



# Viewpoint

## Students as Agents of Social Change: Student Initiatives at Rhodes University, South Africa

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### *Abstract*

*Rhodes University has a diversity of sustainable development initiatives meant for students and in a range of cases activities are initiated by students themselves with the support of the university. Results of a sustainability assessment revealed the involvement of students in environmental societies, environmental awareness campaigns, campus sustainability initiatives and community sustainability projects. Though most of the projects are still in their infancy and some challenges are yet to be overcome, the sustainability initiatives are gaining momentum and have contributed to improving the overall picture of sustainability at the university. Based on the results of the Rhodes University case study, the underpinning viewpoint in this paper is that university students are not merely recipients of Education for Sustainable Development but have the capacity to become agents for social change.*

### *Introduction*

This paper is positioned within the discourse around Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) but focuses on students as they have been found to have a crucial role in sustainable development. ESD aims to develop an understanding of the interdependence of life on earth for effective use of resources – to achieve a balance between ecology, economy and society's needs. It helps develop people's awareness, values and attitudes and enables them to be effectively involved in sustainable development (Palmer, 1998). According to UNEP (2006) education is about working with people to take charge of their own lives in a shared world, through preparing them to plan for, cope with and find solutions to sustainability challenges. The meaning of ESD is however complicated by controversy over the concept of sustainable development; the actual role of education, and the broad and inclusive social issues it seeks to address (Landorf, *et al.*, 2008).

While ESD is argued to be a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development (Nicolaidis, 2000), the education system was critiqued by Woolcombe (cited in Gutiérrez & Pozo, 2005) for socialising students into highly unsustainable aspirations (e.g. many cars, power boats, skiing holidays); making its role in sustainable development questionable. Education institutions directly contribute to sustainability problems (e.g. pollution, resource consumption) that affect the same communities they are supposed to serve (Creighton, 1998; Dunkin, 2000). The question is whether universities are managing to develop responsible citizens who can take charge of their lives and ensure a high quality of life in future in a shared world. This paper

does not address this question but reveals evidence that students have the agency to consciously initiate projects that contribute to sustainable development.

There are various opinions on the role of students in sustainable development. In most cases, they are identified as beneficiaries of ESD. Nicolaidis (2006:418) for example, argues that the intention of ESD is 'to educate students as the future custodians of the planet, to act ethically and responsibly and to demand less resources and customer goods and the associated manufacturing of pollutants'. Students are also regarded as future decision-makers, developers and managers of society's institutions. As such, universities are expected to give them intellectual and professional guidance to develop the capacity required for a sustainable future (ULSF, 1990). Universities are also expected to develop students who can play a role in advancing knowledge and ensure a high quality of life in future (Clugston, 2000). They are tasked with helping students to 'understand the roots of environmental degradation and motivate them to seek environmentally sustainable practices ...' (Clugston & Calder, 2000:34). Some of the priority roles of universities defined from emerging themes in sustainability declarations in higher education (see Wright, 2002: 2004) are also meant for students, for example, developing ecological literacy among students to prepare them to deal with environmental problems and developing interdisciplinary curricula for an environmentally sustainable future.

While students are generally defined as recipients or beneficiaries of ESD, this paper is based on the premise that they also have capacity to spearhead ESD initiatives. Some of the priority roles of universities in ESD (Wright, 2002: 2004) have room for student participation, for example, where universities are encouraged to develop an understanding of sustainability in the community, to have sustainable physical operations, and to carry out research that contributes to sustainability.

This paper is an outcome of a PhD study which investigated a systems approach mainstreaming sustainability in university functions and operations through developing an in-depth case study of Rhodes University (RU) (Togo, 2009). The study explored functional operations of a university including teaching, research, community engagement, operations and management. It also considered the way students participate in sustainability issues. The paper draws on the RU case study to share some of the ways through which students are spearheading sustainable development initiatives.

### *Research Design*

The theoretical framework of the study drew from a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1978) and systems thinking epistemology (Banathy, 1992). Systems thinking is based on the concept that wholes are greater than their component parts (holism). This means 'the properties of each part are dependent upon the context of the part within the whole in which they operate' (Gilbert & Sarkar, 2000:1). Systems of various orders therefore cannot be understood by investigating their parts in isolation (Bertalanffy, 1968). Based on a holistic approach, the study included students' initiatives in addition to other operational functions of universities. Systems thinking emphasises interdependencies of phenomena and provides the methodology and tools for a systems view

of relationships between education and the environment in which it is embedded. This enabled studying the sustainability activities by RU in the community.

According to critical realism, reality is beyond empirical evidence and knowledge is fallible. Reality is stratified into levels, that is, the empirical level of our experiences; the actual level of flows and consequences; and the real level of objects, their structures and powers (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism therefore seeks explanation beyond empirical evidence using abductive and retroductive modes of inference to develop explanations of causal mechanisms that shape human experience (Danermark, *et al.*, 2002). It regards society as consisting of two theoretically distinct elements of structure and agency, that is, social institutions and the creative individual respectively (Archer, 1995). Agency is the capability of doing things or of actively changing the course of events by causal intervention (Giddens as cited in Weik, 2006). The choice of agents is however limited by structure (Carter & New, 2004). Critical realism was employed as an underlabourer to systems thinking to provide for dimensions absent in systems thinking, including a depth ontology that facilitates isolating causal factors influencing events (Sayer, 2000). This paper mainly draws on the empirical level of critical realism. The viewpoint of the paper was however informed by the real level of objects where the PhD study identified agency as the main causal factor enabling sustainable development initiatives by students at RU.

Data was collected through a sustainability assessment, interviews, content analyses and observations. The sustainability assessment was performed using the Unit-based Sustainability Assessment Tool (USAT) (see Togo & Lotz-Sisitka, 2009) developed as part of the main study to identify sustainability initiatives at the university. Only projects and activities initiated by students were selected for reporting in this paper. The paper also draws from two interviews carried out with members of the Student Representative Council (SRC); the SRC president and the Environmental Officer. Content analysis of documents was performed to complement data from the assessment and interviews. Besides the university's Community Engagement Reviews, most documents analysed were downloaded from the RU website, that is, documents with information on student community engagement, student environmental news, and SRC involvement in sustainability activities among others (see reference list). Two of the lectures organised by students during the RU Environmental Week were observed to triangulate information collected through interviews on environmental awareness creation at RU. Deductions from the main study also revealed some sustainability initiatives which are a result of student agency.

## ***Results***

RU students initiated a number of sustainable development projects, either on campus or in the community as part of the university's student volunteer community service programme. Initiatives varied from those aimed at creating environmental awareness; those contributing to the operational management of the university; to those aimed at educational quality in the community. There were however different levels of engagement of students in sustainability activities. Students involved in these initiatives have not necessarily been exposed to ESD. The following is an outline of student initiated sustainability activities at RU.

### **Environmental societies and sustainability related student groups**

RU students in collaboration with the SRC Environmental Officer formed an environmental society in 2007 called Green Revolutions and Social Solutions (GRASS) (P1, pers. comm., 16 November 2007). At the time of the study, the society had over four hundred members and was said to be 'an indication that Rhodes students are willing to take part and recognise the depth for environmental issues at Rhodes' (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008). Activities by the society are both on and off campus and are generally around issues of conservation, awareness and sustainability.

We are very much based on campus-wide as well as in community projects with regards to environmental awareness, sustainable living, a bit of conservation comes in, but I think awareness is one of the major goals they are working with as well as conservation and sustainability. (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008)

Students are also involved in the Rhodes Organisation for Animal Rights (ROAR) which is aimed at fostering an understanding of the impacts of lifestyles; especially eating habits; which contribute to the suffering of animals and environmental degradation (see <http://www.ru.ac.za/3315>). Other societies include the Masincedane Society, Student HIV/AIDS Resistance Campaign (SHARC), and faculty/departmental based societies like the RU Pharmacy Students Association (RUPSA), and the Zoology Society. Students are also involved in sustainability initiatives through the Oppidans,<sup>1</sup> their halls of residences and other clubs.

### **SRC involvement in sustainability issues**

The RU SRC is increasingly getting involved in environmental and sustainable development issues. It has a Community Engagement Councillor and one of its objectives is to 'Increase participation of students in Community Engagement and make this an integral part of a Rhodes University education in a practical and relevant manner both for students and the community of eRhini'<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.ru.ac.za/studentrepresentativecouncil/>). As will be discussed later, community engagement is one way through which RU students are contributing to sustainability. The council recently (2007) established an Environmental Portfolio and elected an Environmental Officer responsible for environmental and sustainability issues. Creation of the portfolio was supported by the Department of Environmental Science, which is also playing a role in making sure that it works. The SRC Environmental Office receives funding for environmental initiatives through the SRC and the university's Environmental Committee.

### **Celebration of environmental days**

Students celebrate environmental days through environmental and sustainability related societies and the SRC. This is done to create environmental awareness or to implement sustainability related projects in the community. At the time of the study, there were plans by the SRC to launch a Rhodes Water Week in recognition of the International Water Week. Arbor Day celebrations for students for 2008 were also planned. World Environment Day is

celebrated as part of the Environmental Week which, in 2008, was held from 12–16 May and was characterised by a number of environmental activities (see the following section).

### **Awareness programmes**

At the time of the interview, a single awareness campaign had been facilitated by the SRC in 2008 around issues of electricity load shedding.

We have had an electricity awareness thing where ... we were trying to put forward how electricity and load shedding will be affecting the students, but more important to put a background to it, how our electricity is generated, and a bit of a look on how wasteful and so on, touching on global warming. (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008)

This was not as successful as was intended because it was held closer to the orientation week and there was not much time on the part of the Environmental Officer to organise it.

The SRC in collaboration with GRASS and ROAR organised various activities to promote environmental awareness during the RU Environmental Week. These included lectures, movies and a picnic among others.

... we will be addressing issues of sustainability, global warming and other environmental issues. ... that will be a large environmental campaign that will be run for a week long period; lectures, movies; something happening every day. There will be a picnic in the Botanical Gardens, to get some students out there ... to get more close, in touch with nature ... . (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008) (The interview was carried out *before* the environmental week.)

Observed lectures were entitled ‘Vegetarians do not Eat Children’ and ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’. These were centred on raising environmental awareness, and explored issues of sustainability at the same time. However they were not well attended and both sessions had less than 30 people at a university where there are more than 6 000 students. Some of the lectures addressed the relationship between people and the environment and that between people and animals, etc. (*RU Student News*, 2008a).

In the past, student environmental awareness campaigns were instrumental in the operational management of the university. The ‘where-is-a-way’ awareness campaign, a student initiative in collaboration with the Estates Division, held to celebrate the World Environment Day in 2006, was centred on issues of waste categorisation and recycling. Waste was collected from all over campus and students separated it into different categories. The Estates Division manager then did an assessment of what is waste to be thrown away, and where to throw it away, as a way of creating awareness.

### **Car sharing**

Students at RU took initiative to establish a car sharing initiative, Greenwheels, aimed at making travelling in and out of Grahamstown cheaper and environmentally friendly (<http://>

[www.ru.ac.za/environment/resources/local/greenwheels](http://www.ru.ac.za/environment/resources/local/greenwheels)). They also established a website (<http://zebra.rucus.net/>) to provide space for interested individuals to organise car sharing and to create environmental awareness. The website has a number of articles to this effect.

### **Research on sustainability issues**

The PhD study (Togo, 2009) shows that the agency of students was also evident in some environment and sustainability research initiatives at the university. In a wide range of these initiatives, the main determinant factors appeared to be availability of funding, resources (e.g. equipment relevant in sustainability research), departmental research programmes and supervision expertise among others. However, students to an extent had the freedom of choosing research areas of their interest. The study established that in some departments (e.g. Biochemistry, Education, History and Anthropology), students were choosing to do research in environmental or sustainable development issues due to the desire to do relevant and applicable research that can make a difference in the real world. Students were also voluntarily involved in applied sustainability research initiatives. Some of such research endeavours were part of departmental community engagement initiatives. This was taking place in Environmental Science and Geography Departments, and the Environmental Biotechnology Research Unit.

### **Community involvement**

Student community initiatives at RU are supported by the Centre for Social Development (CSD), a non-governmental organisation commissioned by the university to lead community engagement. The CSD is co-funded by RU. Some of the projects students were working on show a high level of community involvement in the area of sustainability. An example is the Adopt a Tree Project where students get young succulent indigenous plants to look after for six months before planting them in bare areas in the community. The plants were said to be good for stopping erosion and for carbon sequestration and eventually grow into large plants. (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008)

Student activities for the Rhodes Water Week were planned to take place in the community. According to the interview, this was going to be in collaboration with the Working for Water Programme<sup>3</sup> and possibly the CSD's Galela Amanzi Project.<sup>4</sup>

... the Galela Amanzi CSD project ... is aiming to buy water tanks for the community, specifically for a number of schools which have started projects of gardens in the past. ... these gardens are not sustainable because there is no running water or taps nearby the schools. We are working on getting them some water taps, or tanks or both, so they can have clean water there to use ... this is at high school and primary school level. (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008)

A tree planting campaign in the community was planned by students as part of Arbor Day celebrations for 2008. The aim was to plant about 50 robust indigenous trees, larger than the succulent plants in barren and treeless areas in iGini. This was going to be done in partnership with the CSD (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008).

RU students are challenged to make use of their skills in the community through the Student Volunteer Programme coordinated by the CSD. The centre facilitates over three hundred students volunteering at 30 community-based placements on a weekly basis (RU, 2007). The programme co-ordinator identifies the needs of Community Based Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations, translates these into volunteer skills requirements and then matches students to the community projects. Volunteers receive specialised training before they are placed (RU, 2005).

A number of projects, some related to educational quality, are running at the university as part of the student volunteer programme. These include:

- tutorship of students from disadvantaged schools;
- English literacy orientated projects;
- sponsoring school children;
- hosting community fun days;
- Peer Education Training (SHARC),;
- AIDS awareness workshops (RUPSA);
- teaching and providing grade 12 biology revision support to learners from disadvantaged high schools (science disciplines students, the Young Royals and Zoology societies); and
- establishing and maintaining a vegetable garden; and running of a soup kitchen for vulnerable families (the Masincedane Society).

There are other community involvements by students through the Halls of Residence, the Opidans and other societies and clubs which are sustainability oriented. The nature of involvement varies from educational projects for the disadvantaged through various departments to involvement in fundraising efforts for child and family welfare in collaboration with the CSD in which they collect and distribute food and clothing donations (RU, 2007).

### *Challenges*

GRASS was relatively current and the SRC Environmental portfolio a new and unique initiative making it difficult to assess performance with time. In the case of the SRC Environmental Portfolio, it was difficult for students to do performance assessment without similar initiatives to compare it to.

More student support was needed for the success of these initiatives, for example, the Environmental Portfolio as indicated below:

... I do need more student support which is in the way of GRASS, students societies, ... environmentally aware and active students who I can draw upon, to help me, because ultimately this is not a one man's show, it's a university's so the more students get involved the better. (P2, pers. comm., 8 April 2008)

Student initiatives at the university tend to be short-lived as they die down when the group that initiates them moves away. Initiators generally have a following of people around them. Before GRASS there was GAIA, which just died away.

Some student initiatives are restricted by the operational processes of the university. Other university commitments come first and some initiatives are interrupted by holidays. In the Adopt a Tree Project for example, students couldn't use bigger trees as many live in residences and have no place to properly care for the trees.

### *Implications of the Results*

While students were identified as recipients of ESD, this paper has shown that they can be agents in spearheading ESD initiatives. Given institutional support, students have the capacity to play a role in sustainable development endeavours which reach out to their local communities. There is however need to address structural factors and other challenges which might limit their agency.

The RU study is just one case in point. Worldwide students have revealed their agency in ESD in different ways, focusing on a diversity of sustainability challenges at various scales. Without going into much detail, some of these initiatives<sup>5</sup> address issues like climate change, on-campus education and action on environmental issues, international development projects and local outreach (including political structures, gender equality, microfinance, international trade, human rights); and conservation to mention a few.

Sustainable development issues cut across disciplines and affect everybody. All students should therefore be beneficiaries of ESD. If all the students involved in spearheading sustainability issues at RU were exposed to ESD, initiatives would have been of a much broader and profound nature. ESD could also be structured in such a way that it equips and empowers students, not only to take charge of their lives and participate effectively in sustainability initiatives, but to be the bearers of knowledge on sustainable development who can participate in educating society about such issues.

### *Conclusion*

Student initiatives augment the way RU is responding to sustainable development challenges. In a number of initiatives, there is collaborative work between students and university management that has resulted in strong and comprehensive responses. This is especially the case in community involvement where the student volunteer programme has enhanced the university's responses to the community in sustainable development-related issues. This paper however only shared the student initiatives without investigating how adequate or relevant these initiatives are. It did not go deeper into investigating challenges that students face in instigating the identified initiatives but only highlighted a few challenges that were reported during data collection. Future related studies at the university can target assessing student initiatives so as to develop ways of addressing challenges and improving the initiatives. The paper was also restricted to initiatives in which the agency of students was evident in the activities. There

are other sustainability initiatives at the university that involve students but which were not reported as they were not a result of student agency (see Togo, 2009).

### *Notes on the Contributor*

Muchateyi Togo is a post-doctoral fellow in the Rhodes University Environment and Sustainability Education Unit. She completed her PhD in 2009 on Education for Sustainable Development in African Universities, in which she focussed on a case study of a systems approach to mainstreaming environment and sustainability in one university (Rhodes University). E-mail: muchatogo@yahoo.com

### *Endnotes*

- 1 Oppidans is a union of the community of students who stay off-campus. It has a committee which is responsible for coordinating donations (see <http://www.ru.ac.za/oppidan/>).
- 2 Grahamstown.
- 3 The Working for Water (WfW) programme is administered through the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. It was launched to spearhead the fight against invasive alien plants and works in partnership with local communities, to whom it provides jobs, and private companies, government and other organisations (Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, 2008).
- 4 Galela Amanzi promotes responsible use of water, as well as make water available to community centres and schools that do not have consistent safe running water (Rhodes University Student News, 2008b).
- 5 More information on a few examples of such student initiatives can be obtained from the following websites: <http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=6573>; <http://wscsd.org/>; <http://groups.tigweb.org/NSCC-SD>; <http://www.unbf.ca/clubs/ENVS>; and <http://www.ssdactivist.20m.com>.

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### *Documents used for Content Analysis*

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### *Interviews*

P1, pers. comm., 08 April 2008: Interview with the SRC President.

P2, pers. comm., 08 April 2008: Interview with the SRC Environmental Councillor.