Report from World Student Environmental Summit, May 2011
Ratri Sryantoro and Felix Huber

This year the World Student Environmental Summit was hosted by Blekinge Institute of Technology, located in the picturesque city of Karlskrona. Over 65 undergraduate and postgraduate students from 36 universities in 18 countries gathered to be part of the intensive 3-day summit with the theme of: Conserve, Create, Collaborate.

The primary aim of the summit was to provide a platform for students to collaborate with their peers to create solutions towards the sustainable global future. The organising team successfully lined up a series of workshops and talks featuring prominent leaders in sustainability from various backgrounds: engineering, architecture, urban planning, design, journalism, green entrepreneurship.

The summit’s patron was the distinguished Professor Karl-Henrik Robèrt, M.D. Ph.D, the innovator of ‘The Natural Step Framework’. A prominent figure in the area of sustainable development and global systems, Professor Robert recently received the Green Cross Millennium Award for International Environmental Leadership and the Blue Planet Prize, often referred to as the "Nobel Prize of Sustainability" for having led the development of the framework for strategic sustainable development.

The summit kicked off with an Opening Day on the 18 May 2011. Delegates were invited to tour the BTH campus and facilities. Featuring a very green campus with its own mini global society of students from diverse backgrounds in a striking location surrounded by the Baltic Sea, it was clear that BTH was the perfect setting for the summit. The day ended with an introduction dinner which allowed delegates to meet in a more informal setting.

Day One: “Conserve”

The first day was focused on the theme “Conserve”. Following a welcome, the delegates were then able to choose to attend one of three simultaneous workshops:

- Workshop 1 was hosted by Greg Macdonald, an architecture professor from RISEBA (Riga International School of Business and Administration) in Latvia
- Workshop 2 was hosted by Marina Joarder, a Deutsche Welle foreign language journalist. Marina guided the delegates in understanding the role of media in influencing and raising the issues of sustainability in public.
- Workshop 3 was hosted by Barrett Brown, a specialist in leadership and change management for sustainability.

The afternoon saw the delegates visiting a nearby eco farm, where we learned about sustainable agriculture.

Day Two: “Collaborate”

The morning started off with three simultaneous workshops featuring discussions in various subject matters, but focused on the theme of “Collaborate”.

- Workshop 1 with the topic “Green Entrepreneurship” was facilitated by Harveen Singh, a technology entrepreneur which operates a consolidated paperless billing company in
Singapore. Harveen guided the delegates through the thought process of understanding the potential, establishing value creation of a green business, and strategically influencing different stakeholders (community, government, shareholders) to support green business ideas, for the budding entrepreneur amongst the delegates. He shared a valuable insight into the different challenging approaches and setbacks he had to overcome before finally establishing his business in Asia, where the appeal of sustainability is still often overshadowed by preference for low cost.

- **Workshop 2** was facilitated by Holger Nils, an independent consultant in concept design and the Chairman of KölnDesign.

- **Workshop 3** was facilitated by Tobias Larsson, the Chair Professor in Product Innovation at School of Engineering, Department of Mechanical Engineering, BTH. His workshop focused on gearing product and systems innovation towards sustainability, particularly in engineering sciences.

Following lunch, two concurrent sessions were held with the common theme of “Designing a Sustainable Future”. The first workshop was facilitated by Kelvin Campbell, an international leading figure in urban planning who co-founded Urban Initiatives in 1989 as an interdisciplinary urban planning and design practice, leading it on some of the best urban projects in Europe. Kelvin presented the outline of his new project “Massive Small: The Operating System for Smart Urbanism”. The idea behind the “Massive Small” concept is that small changes at the level of local communities actually have a bigger potential in driving regeneration priorities. He argued for a culture shift which sees a greater planning independence for local authorities, to significantly simplify planning regulations and stop the tendency towards micromanagement.

The second workshop was facilitated by Inderpaul Johar, an architect, Director and Co-founder of 00:/, where he leads on several architecture, research and strategy projects. Indy is a sustainability conceptualist and his work in sustainable architecture and urbanism is a perfect complement to Kelvin Campbell’s concept of “Massive Small”. Indy’s work through 00:/ is focused on creating ‘sustainable design’ which tackles ecological and social concern. Their work extends beyond zero carbon building designs, and further into the field of regeneration which strives for the creation of micro-economies, supports small-scale businesses and non-monetary forms of exchange such as swap shops.

The day ended with a heated panel discussion in “Creating a Sustainable Future: Fighting a Losing Battle?” where all speakers were invited to participate. Delegates participated and asked questions to speakers on how to best tackle the unrelenting challenges to a global sustainable society. Many topics were discussed during the session from political, economic and social challenges. The session was further enriched as both delegates and speakers offered insight into their own projects and experiences.

**Day Three: “Create”**

The final day was an event co-chaired by both WSEN and YC3 (Youth Cross-Border Cooperation and Communication). YC3 serves as Youth Board to the Euroregion Baltic (ERB) which is a platform for young people of the Baltic region to offer their voices towards the many issues pertaining to the development of the ERB. This session focused on the role of social media in spreading a common language of sustainability.

First, the delegates were treated to a very eye-opening presentation covering the rapid development and future potential of communication and social media by creative technologist Johan Ronnestam.
He presented some case studies of the power social media in building successful brands and establishing new ventures and businesses.

In the second session, the Y3C held a live interview with Irmantas Sujeta, a youth activist that was involved with leading the youth revolution during the Egypt uprising to overthrow ex-president Mubarak. Irmantas shared with us the details of the events leading up to the revolution and the role of social media (particularly twitter and facebook) in communicating the voice of the youth when many media outlets were banned by the government during that time. Irmantas argued that social media was not the reason the revolution happened, but rather it was a powerful catalyst that allowed the revolution to gain momentum over a relatively short period of time, and grew to such a significant size that they garnered support from all over the world and finally successfully achieved their objective.

During lunchtime, we continued with a short session of networking with other delegates and Y3C members.

The final and most insightful session of the day was saved for last by the organisers, which was a presentation by Dan Epstein, Head of Sustainability on the 2012 London Olympics. Dan shared with us interesting details of the design and construction of the London Olympics structures, which was designed with a major sustainability agenda right from the beginning. Dan presented the principles of planning for a ‘Sustainable Games’ where they committed use the Games as a catalyst for change towards a more sustainable UK. The focus was to regenerate already existing areas in UK to use for Games purposes rather than developing greenfield structures. But they also looked beyond the Olympics games and designed these structures with intention to improve the quality of life and encourage sustainable living in these areas when the Games end. The ongoing construction process is a concerted effort which saw the Olympics Development Authority (ODA) worked collaboratively with other stakeholders across the London 2012 supply chain to establish and enforce a new set of sustainable development standards.

The summit was then closed by remarks from Prof Karl-Henrik Robert and Eiji Hatta, the president of Doshisha University, which chairs the World Student Environmental Network.

**Personal Feedback**

Overall, the conference was very interesting. However, while a lot good ideas were presented during the conference, having come from engineering backgrounds we felt that the conference lacked scientific and technical aspects as most of the topics chosen were very much design and environmental based. Nevertheless, the experience actually became an eye-opener as we were exposed to opinions and views on sustainability and environmental issues from different backgrounds (commercial, environmental and natural science, architecture, etc).

One critical remark which we conveyed in the review was the fact that despite the plethora of ideas discussed throughout the conference and the vast network we gained, no direct output or consensus was created. This was a weak point for the conference as there was a great potential to establish a follow-up project which can be, for example, implemented in the participants’ universities and countries. Of course such an idea would be an ideal outcome of the conference, but we appreciate it would be difficult to realise given the high level of complexity in implementing such project.

**Quotes from the sustainability experts**
• “Now is the opportunity to recast the industrial society. Don't comment, don't criticize – build the world! Keep the final goal in sight, but break down the way to achieve it. Then take lot of small steps, and take these fast.” – Inderpaul Johar, architect and founder of 00:/

• As for the justification to fly in students from all over the world for a three day conference the organiser Karl-Henrik Robèrt replied: “We have to run fast to catch up with the fast changing environment. If only one person of the whole conference series has a good idea and implements it, the gains and ‘payback’ will be far greater that the costs incurred”

• “Everybody sees the world differently. Recognize these world views and use it for communication, approach people within their agenda. If you manage to align your reasons with those of others, the target is half won.”

• A sustainable world requires a change of thinking, such as
  
  o Change in metrics, for example businesses must start seeing profit beyond its economic means but rather a return on risk (e.g. the running risk of pollution and how this affects resources)
  
  o Change in design thinking, look at the required function of objects. For example, a car is used for mobility, we should not be bound to the concept of a four-wheeled car.

Summary

Overall we believed it was a very successful event which brought together so many different backgrounds. From our perspective, it was a great opportunity to be able to ‘learn from the experts’ who came from different industries and with extensive experience in implementing sustainable solutions in their industries and communities.

We would not hesitate to recommend ETH to continue their support by sending delegates to the next WSES 2012. Furthermore, we would suggest next year’s delegates to prepare a small presentation of ETH Sustainability projects, so we can further contribute towards meaningful collaborative and comparative sessions with other delegates. Particularly if you have an ongoing sustainability and environmental related project, this summit would be of great advantage for you, as you will meet prominent leaders in the industry who can give you the right support and guidance towards the right direction.

Furthermore, it might be worthwhile to suggest to the organisers to have a particular objective to the conference, such as a common project to be implemented at each participant’s home country (e.g. similar to the ETHZ ecoworks 24 hour concept).

Information on WSES

The World Student Environmental Summit (WSES) is an annual summit organised by the World Student Environmental Network, which was initiated by Doshisha University, Japan in 2011. Each year, universities around the world bid to host the conference. Previous host universities include Doshisha University (Japan), University of British Columbia (Canada) and Eberhard Karls University of Tubingen (Germany).

The primary aim of WSES is to establish a platform for students to from different political and cultural backgrounds to:
• Share their university projects aimed towards a more sustainable society and environmental well-being with their fellow participants

• Develop strategies and potential solutions for sustainable development and take them back to their universities for implementation

• Deepening mutual understanding and friendship within the greater World Student Environmental Network.

To express your interest in supporting or hosting the next World Student Environmental Summit, please go to http://wsen.org or write to futurehost@wsen.org