



ENABLING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Introduction

Education has always shown the path to bring about change and transformation in society. It has ushered in change through new knowledge, ideas, thoughts and values and equipping learners with skills and behaviors needed to address social, cultural, economic and various other challenges. As challenges get more difficult, issues overlap and seem to be interconnected, the education system needs to gear itself to meet the demands of this increasingly complex world scenario. Educational institutions need to move from the traditional set goals of teaching and learning and encompass a larger purpose by incorporating sustainable practices. Sustainable Education was defined by UNESCO 2014 - "Education for Sustainable Development allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behavior and take action for sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development consequently promotes competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in a collaborative way. Education for Sustainable Development requires far-reaching changes in the way education is often practised today."

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Sustainable development was defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987). This directs us to the fact that we require development and advances to improve the quality of our lives, but these should not be achieved at the cost of the future. The quality of life that future generations will live will be highly affected by the decisions and choices we make today. But unfortunately, the growth and development taking place in our society today will prove to be detrimental to us tomorrow. This is a pressing issue that cannot be stored away to be examined later but something that demands our immediate attention. Sustainable development directs us towards addressing this issue and enables us to choose those options that will help us to live a better today and tomorrow. Sustainable development is not restricted to only the economic aspect, the three pillars of sustainable development that are interdependent with pivotal roles to play are the economy, society and environment.

Education has a key role to play in the path to a more sustainable world. It is the tool which will help societies



to create learners who are more sensitized and are aware of ways and means to live their lives in alignment with sustainable living habits. Higher Education equips learners with knowledge and skills that prepares them to live their lives as productive, contributing member of their society. The pandemic period led to an overhaul of educational practices with a lot of emphasis on technology driven learning as teachers and students participated in the teaching learning practices through the virtual world. It also brought to the fore the fault lines that exist in society, the widening gap between the privileged and the less privileged, highlighting the necessity for a more equitable and environment friendly world, the need for better health systems, addressing issues of poverty, gender inequality, climate change etc. As educational systems are going back to the physical spaces, with new practices and processes emerging and being incorporated to deliver meaningful learning experiences to the learners. This is a time that educational systems can incorporate sustainable practices in a more enhanced way to bring about a transformation in learners and the society. Higher educational institutions through sustainable practices can instill in learners the knowledge, skills, values that will help them to be sensitized to the environment, the needs of the society and to enable them to understand that their economic goals should be tempered with the goals of sustainable development.

As stated by UNESCO with reference to its new global report on the Futures of Education titled Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education -Today, however, as we face grave risks to the future of humanity and our planet, we must urgently reinvent education to help address these common challenges. The new social contract for education must unite us around collective endeavors and provide the knowledge and innovation needed to shape sustainable and peaceful futures for all anchored in social, economic, and environmental justice. There are various ways and means through which sustainable practices can be adopted by higher education institutions. Some of the sustainable practices that higher educational institutions can incorporate include the following:

- Eco friendly institutions- Educational institutions need to be shaped into a more ecofriendly space. Greening of the premises can go a long way in contributing to the environmental sensitization the learners. Green audits, energy audits can enable the institutions to prepare itself to a more ecofriendly approach. Efficient use of all the available resources to a large extent will aid the institution in promoting sustainability. Establishing proper and effective waste management systems will help in instilling in learners the need for addressing this issue and to mitigate the harm done by it.
- Environmental Ethos- The institution can develop an environmental ethos among its learners by conducting various awareness programmes on the issues related to environment, climate change, global warming etc. Through co-curricular activities a wide array of activities can be offered to the learners such as cultural programmes, exhibitions, poster competitions, cleaning drives etc that provide awareness as well as develop environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviors among learners. To build up learners connect with nature activities such as nature walk, gardening, building green walls etc can be offered to learners.
- Teaching Approaches- Various teaching approaches that come within the ambit of experiential learning such as place based learning, project based learning, service based learning, internships, field trips etc offer students with learning opportunities in the real world and are considered to be conducive for sustainable



education. These require high levels of engagement from the students during the learning process that can lead to skill development and behavioral changes. Through such active learning experiences, they become partners in their own learning and co producers of knowledge.

- Good Health and Mental Wellness- Activities focused on creating awareness and aimed at developing good health habits need to be organized by the institution. Learners need to be trained in developing good mental health and strategies to deal with different types of stress and towards these sessions on yoga, meditation can help to a great extent. Training learners in mindfulness to focus on the present, mindfulness strategies will develop self-awareness among the students and help them to have a more balanced approach to the world around them. Counselling sessions will enable students to share their thoughts and beliefs, to express themselves and gain a better understanding of themselves, their emotions and develop a more positive attitude.
- Community outreach – Through various community outreach activities, fundraising etc the institutions can help learners to understand the society they live in, the issues that the community is grappling with and the role that they can play as responsible members of the society. Such activities help students to understand the active, participatory role they can play in their own community and contribute to meeting the challenges faced by society.
- Collaboration- Collaborations offer excellent opportunities for students to interact with experts in various fields and help them to learn from their knowledge and expertise. It also allows efficient use of the community resources as well as expose students to the diverse ideas and views that exist in society.

Higher Education institutions need to invest their efforts and resources towards sustainable education as that is the way forward. The future of our world rests in the decisions and choices that are made in the present. UNESCO states that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to address the interconnected global challenges we are facing, including climate change, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, poverty and inequality. Learning must prepare students and learners of all ages to find solutions for the challenges of today and the future. Education should be transformative and allow us to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change our societies and care for the planet. Sustainable practices will enable educational institutions to prepare learners who value and understand their responsibility and the potential for change that they hold within themselves.

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