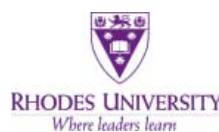# UNIT-BASED SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT TOOL

A resource book to complement the UNEP Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities Partnership

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Acknowledgements

This sustainability assessment tool was developed for use in the Swedish/Africa International Training Programme (ITP) on 'Education for Sustainable Development in Higher Education', and complements the UNEP Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability into African Universities (MESA) *'Education for Sustainable Development Innovations Programmes for Universities in Africa'* materials
(available on www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp).
It is part of the broader UNEP MESA initiative which aims to resource African Universities to mainstream environment and sustainability into African Universities. The tool was developed through the PhD research of Muchaiteyi Togo, supervised and supported by Heila Lotz-Sisitka at Rhodes University, South Africa.

See *www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp* for materials on *'Education for Sustainable Development Innovations Programmes for Universities in Africa'*. These provide more information on ESD in Higher Education.

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Introduction

This booklet begins with an outline of the **Unit-based Sustainability Assessment Tool** (USAT), which is designed to assess sustainability at universities. The tool focuses on **the different functional units** in a university (e.g. departments, research units, management units etc.), and how they are integrating sustainability concerns into their core functions of teaching, research and community engagement and university management operations. Using a unit-based assessment tool allows for 'building the picture' of the whole, *as well as* concentrating on specific units as required (e.g. concentrating on one department etc.). This framework allows for the integration of sustainability thinking across the different units of the university, and creates possibilities for sustainability issues to be managed within functional units, *as well as* through a broader systemic framework. The booklet explains the indicators, the assessment criteria and ways of representing results of a unit-based sustainability assessment using the USAT. It also suggests other data collection methods to complement the USAT in carrying out a sustainability assessment.

For more information on sustainable development and sustainability in Higher Education, see the **'Education for Sustainable Development Innovations Programmes for Universities in Africa'** *materials (Module 1), available on* www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp

> **NOTE:**
> **The USAT is included at the end of this booklet, for direct use or adaptation**

Background

Sustainability in Higher Education describes "*a positive movement towards environmental accountability and social and environmental responsibility*" (Nicolaides, 2006, p. 415). According to Cobb, cited in University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) (1999), there can be no sustainable communities and institutions without social justice. **Sustainability therefore comprises social and economic, as well as ecological dimensions**. Clugston and Calder (2000, p. 34) describe sustainable institutions as institutions that "*help students understand the roots of environmental degradation and motivate them to seek environmentally sustainable practices while also teaching the roots of today's injustices in full integration with modelling justice and humanness*". Genuine commitment to sustainability should be evidenced in the critical dimensions of institutional life (for example, written statements of mission and purpose, academic

programmes, energy and purchasing practices, outreach, faculty hiring and development, etc.) (*ibid*).

Academic institutions vary in the way they approach sustainability. Some concentrate on minimising their ecological impact through emphasising operational practices that include waste reduction and/or recycling, carbon dioxide and air pollution reduction, energy and water conservation practices, sustainable landscaping and so on (ULSF, 1999). Others emphasise sustainability in the curriculum and take up the question of sustainability into their teaching, research and community service activities. In Africa, a concern for sustainability is often reflected in contributions to sustainable development and poverty alleviation at community and national levels. Universities that show commitments to sustainable development often feature topics like globalisation and sustainable development; environment and development; poverty reduction; appropriate technologies; land ethics, rural development and sustainable agriculture; urban ecology and social justice; population, women and development etc. in the curriculum. A concern for sustainability can also be taken up in faculty and student research and community service activities on topics such as natural resource management, renewable energy, sustainable campus management, ecological economics, indigenous knowledge and technologies, population and development, total environmental quality management, etc. (UNEP, 2006 *www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp*)

For case studies on how Universities in Africa are approaching sustainability, see the **"Education for Sustainable Development Innovations Programmes for Universities in Africa'** *materials (Module 1), available on* *www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp*

Different Sustainability Assessment Tools

In considering these aforementioned tools in the context of the UNEP Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities Partnership, and its intention to integrate environment and sustainability initiatives into a wide range of different faculties and departments, administrative and research units, and given the way that universities tend to be managed via department or unit heads (within a broader systemic management system), it was necessary to develop a tool that could easily be used at department or unit level. Such a tool would also need to give an insight into the 'whole' picture of sustainability in universities. It would need to allow for flexibility in the use of the tool so that it could be used at department, faculty or unit level to identify change projects, *or* to guide assessment of university wide change initiatives. To develop such a tool, it was necessary to review existing sustainability assessment tools, and to develop and adapt the USAT for use in African universities.

A variety of tools have been developed for use in assessing sustainability efforts in higher education (Shriberg, 2002; Shriberg, 2004; Lozano, 2006). Among them are the **Sustainability Assessment Questionnaire** (SAQ), the **Auditing Instrument for Sustainability in Higher Education** (AISHE) and the tool for the **Graphical Assessment for Sustainability in Higher Education** (GASU).

The Sustainability Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ)
http://www.ulsf.org/programs_saq.html

The SAQ offers its users a comprehensive definition of sustainability in higher education as well as providing a snapshot of institutions on the path to sustainability. It covers seven critical dimensions of higher education including:
- curriculum,
- research and scholarship,
- operations,
- faculty and staff development and rewards,
- outreach and service,
- student opportunities, and
- institutional mission, structure and planning. (ULSF, 1999)

> **It is often difficult to 'get started' with sustainability activities in universities. Sustainability Assessment Tools can be very helpful to assess what progress is being made, and what still needs to be done.**
>
> **These tools can help you identify a 'change project' in your institution.**

The Auditing Instrument for Sustainability in Higher Education (AISHE)
http://www.science.uva.nl/ecdo/dho21/publicaties/AISHE/AISEH-book1.5.pdf

The AISHE was developed in recognition of the fact that, while various charters give direction on the way in which higher education can contribute to sustainable development, they do not offer guidelines on what exactly needs to be done. Hence there was need for a concrete list of criteria, operationalised through some auditing instrument. The AISHE was then developed to make it possible to decide by internal or external auditing, to which level the university (or a part of it) has succeeded in implementing sustainability. AISHE is also a tool that can foster participation in the auditing process. There are 20 criteria within five fields of attention:

- vision and policy,
- expertise,
- educational goals and methodology,
- education contents, and
- result assessment. (Roorda, 2001)

Graphical Assessment of Sustainability in Universities (GASU)
http://works.bepress.com/rodrigo_lozano/4/

The GASU was designed to facilitate the analysis, longitudinal comparison and benchmarking of universities' sustainability efforts and achievement. It makes use of indicators grouped under economic, environmental, social and educational dimensions and offers a condensed graphical overview of these indicators (Lozano, 2006).

For information and an activity to explore how sustainability assessments work, see the 'Education for Sustainable Development Innovations Programmes for Universities in Africa' materials (Module 3), available on www.unep.org/training/mesa/toolkit.asp

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