drivers which shape establishments' strategies. It is worth noting that, since Rio, accrediting bodies, with the EFMD at the top of the list, have started to reconsider their criteria. In particular, since last February, they have dedicated an entire chapter to ethics and responsibility.⁽⁴⁾

For a number of years, dedicated rankings have existed for the evaluation of sustainable development (beyond grey pinstripes or Green Matrix for instance) but these have only been applicable to institutions which are leaders in this field. During the "Sustainability in University Rankings: A new proposal for rankings" conference, which took place last October at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, discussions explored how to go further; how to integrate sustainable development

criteria in traditional conventional rankings pertinent to all establishments (Business Week, FT, QS...).

The professionals of the sector also started to organize themselves to produce something concrete in higher education. One of the first tangible implementations of Rio+20, was launched during the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Congress in Nairobi in February 2013. The international performance evaluation platform⁽⁵⁾ now groups all the different evaluation tools on the five continents with tools such as the Green Plan (France), Life (UK and Australia), STARS (US), etc. The support of the UNEP, PRME, Global Compact and UNESCO for

this platform, demonstrates how the different stakeholders have understood the necessity of a true systematic vision in our establishments and the need to evaluate the strategies put in place.⁽⁶⁾

What everyone agrees about today is that beyond dedicated programs in sustainable development which train experts, we need a viral approach which infuses all education programs. We need to move away from a 'niche' approach and have all actors in the economy

engage with the subject, whatever their field of competence. For HEIs, this means ensuring that all their students are properly equipped to take into account these elements in their future careers, assuming the consequences of their choices, in full knowledge of the facts.

In a lot of countries, considering which competences are necessary for deploying a sustainable development approach started years ago. In France, for example, the government asked a panel of stakeholders to draw



"WITH GREAT POWER, COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY" - STAN LEE, WRITER OF SPIDER-MAN.

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Sources : KEDGE Business School
 Practical guide to the UN Global Compact for HEI - RIO 2012
 Greening universities toolkit UNEP 2012
 Revised in 2014 by Kedge Business School

up guidelines of new competences, and make recommendations about the necessary educational approach for sustainable development by next September. This group studies, subject by subject, what is missing today, and is piloted by two main academic institutions in France, the CGE and the CPU.⁽⁷⁾ It includes representatives from the corporate world, unions, NGOs, ministers, and student associations.

Certain HEIs are working on the creation of tools for evaluating competences, behavior, and even the values of their students, during, or at the end of their studies. Other initiatives try to define a ‘responsible’ manager, engineer, buyer or financial manager. These approaches therefore set out the context of appropriate competences. Each tool measures the particular capacities and competences linked to specific activities and professions. Even if the tools are useful, or even indispensable, they cannot be common to all HEIs. The work done clearly shows that, beyond a few transversal competences, the application of particular competences remains difficult to transfer from one profession to another, one country to another, or one culture to another.

In complement to these specific tools, the “sustainability literacy test”⁽⁸⁾ launched this year aims to be universally applicable, focusing only on knowledge, whatever discipline is studied, or whatever the type or place of education.

To get into the most prestigious universities, students are often asked to be able to prove a certain level of English.⁽⁹⁾ To be admitted to the best MBA programs, some institutions check students’ scores on performance tests⁽¹⁰⁾ (analytical skills, problem solving, comprehension etc.). In the same vein, and in order to guarantee that the graduates ‘produced’ are aware of the stakes linked to sustainable development, it seems logical that eventually the best institutions will be able to require a minimum level of knowledge about the major universal challenges we face, and students’ own responsibility.

The sustainability literacy test is a multiple choice questionnaire of 50 online questions

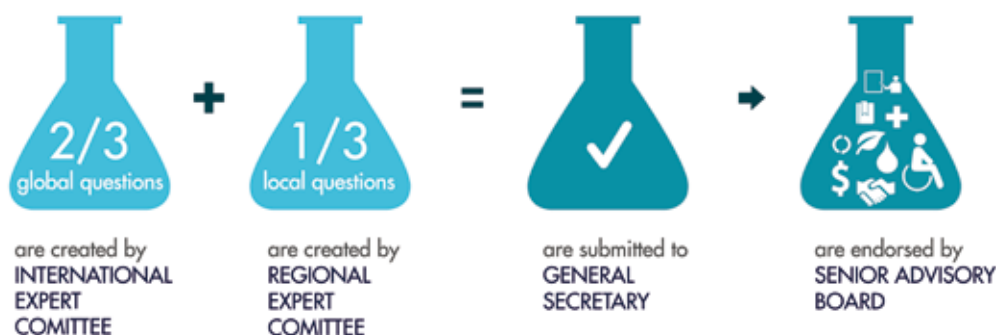
evaluating basic knowledge of sustainable development issues, and individual and corporate responsibility. It is aimed at all higher education students whatever their level of studies (bachelor, master, MBA, PhD, etc.).

The test covers a wide range of questions to check the participants' understanding of the major challenges facing society and our planet. The questions focus on general knowledge about social, environmental and economic aspects, as well as a basic understanding

of the minimum score for graduation. Others will use the test as an educational tool to raise awareness among students; or to evaluate the impact a program has on students, by having them take the test at the beginning and at the end of their studies. The tool will be free for universities, and will eventually be offered to companies, other institutions, recruitment cabinets, etc.

In November 2014, the next UN conference on education will be held in Nagoya⁽¹²⁾ in Japan. Let's bet that higher education will set an example on the subject of

The structure of the new Sustainability Literacy Test



of how our planet works—such as water or carbon cycles, the greenhouse effect, etc. Other questions focus on the responsibility of organizations in general, and companies in particular, such as the responsibility of the individual as an employee or simply as a citizen.

To increase its pertinence, two-thirds of the questions are identical throughout the world, and treat the issues the planet faces, such as global warming. The remaining third of the questions are based on local issues covering regulations, laws, culture and practices in the country.

The test is customized today in around 20 different countries including the United States, Brazil, India, Egypt and China. Supported by a number of UN institutions,⁽¹¹⁾ the objective is to target tens of thousands of higher education students.

Naturally, evaluating the minimum level of knowledge does not guarantee the future behavior of our graduates. However, putting a process in place on a global level will create a dynamic for the integration of sustainable development in our institutions' strategies. Some pioneer establishments will ask for a mini-

imum score for graduation, and that our establishments will show that integrating sustainable development in their strategies is, or will soon be, a reality for each of our institutions. **ABR**

1) www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/right-to-education/

2) This initiative, led by UNESCO, the UNEP, Global Compact, PRME and UNU was signed by close to 300 Deans and Chancellors and has become the most important voluntary contribution of all the summits.

3) www.unep.org/training/docs/Greening_University_Toolkit.pdf

4) EQUIS STANDARDS & CRITERIA – 2013 www.efmd.org/images/stories/efmd/EQUIS/EQUIS_Standards_and_Criteria_2013.pdf

5) www.sustainabilityperformance.org

6) Paragraph 47 "Assess and Report" of the final text produced in Rio

7) The CGE and CPU are the two main academic associations in France (business and engineer school and public universities) and represent almost 2,4 million students.

8) www.sustainabilitytest.org

9) The Toefle was passed by more than 27 million people since 1964 www.ets.org/toefl

10) More than 200,000 people each year pass the GMAT in the world www.gmac.com/GMAT

11) Such as UNESCO, the UNEP, the UNDP, UN DESA and PRME

12) <http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/unesco-world-conference-on-esd-2014/>