

## Foreword

*From space I saw Earth indescribably beautiful - with the scars of national boundaries gone*

(Isaacs 1999)

How can this astronaut's view of Earth become the vision of our world? Civil society is increasingly facing a wide-ranging set of systemic issues, the most pressing being the need to move towards thought and behaviour that facilitate more sustainable human, social, economic and ecological ways of living. And yet our ways of dealing with these issues are still largely based on fragmented and reductionist approaches. Rather, we should be taking a more holistic approach based on 'seeing the whole' and acting appropriately in the light of such insights. As one participant in a conference I attended recently observed 'We view sustainability like the five blind men describing an elephant<sup>1</sup>.' In spite of this dominant practice we need rapid progress to action national policies on education for sustainable development - learning together about the impacts of our actions on the long-term future of our economy, ecology and communities. This stimulating series of teaching and learning activities succeeds in doing just that. Through different disciplinary traditions as well as inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches it addresses a critical question that all universities need to consider, namely how can we promote the principles and practices of sustainable development across the university curriculum so that our graduates contribute to a more sustainable Earth?

The activities described here focus on the learning process experienced by individuals and groups within a single institution that holds a collective vision and has begun to change its practice. This dynamic process is essential in building the social and individual capacity for action, and must be a key element in the successful development of a sustainable university. Bringing together the thinking and action of a whole institution on sustainable development to create meaningful working linkages and synergies is clearly no easy task! This collection of ideas and actions has

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<sup>1</sup> The perspective from the elephant's ear is totally different to the man describing his perspective from the trunk or the tail!

successfully met the challenge and will be of great value to both practitioners, and policy makers seeking to create an innovative and sustainable knowledge-based university.

Even among researchers and practitioners who share the vision of knowledge as emerging from action, there are multiple points of view within disciplines and fields of application. Diversity, as exemplified in this publication, is essential to a network of academics and other stakeholders interested in testing the applicability of their scholarship. The reason for welcoming such diversity relates to the new and emerging societal demands placed on every discipline in a knowledge-based society. This is why approaches to teaching and learning need to commit to genuinely active and interactive partnerships with other stakeholders. Single-discipline, or even inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches where inputs from several disciplines overlap, appear insufficient. The new demands of sustainability require that teaching and learning move toward a trans-disciplinary approach, where different disciplines establish working linkages with other sectors of society – other stakeholders such as employers, policy dimensions and discourses.

The emergent worldview has been described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine and experiential, but above all its defining characteristic is that it is participatory. This is a particularly apt description for the process adopted in the development of this book, because the teachers and students who have contributed to its production are already reshaping our world, and as they act, they are learning through shared experiences, observations and measurements. So, how refreshing it is to read about the myriad different ways that students and staff have taken to the issue of sustainability. It's not just a passive pleasure but an active and challenging one too!

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### **Reference**

Isaacs, W. (1999) *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, New York: Doubleday.