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The Methodist University Sustainable Program

Using the Earth Charter to Mainstream Sustainability

WAVERLI MAIA MATARAZZO-NEUBERGER
and **VICENTE MANZIONE FILHO**

Abstract

This article describes a pioneering initiative of a Brazilian university to introduce sustainability in all undergraduate curricula and in its operations. The Methodist University Sustainable Program was developed in a bottom-up way and began with the introduction of sustainability as a core value in the Institutional Political-Pedagogical Plan, followed by the creation of a Sustainability Committee and actions defined in an Education Program and a Structural Diagnosis of three environmental resources: water, energy and greenhouse gas emissions. The first step of the Education Program was to establish how and where sustainability could be included within the curricula of undergraduate courses. The second step was to prepare the professors and lecturers of the identified subjects to mainstream

Waverli Maia Matarazzo-Neuberger is Methodist University Environmental Centre coordinator and Environmental Technology course coordinator at the Universidade Metodista de São Paulo, Brazil. E-mail: waverli.neuberger@metodista.br

Vicente Manzione Filho is Methodist University Environmental Centre researcher and Environmental Technology course lecturer at the Universidade Metodista de São Paulo. E-mail: vicente.filho@metodista.br

sustainability in their curricula using the Earth Charter as a guideline. The first module of an education leadership program was conducted and resulted in the Sustainability Academy seed. The second module is already planned and will be implemented soon.

Keywords: universities, ESD, faculty development, sustainability operations, sustainability curriculum

INTRODUCTION

We are facing a transition moment in human history and education is a key to create the sustainable future that the Earth Charter envisions. As Sterling (2001: 12) states, it is a change of mind on which change towards sustainability depends. It is the difference of thinking that stands between a sustainable or chaotic future. The qualities, depth and extent of learning that take place globally in the next ten to twenty years will determine which path is taken: moving towards or further away from ecological sustainability.

Colleges and universities are critical loci of this change. They are learning centres for new ideas and for change. They guide other sectors and have the potential to serve as societal models. Although they are unique in many ways, their innovations are largely replicable by other institutions. And their mission and responsibilities for defining educational scope give them a reason to update and reevaluate in a way that invites institutional learning and openness to sustainable thinking (Edelstein 2004: 271). Universities also transcend boundaries in space and time. With their senior professors and junior students, they also connect society's elders with its youth. With their interdisciplinary studies and many learned associations, they connect across intellectual and geographic boundaries and are thus participants across space (M'Gonigle and Starke 2006: 13).

Sustainability provides a university an opportunity to confront its core values, practices, entrenched pedagogies, the way it uses resources and its relationship with the broader community (Wals and Jickling 2002: 230). It can be a catalyst for institutional change and for a transition towards new ways of knowing, introducing teachers, students and administrators alike to a new pedagogical world that opens up promising avenues for both institutional and individual practice (Wals et al. 2004: 348).

Sustainability is both a practical and moral subject. It is interdisciplinary: as much a matter of concern to the humanities as to the sciences. It is, at once, an inescapable dilemma of our time, a matter of study and reflection and a challenge to action. It raises questions about globalisation and personal responsibility. It constitutes, in fact, all that a discipline calls for: a greater understanding and a basis for the moral authority of knowledge (Cullingford 2004: 250).

But constraints also exist in academia, such as the complex organisational, institutional, social and cultural defenses against change that all institutions deploy. Meta-change of the type represented by a shift of society to sustainability is particularly challenging because of the general lack of critical social evaluation and learning

mechanisms for understanding complexity and adjusting to the big picture, a limitation endemic to bureaucratic and disciplinary education (Edelstein 2004: 271).

The objective of this article is to present the Methodist University Sustainable Program, the first known program in Brazil to involve an entire university with the goal to introduce sustainability transversally in all undergraduate course curricula and in university operations. The Earth Charter principles are used as guidelines for the program development.

CREATING THE METHODIST UNIVERSITY SUSTAINABLE PROGRAM (MUSP)

Methodist University of São Paulo is located in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo. It has 25,825 undergraduate students distributed in the knowledge areas of humanities, communication, business, science and technology, totalling 54 undergraduate courses. In addition it runs 43 specialisation courses and six MSc and PhD programs, totalling 1,008 students. The institution has 1,660 employees, 537 professors and lecturers and 242 interns. The university has great regional influence and is recognised as the third-best private university of São Paulo state¹.

The Sustainable Program was developed considering what Creighton (1998: 11) points out as the five key ingredients to successful university environmental action: (1) understanding how the institution works, its players and its decision making; (2) university commitment and demonstrated support for environmental action, often articulated in an environmental policy; (3) a university-wide environmental planning committee or smaller issue specific committees; (4) individual leaders; and (5) an understanding of basic principles of environmental protection.

One of the authors of this article has been involved for 15 years with the Methodist University, working as a professor and also as an administrative coordinator of courses and a research centre. This experience gave the authors a privileged idea of how the institution works, satisfying the first key ingredient listed by Creighton (1998: 11).

The second key ingredient came into action when in 2008 the institution decided to reformulate the Institutional Political-Pedagogic Project (IPP). This document describes the main policies adopted by the university. The authors suggested the creation of a Sustainability Axis, the guidelines for which had been developed by the authors as a closing project for the Schumacher College Certificate in Education for Sustainability. The meetings to renew IPP resulted in the adoption of sustainability as a new core value in addition to two others already existent, namely, Christianity and common good. The IPP was approved by the University Council and presented to the academic community by the end of 2008. Sustainability has been recognised since then as a central value in the institution, and has opened a new and strong scenario for change.

The Sustainability Committee, our third key ingredient, was created in December 2008. The committee members are the five Vice Principals, the head of Communication Department and the Environmental Centre coordinator (one of the authors). The committee functions are to deliberate, give suggestions regarding the activities proposed, support the program institutionally and open doors within the university for

changes to come. In early 2009, the Sustainability Committee approved the initial plan and allocated a budget to implement the Sustainability Axis, renamed Methodist University Sustainable Program (MUSP).

A couple of circumstances were favourable for the MUSP implementation. First, the university was not yet so fragmented. The institution was accredited as a University only in 1997, although the theology course existed since 1938, so 'feuds' common in academically fragmented institutions had not had enough time to consolidate. In addition, the management design of the institution privileged collegiate forums, which brings a great permeability and a constant contact at all levels and segments of the university structure. A second indication was perceived during the awards event of the Program *PraMelhor*. The program objective is to stimulate the participation of all employees (administrative and academic) through suggestions and creative and innovative ideas regarding the improvement of economic aspects and quality of life within the institution. Seventy per cent of the finalist projects were related to environmental issues.

The initial plan of MUSP defined two major structuring components: (1) an Educational Program, designed to introduce sustainability in a transversal way through all the undergraduate courses; and (2) Structural Diagnosis of three environmental resources: water, energy and greenhouse gases emissions, in order to offer subsidies to plan the reduction of the ecological footprint of the university. This initial plan provided enough space for incorporation of other ideas coming from university members. The MUSP was launched in early April 2009 at an event in a nature park on the outskirts of São Bernardo do Campo. The invitation was extended to the principal, vice principals, all faculties' directors and course coordinators as well as administrative managers, totalling almost 100 persons. The engagement of all these sectors sought to create an open and communicative process in which all stakeholders play their own respective roles, what Wals et al. (2004: 348) describe as the most desirable reform approach, highly contextualised, but with great impact.

IMPLEMENTING THE MUSP

Structural Diagnosis

Creighton (1998: 17) points out that successful environmental programs rely on visible and meaningful commitment to environmental action from institutions' leaders. The first step of this commitment is the recognition by the administrators that the university has varied environmental impacts; that reducing these impacts is in the long- and short-term interest of the institution; that impacts go beyond the creation of trash, and thus strategies must go beyond recycling; that some of the strategies save money, others reduce liabilities and still others do neither but are nevertheless worth doing because they have long-term benefits for health, safety, the environment, or the community; and appropriate and creative solutions may require rethinking some current operating norms. Recognising the importance of these principles, the Sustainability Committee decided to perform a diagnosis of how the university uses water and energy and emits greenhouse gases. This represents

the first phase of the process. The second one would extend this diagnosis to waste production, life-cycle of used materials, safety and health indicators, and purchase and transportation polices.

The diagnosis of the first phase was conducted through June to November, 2009, by a research team of the Methodist University Environment Centre and administrative managers of the three university campuses. Data for the last three years was collected and analysed.

The report is now ready to be presented to the Sustainability Committee. After its approval, mitigation and monitoring plans will be elaborated and applied to reduce the university footprint. Plans will be developed with the participation of professors and lecturers, their students and administrative personnel. Creighton (1998: 49) alerts that the changes required to minimise or eliminate the impacts of higher education institutions are complicated and demand participation and commitment at all levels. Formal committees, policy statements and individual leaders will help actualize the change. MUSP wants to guarantee and hold space for the engagement and participation of every segment of the university, essential to the development of a real institutional collective intelligence and culture.

Educational Program

One of the main objectives of an education for sustainability program should be to create space for social learning that includes spaces for alternative paths of development; for new ways of thinking, valuing and doing; for participation minimally distorted by power relations; for pluralism, diversity and minority perspectives; for deep consensus, but also for respectful disagreement and differences; for autonomous and deviant thinking; for self-determination; and finally, for contextual differences (Wals and Corcoran 2004: 224). The design of the Educational Program of MUSP allowed the creation of these spaces and following the principles of the program, was built bottom-up, considering the points of view and experience already embodied in the academy.

The elaboration of the educational program began in May and June 2009, when meetings with directors and course coordinators of all faculties happened. The objective was to identify which modules in every undergraduate course could begin to introduce sustainability into their curricula. A fundamental principle of the program was that sustainability should not be treated as one more discipline within current curricula, but should be transversally mainstreamed into curricula in order to really be effective. The mind map methodology was used in these meetings to identify in each faculty themes, areas and ways in which sustainability could be mainstreamed.

In the next phase course coordinators were asked to analyse the mind map of their respective faculty and to identify which modules could address sustainability in their courses. Presentations to and discussions with collegiate forums were stimulated. The final result of this process was the identification of a group of professors and lectures that would be responsible for implementing sustainability in the curricula of each course. This group was invited to join the Education for Sustainability Leadership Program in Higher Education (FLESES, in Portuguese).

Opening the door for emerging new leaders was viewed as a *sine quo non* condition for the development of the program. Chase and Rowland (2004: 104) demonstrated that the success of higher education sustainability projects was based on decentralised leadership structure, avoiding a small group becoming 'the' environmental organisation on campus and allowing other groups to emerge and play critical roles. Keeping its focus on education for sustainability through faculty development could give rise to a university-wide commitment that was one of the main objectives of MUSP.

FLESES realised Creighton's (1998: 11) fourth key ingredient. It was designed as a modular program. Module I was named 'Sustainable Futures: A collective creation' and was in force from 13 October to 5 December, 2009, totalling 40 hours, distributed over 8 weeks. The module comprised 28 hours using long-distance learning methodology and 12 hours in classes. The objectives were to allow the understanding of the relations between sustainability and future scenarios, to reflect on the relationship of professional practice and planetary sustainability in the context of the careers offered in the university and to delineate the role envisioned for university students in the future.

While designing the course, sustainability was considered an emergent quality arising from sets of relationships in a system, whether viewed at the macro or micro scale. As Sterling (2004: 55) states, sustainability is likely to arise depending upon the degree to which our attention shifts from 'things' to relationships, and from a segregated and dualistic view of the world towards an integrative and participative perspective. This involves more than a simple and dualistic environmentalism and indicates, instead, the need for 'whole system thinking'. The activities, reflections, text readings and videos chosen to be part of this module immersed the participants in this kind of vision, offering a glimpse of how we can create the opportunity for people to imagine and work towards life-centred forms of development (Clover 2002: 167).

The Earth Charter was adopted as a guideline for this module, because it represents an important contribution for a holistic and integrated vision of the social and environmental problems of humanity. It does not consider ecology as a technique to manage scarce natural resources but as a new paradigm to relate to nature, looking at 'all interconnected beings' as forming an immense and complex system (Boff 2006: 43). The Earth Charter encourages everybody to search for common ground in the midst of human diversity and to embrace a global ethic that is shared by an ever-growing number of people throughout the world (Earth Charter International 2008: 7), essential to ensure a focus on the development of international educational initiatives.

FLESES was attended by 86 professors and lecturers representing all undergraduate courses of the university. The main objective of this initiative was to establish a real sustainability academy—a learning community that will be responsible for introducing sustainability transversally in university curricula, develop research and engage community and stakeholders aiming to improve the local environment. The 16 principles of the Earth Charter were used by each professor and lecturer to inspire and guide changes in the contents of the next semester's educational program.

FLESES Module II will be devoted to developing procedures and techniques to work with sustainability issues with students. A Module III related to the systematisation and sharing of the results obtained by each undergraduate course in the implementation of sustainability within its curricula is also being planned.

This initiative for introducing sustainability through all university undergraduate courses is the first of its kind in Brazil. The authors have been in contact with other universities and initiatives such as the Global Forum, which aims to introduce sustainability in management and engineering graduation courses. They believe that the methodology and procedures developed in this program could inspire and be used as an example for other universities in Brazil and Latin America.

The MUSP was developed to bring real transformative learning to a scenario grounded in formal traditional education. Although the results of this program are still to come, there are already some important outcomes to register, such as the importance of conducting a real bottom-up process, listening and considering carefully all the contribution in order to engage all segments of the institution. The adoption of this policy has brought real progress to the entire process and will facilitate future steps. The authors want also to highlight the importance of a proper time and space to promote natural maturation of the program, avoiding premature outcomes that could sound like greenwashing.

Exploring sustainability in higher education can be regarded as a process of simultaneous individual and institutional confrontation and self-confrontation in order to arrive at a better understanding of the potential significance of sustainability for the institution and for oneself. The emphasis is on the process and its facilitation, and brings the need for facilitated cultivation of pluralism and conflict in order to create space for social learning in moving towards contextual sustainability in higher education (Wals and Corcoran 2004: 223).

By the first semester of 2010, sustainability will be ready to be introduced in the curricula of all 54 undergraduate courses in a transformative way of learning. Mitigation measures and monitoring plans to reduce the university's footprint will be implemented in a way that students can learn in classes about sustainability and see and engage in practical action within the campus, nurturing the kind of influence that gives meaning and empowers their lives and the human future.

Note

- 1 More information can be obtained at the website www.metodista.br/metodista-sustentavel (accessed 20 June 2010).

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