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## Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions of Belarus: Case Study

**Abstract.** The article deals with the organization of network activities in the field of education as one of the most important forms of international cooperation among the universities of the Republic of Belarus. The authors describe the largest networks of associations and universities. The direct participation of Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno in the national and European educational space is analyzed using examples of networking. The emphasis is placed on the importance of implementing university network priorities aimed at fostering education for sustainable development in cooperation with Belarusian universities.

**Keywords:** education for sustainable development, international cooperation, higher education, university cooperation, network activities, university networks, networks of associations

### 1. Introduction

Our region is an exceptional eco-region not only because of its geographical and historical characteristics, its unique natural and cultural heritage, but also thanks to the feeling of belonging to “the Baltic region,” shared by its inhabitants. Located at the meeting point of the three borders, the region brings together countries and peoples of different levels of economic and social development, different religions, languages and cultures, that share a common heritage, created throughout

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centuries of old 'exchanges' of all kinds. These characteristics render the Grodno region a perfect illustration of the global situation.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) requires a reorientation away from focusing entirely on providing knowledge towards forms of dealing with problems and identifying possible solutions. Therefore, education should retain its traditional focus on individual subjects and at the same time open the door to multi- and interdisciplinary examination of real-life situations. This could have an impact on the structure of learning programmes and on the teaching methods, requiring educators to stop being merely transmitters of knowledge and learners to stop being merely knowledge recipients. Instead, both should form a team.

Formal education institutions play an important role in developing capacities from an early age, providing knowledge and influencing attitudes and behaviour. It is important to ensure that all pupils and students acquire appropriate knowledge of sustainable development (SD) and are aware of the impact of decisions that do not support it. The educational institution as a whole, including pupils and students, teachers, managers and other staff as well as parents, should follow the SD principles.

It is important to support non-formal and informal ESD activities, since they are an essential complement to formal education, not least for adult learning. Non-formal ESD has a special role to play as it is often more learner-oriented, participatory and promotes lifelong learning. Informal learning in the workplace adds value for both employers and employees. Therefore, cooperation among different actors involved in all forms of ESD should be recognized and encouraged.

Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the international Non-Aligned Movement since 1998, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the UN since its founding in 1945. Belarus is included in the European Union's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which aims at bringing the EU and its neighbors closer.

For the past decade, Belarus has focused its efforts primarily on ensuring social stability in a challenging environment of transition from one economic model to one conditioned by today's globalized world. The socially-oriented economic development model has helped to preserve the industrial potential and avoid a sharp increase in poverty, but this improvement has not yet led to positive changes in environmental security, in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and the high deterioration of industrial fixed assets.

Belarusian ESD practice is at a relatively early stage of development, which is limited by the lack of a national strategy and program for ESD development that would encompass all levels of formal education, non-formal and informal learning. Despite a number of successful projects in ESD implemented with the support of EU, UNDP, the Support Program of Belarus of the Federal Govern-

ment of Germany and other international programs, there are still problems with openness and flexibility of the education system and enhancing the role of education in the sustainable development processes of the regions [National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus Until 2030].

## **2. Sustainability for 21<sup>st</sup> education's needs at Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno**

Sustainable development, and the process of institutional transformation this requires, remains a considerable challenge for universities. Worldwide, only a few universities are confronting these challenges. Through its initiatives "Agenda 21" and through the Department of Ecology, Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno has been among the first Belarusian universities to view the institution as a whole and to attempt to initiate processes in all working areas which point the way towards the integration of sustainability into each of the different areas in which it is active.

In this paper the focus is placed on the following question: how can universities actively face the challenges associated with sustainable development, and to what extent can targeted structural changes perform a contribution to transforming universities for sustainability? The University administration of Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno encourages research into ESD. This has increased cooperation and partnerships between stakeholders in research and development activities, ranging from identifying issues to working with new knowledge and making it known and used. The results of research and development efforts are discussed with actors locally, regionally and globally, and are incorporated into different parts of the education system, experience and practice.

Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno tries to ensure that all pupils and students acquire appropriate knowledge of SD and are aware of the impact of decisions that do not support sustainable development. An educational institution, as a whole, including pupils and students, teachers, managers and other staff as well as parents, tries to follow SD principles.

All this shows us the necessity of a new way not only of teaching but also of learning. The individuality of student should be on priority. It is important to teach him to find his own way of solution each problem. The multi- and inter-disciplinary examination of real-life situations need from the teacher to be creative.

Against this backdrop, it is worth asking to what extent the experiences gained and the knowledge acquired through these projects could be transferred to other universities or could provide support for them. In order to better understand this

transfer and its associated challenges, reference will be made to the findings of higher education research.

### **3. Environmental co-operation of universities as part of a regional framework for environmental management**

The education sector consists of a broad field of actors with different regulatory management systems in different countries. It is also geared to cater for the needs of people of different ages and in different life situations. Cooperation, shared responsibility and leadership of all relevant state bodies should be recognized as an important mechanism for good governance and should be strengthened. Universities should cooperate and take the lead in initiating and encouraging further integration of SD concerns into formal education policies, programmes and curricula at all levels.

Such universities in Belarus as Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno (GrSU), and Belarusian State Pedagogical Maxim-Tank- University (BSPU), Belarusian State University (BSU), have organized a community of professionals, institutions and organizations, established with an aim to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into all areas of society, as well as to integrate the Belarusian experience of ESD practices into the international network of regional centres of expertise (RCE).

Our vision is to implement the education for sustainable development as a system innovation project. This is a unique opportunity to strengthen education as a social institution.

We can do it only if we have a professional and expert support in the promotion of the SDGs and ESD practices in educational, economic, ecological and social areas on the national, regional and local levels of government in Belarus.

To achieve these goals, the universities have focused their activities on the following tasks:

- to reorient the main attention from the provision of knowledge to working out problems and finding possible solutions;
- to change teaching methods and curriculum structure;
- to find new opportunities for a more multilateral and systemic approach;
- to promote the development of knowledge and special skills in the field of SD, increase their competence.

Based on the foregoing, we can argue that the introduction of ESD in higher education institutions involves the identification of innovative forms, new sustainable development issues.

As the most optimal innovative forms of education, contributing to the formation of sustainable development of society, we can consider the following forms:

- traditional (information-receptive) learning;
- learning through discovery or guided discovery learning;
- learning through active student participation or involved learning (participatory learning);
- problem-based learning;
- interdisciplinary education;
- online learning.

The use of these forms allows you to stimulate students' cognitive activity and achieve better results.

#### **4. The student voluntary environmental movement “Green sun”**

The process of implementing the principles of sustainable development in the educational process through the organization of voluntary environmental movement «Green sun» is actively carried at the Faculty of Biology and Ecology. Minimal involvement of students in unified eco-educational space, which is formed with the participation of social organization, can significantly improve the level of the individual components of a positive attitude to nature; it promotes the development of student initiatives, drawing attention to environmental problems, filling the information deficiency on this or that environmental problems. The activities of the voluntary environmental movement “Green sun” are based on the principles of sustainable development and the Earth Charter, fairness, transparency, democratic participation, respect for human rights and gender equality.

The volunteers want students of our university and others studying in the region to recognize the value of nature and treat it with care and respect, and to have the competencies and effective mechanisms of participation in environmental decision-making. They actively cooperate with civil society organizations, government, academia communities, as well as business companies sharing our concerns about the environment in Belarus.

Here are some of the activities undertaken by the “Green Sun”:

- Environmental actions: “Grodno is our city.” The main goal of the event is the formation of a new type of person with a new ecological thinking, able to understand the consequences of their actions in relation to the environment. Target group – students of secondary education.

- Roundtable on the topic “Education for sustainable development of the region: experience and prospects.” Target group – representatives of the city authorities, the staff of educational establishments, youth and environmental

organizations. Goals – education in the subject of sustainable development, exchange of experience, development of cooperation.

– Yanka Kupala state University of Grodno organized a webinar entitled “The introduction of the ideas and principles of sustainable development.” The purpose of the seminar – discussion of the possibility of extending the principles of sustainable development in the educational environment through interactive methods of education.

The challenge is how best to use their experience and potential to promote ESD. Another challenge is research into ESD-related issues, which still does not have a prominent role in the region. There is also a need for international cooperation on ESD in pre-school and school education. ESD uses tools that stimulate a change in behavior. With the tasks it fulfills, ESD shapes attitudes and integrates various spheres of human activity. It also improves such abilities as communication, systemic thinking, critical thinking and cooperation [Hopkins & McKeown 2002: 19].

Regional and subregional forums that bring together members of the education community, such as civil servants, educators and researchers, and other relevant actors to share their experience and good practices on SD- and ESD-related issues should receive high priority.

Educators, leaders and decision makers at all levels of education need to increase their knowledge about education for sustainable development in order to provide appropriate guidance and support. Therefore, competence-building efforts are necessary at all levels of both formal and non-formal education [Urea 2015: 228-233].

Key actions to achieve this could involve stimulating competence development for staff in the education system, actions for leaders to increase their awareness of SD issues; developing criteria for validating professional competence in ESD and incorporating them in staff evaluation and; introducing and developing management systems for SD in formal educational institutions and non-formal education settings; including SD-related issues in training and re-training programs for educators for all levels of education; and encouraging educators, including those involved in non-formal and informal education, to share experiences. The competences in ESD for educators as developed by the relevant UNECE Expert Group should be considered.

## 5. Conclusion

Education for sustainable development is part of the general educational transformation to enable every new generation to humanize living conditions. This is based on a definition of education “which emphasizes the self-driven devel-

opment and self-determination of human beings in a discourse with the world, other people and themselves” [Thomas & Muga 2014: 512]. In this context, education for sustainable development refers to the human capability of taking part in the shaping of society in an informed, reflective, and responsible manner, with a view to sustainable future development.

Questions as to how the future may be designed with a view to sustainable development at the local, regional, and global levels are systematically addressed in concrete activity areas. This means learning on the basis of real-life situations through exact observation, critical analysis.

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## Zrównoważony rozwój szkolnictwa wyższego na Białorusi: studium przypadku

**Streszczenie.** W artykule przedstawiona została organizacja zintegrowanych działań w sferze edukacji na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju, która jest uważana za jeden z najważniejszych form współpracy między białoruskimi uniwersytetami. Autor zwraca uwagę na największe sieci stowarzyszeń i uniwersytetów. Analizuje udział Grodzieńskiego Uniwersytetu Państwowego im.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju, współpraca międzynarodowa, szkolnictwo wyższe, współpraca międzyuniwersytecka, organizowanie sieci działań, sieci uniwersyteckie