Futures of Education – Learning to Become 2021

Concept Note for Conference, VIA University College, 22-23 April 2021

"As we come to terms with human-caused changes to the planet and face the possibilities of fundamental transformations in social organization, human consciousness and human identity, humanity needs to devote attention to the question: what do we want to become? Knowledge and learning are at the core of transformations in human minds and societies"

- from the presentation of the Futures of Education – Learning to Become initiative

BACKGROUND

UNESCO, UN's organization for international collaboration in education, sciences, and culture, has continuously demonstrated its commitment to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Both before and after the Brundtland rapport and the Rio conference in 1987 and 1992, UN raised global awareness of Sustainable Development. UNESCO was the lead UN-agency of the UN Decade of ESD 2005-2014, which in 2014 was followed by a five-year Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD, which "aimed to generate and scale-up ESD and to accelerate progress towards sustainable development." More recently, UNESCO has announced the launch of a new 10-years global framework for ESD at a conference in Berlin, May 2021, *'Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs' or 'ESD for 2030'.*

This framework is, as the title indicates, oriented toward the role Education can play for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. It builds on the following key notions:

- **Transformative action:** ESD has to pay more attention to each learner's individual transformation processes and how they happen. First, transformation necessitates a certain level of disruption together with courage and determination. Second, there are stages of in the transformative learning process of the individual.

- **Structural changes:** There is a need for ESD to pay more attention to the deep structural causes of unsustainable development, particularly the relationship between economic growth and sustainable development. ESD should promote development as a balancing act, which implies adapting to changes while respecting the values of conservation, sufficiency, moderation, and solidarity. A structural view is also required to address ESD in contexts of extreme poverty or other challenging survival situations (e.g., conflict or refugee situations), where the full complexity of the concept of sustainable development does not immediately resonate with people trying to survive daily.

- **The technological future:** Technological advances may provide solutions to some of the "old" sustainability problems, but some ESD efforts to change people's behaviour may no longer be relevant. However, the technological solutions themselves may bring new challenges or simply create an illusion of having solved the original problems.

There is, however (hopefully) also a world after 2030. UNESCO has also initiated another ambitious global initiative that expands the notion of sustainability of education, learning, and edification, which goes beyond the SDG2030 agenda. This second initiative, "Futures of Education – Learning to Become," aims at reimagining "how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet," and it operates with a horizon of 2050 and beyond.

Concerning ESD, the concept of "Learning to Become" points to a vision of education and an approach to pedagogy which views learning as a process of continual unfolding that is ongoing and life-long. ESD can, therefore, be understood both as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD1) and as Education as Sustainable Development ESD2 (Vare &Scott, 2007). It is worth noting that the "futures of education" initiative operates with a "fluid and collective concept of future-making," emphasizing an idea of futures in the plural. This opens up for giving space for the plurality of views of learning, embedded in the various worldviews worldwide. It also opens up for working with a plurality of visions for the future.

IDEA
The idea of the conference can therefore be described in the following way:

The conference, recognizing both the importance of the two abovementioned initiatives by UNESCO and the need for action and

reflection concerning the SDGs and ESD1 and ESD2, will explore how "learning to become" are central for the transformations of human minds and societies. That will be done by examining various forms of open path-dependent emergences of (sustainable) visions of the future, with a particular focus on how knowledge and learning are generated through education and edification.

MAIN THEMES OF THE CONFERENCE

The two UNESCO-initiatives constitute the background for the conference. They will be examined and debated from three overall thematic perspectives

Theme 1: The Anthropocene, visions for the future(s) and the development of the intergenerational contract

It is a fact that the effects of socio-economic factors on the ecosystem of planet Earth since the 1950' has increased exponentially (the Great Acceleration). In recent years, this development is often presented together with another idea, namely the idea that the current geological age is a period during which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the environment (the Anthropocene). This development has radical philosophical, theoretical, scientific, social, cultural, and existential implications. It has also led to the development of Environmental Humanities, which integrates perspectives from science, social science, humanities, and artistic research.

How are we to conceive and visualize the future of Sustainable Development and ESD in light of these developments? As we saw, the first key notion for ESD for 2030 concern the transformative development of the individual learner. This indicates that we have to focus on ESD1 and ESD2 but also that ESD implies not only "learning" but also an open form of *edification*. Another critical question is how we are to understand what could be called the *intergenerational contract* concerning education, society, and the notion of futures of education. The German educational thinker Schleiermacher argued at the beginning of the 19th century that the most crucial question concerning education and edification was, "what does the older generation want from, the younger generation?" The Brundtland report in 1987 defined sustainable development as a development *that meets the present's needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs.* The intergenerational contract then explicitly became a broader social issue. But how are we to understand the intergenerational contract in 2020, in light of the idea of the Anthropocene and the notion of *futures* of education? This first theme explores the concept of sustainable development and ESD relating to these issues.

Theme 2: Sustainable development, equality, diversity and ESD

The Brundtland report was an attempt to reconcile the tension between the idea of environmental sustainability and the concept of fair and more equal economic development, which came to the fore at the first UN-conference on environmental issues in 1972.

The SDG can likewise be seen as an attempt to balance the environmental problems with issues related to fair and equal development of human social life. Further the theme of structural changes is as mentioned also one of the three core notions in the ESD for 2030 initiative. It has been argued that SDG-10, which calls for the reduction of inequalities, is an attempt to balance the environmental issues addressed in goal 13-15 with various forms of fighting inequality and injustice in SDG1-6. The practical means to do this are science and technology, economics, partnerships, governance, and individual and collective action, which all also are included as themes in the SDG's (Richardson). However, fighting inequality should not only be understood as balancing income and fighting economic inequality, but also fighting for equality concerning age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, both in countries, between countries, and concerning migration. How are we to understand this broad idea of equality in the SDG's? Central subthemes are here the difference between equality and equity, capability, social ecology, and resilience and innovative social transformations of different culturally and existential path-dependent visions of futures in a sustainable way. How do and ought these issues influence the idea and of practices of ESD?

Theme 3: Sustainable Development, edification and ESD of poly-technical education

The third theme concerns the future of ESD1 and ESD2 in the context of a particular form of Higher Education (HE), namely Higher Poly-technical Education (HPE), which is taking place at Vocational Colleges or Universities of Applied Science (UAS). This kind of institution offers programs and degrees in a broad range of subjects, and it is, in general, aimed at educating professionals to more or less well-defined professions. Practical training "outside" the educational institution, therefore, besides empirical and theoretical studies, plays a vital role in this kind of HE. Further, are these kinds of institutions also expected to "create value" for external public or private stakeholders - and civil society.

That, on one side, raises several issues questions regarding what characterizes and ought to characterize education and research in these institutions, but on the other side, the triangle of empirical, theoretical, and practical perspectives and "creating value for others" make them attractive concerning working with SDGs and future ESD. Put differently, this form of HE has the opportunity to work with both "head, heart and hand" in ESD. Some but not all possible subthemes are:

1) How does ESD "matter in practice" in professional education and training and the professions? How do the generic aspects of ESD in specific ways play together with the more specific skills, knowledge forms, and expertise developed in the various programs, degrees, and professions represented in HPE? How are the particular futures of the different forms of professional knowledge envisioned to evolve further in light of the two UNESCO initiatives both in itself and in cross-professional collaboration?

2) Examples of concrete cases of ESD in HPE: these examples could highlight how various forms of inquiry (broadly understood) takes place in ESD, for instance, as STS-analysis, facilitation, phenomenological research, hermeneutics, care as "intervention," hands-on experimentation, prototyping. They could also highlight

learning notions in HPE for ESD (communities of practice, socio-material learning, rhizomatic learning, etc. as well as an existential dimension of learning– see also point3)

3) How are ideas of learning related to edification? How is the professional faculty of judgment and imagination developed (in light of the conference's main themes)? How is Phronesis or practical wisdom existentially situated as "heart" knowledge in-between "head" and "hand" knowledge in the various professions? Besides technical professional expertise and practical wisdom, are there also artistic and poetic elements involved in the "craftsmanship" of the professions"?

4) The theme of value creation: There is a difference between what it means to create value in a product to a consumer and the value creation process in education (Biesta), and the same could indeed be said about other professions, for example, in health care, design, and engineering. HPE institutions have a unique opportunity to rethink and contextualize the concept of value, value creation for others, the idea of "value chain" in a more sustainable way, opening up for a profound notion of sustainable development. That also includes exchanging various forms of values, and the conditions of intersubjectivity these exchanges entail and presupposes. What does it mean to "create value for others" in a sustainable way in various contexts and professions? What is the relation between the intrinsic (internal) value in a given profession and the values this profession creates for others?

5) In recent years newer forms of research, which opens up for broader participation in research processes, have emerged, the so-called citizens or participatory science, where citizens help researchers collect or process data across concerning, for example, astronomy and medicine and cultural heritage. This kind of research has a vast potential concerning working with SDG's and ESD. While (obviously) not the only type of research on the HPE institutions, these institutions have unique opportunities for exploring the potential of this kind of research both concerning student involvement and the surrounding communities of HPE institutions

6) The evaluation criteria of education and research at HE institutions and, in particular, activities at HPE institutions has to be discussed both in general and in relation to research activities related to the SDGs. The "evaluation industry" of higher research is at best debatable regarding the universities and is problematic with regard to HPI institutions. The questions regarding the evaluation of research are as relevant as ever both in general and more specifically in relation to the research activities at HPE institutions (who, why/to what purpose, which kind of activities and how). These questions have been raised as a global international concern (see, for example, https://sfdora.org/), and are also very relevant to consider concerning the evaluation of education and research in sustainable development.

REFERENCES

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