

FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

YORK UNIVERSITY

PROSPECTUS FOR A YORK CENTRE FOR APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY

June 12, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to propose the establishment of a Centre for Applied Sustainability (CAS), an organized research unit to be affiliated with the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), York University. The Centre's initiatives in facilitation, collaboration, applied research and education, will help to establish economic and environmental policies and practices that are socially equitable and that will have long-term implications globally for the quality of life of future generations. The Centre will maintain both a domestic and international focus.

The proposal is divided into seven sections. Part I outlines the need for a Centre for Applied Sustainability, from an international, national, and local perspective. Part II outlines the record of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, and demonstrates how its various activities contribute to the natural evolution of the Centre. Part III provides the detailed description of the Centre, including its mandated functions, internal organization, and generation of benefits. Part IV provides an overview of the unique approach of the Centre and indication of the kinds of project activity to be expected once the Centre is formally established. Part V addresses the question of funding -- both anticipated costs, and potential areas of financial support. Concluding comments are provided in Part VI. The proposal also includes seven appendices which document a range of activities and achievements already undertaken by FES, its faculty members, and collaborating partners (particularly the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy). Annex 1, a separate document, includes the curricula vitae of faculty members expected to be centrally involved in the Centre for Applied Sustainability.

I. ON THE NEED FOR A YORK CENTRE FOR APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY

Modern interest in "sustainability" can be traced to the development of environmentalism, ecology, and the concept of "limits to growth" in the 1960s; the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development in the 1970s through 1990s; and unprecedented levels of interest and activity by universities, citizens' organizations, and governments during the past thirty years. "Sustainability," the idea that society should meet the requirements of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, has proven to be much more than a short-term fad. The concept is now a world-wide focus for efforts to integrate economic, social, health and environmental values; and to encourage decision-making that is democratic, participatory, and respectful of all of society's stakeholders -- government, business, labour, non-governmental organizations, community groups, First Nations, and social service organizations at the local through to the global level.

As universities prepare for the twenty-first century they are examining their traditional role in the development and dissemination of knowledge. Included in this re-examination is a reassessment of their relationship with various aspects of society including business, governments, and non-governmental organizations. In response to similar challenges and faced with increasingly uncertain and complex environments, new approaches to problem-solving and policy-making are necessary. The principle of the partnership proposed is that both external stakeholders and the Centre will benefit from a commitment to the exchange of knowledge and understanding.

Sustainability represents both an ideal for the world's future, and an immense challenge -- a challenge to be met by the Centre for Applied Sustainability. While there is general agreement about the concept of sustainability, progress in applying the concept to everyday life has been slow. The need to sustain the natural environment, healthy communities, a vibrant economy, and

equitable social relations is basically unchallenged. Similarly, many accept that society must not mortgage the life chances of future generations in order to serve our short-term interests. Putting these laudable concepts into practice, however, proves to be very difficult in the face of immediate financial considerations, limited abilities to see into the future, and desperate efforts to survive in a turbulent world. This dilemma provides special focus for the research centre proposed here -- a **Centre for Applied Sustainability**. The Centre will marry the theory of sustainability with the practice of sustainable living expressed in policy, economics and governance.

Many research institutes and centres around the world are carrying out research on sustainable development. However, our current social, economic and political processes utilize no more than a tiny fraction of what we know about sustainability. The Centre will expand the repertoire of sustainability options locally, nationally and internationally. In order to derive lasting benefits from what we know, and what we are continually learning, we must concentrate on facilitating the implementation of sustainability practices in homes, communities, industries and governments; that is, *applied sustainability*.

The need for the Centre can be seen from international, national, and local perspectives. At the international level, one is struck by the volumes of books, speeches, media presentations, conferences, etc. which celebrate the concept, and promote the rhetoric, of sustainability. International agencies, even the major international banks, designate funds and selection criteria for projects designed to promote sustainability. Still, the rhetoric is overshadowed by the continued destruction of the earth's natural resources, the growing gap between rich and poor, and patterns of resource exploitation designed to meet only today's needs. The gap between concepts of sustainability and everyday practice continues to look like an abyss. The need for centres of

higher learning, particularly those which can bring together researchers with practitioners, is paramount. The Centre's multi-stakeholder, participatory practices will serve as a bridge between the theory and practice of sustainability.

Canada has been a major force in the promotion of sustainability, both through its actions on the World Commission on Environment and Development, and through the efforts of governments at several levels. The Canadian International Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre, Canada's two major agents of support for international development, have been at the forefront in espousing sustainability as a global objective. Various provincial, and even municipal, governments have taken similar actions on a regional scale, with some apparent levels of success. Much of the world now considers Canada to be a leader in its efforts to address sustainability. A number of research centres, some directly associated with universities, have sprung up across the country (Appendix 1). Still, the challenge of putting sustainability concepts into practice is far from met. While Canadian universities, governments, non-governmental organizations, and businesses possess a wealth of intellectual talent and good intentions, there remains an unmet need to bring these groups and persons together in an effective, coordinated effort to achieve sustainability.

At the local level, the province of Ontario established in 1989 the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy (ORTEE) to foster sustainable development in the province. York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) was one of the many stakeholders involved in the development of ORTEE's activities. In 1992, ORTEE produced a strategy report, Restructuring for Sustainability, which outlined six principles of sustainability:

- Anticipating and preventing problems is better than trying to react and fix them after they occur;

- Accounting must reflect all long-term environmental and economic costs, not just those of the current market;
- The best decisions are based on sound, accurate, and up-to-date information;
- We must live off the interest our environment provides and not destroy its capital base;
- The quality of social and economic development must take precedence over quantity; and
- We must respect nature and the rights of future generations.

When ORTEE was disbanded in 1995, the government of Ontario provided York University with ORTEE's physical space, some equipment, and its information resources. This allocation was made in the expectation that York would establish a Centre for Applied Sustainability which would continue and build on some of the activities initiated by ORTEE. This government allocation helps to signify the need for the Centre, not only in an international and national perspective, but, very specifically, within the Province of Ontario.

There are numerous benefits to the establishment of the Centre over and above the current outreach activities of the Faculty of Environmental Studies: the Centre will provide an opportunity to enhance collaborative activity across the University drawing on the strengths of the various disciplines; the existence of the Centre will highlight York's impressive strengths related to applied sustainability; and the Centre will greatly enhance the potential for partnerships with stakeholder groups; and it will increase opportunities for student support and involvement in Centre projects and activities.

II. YORK UNIVERSITY'S STRENGTHS IN APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY

York's uniqueness lies in its combination of Faculties that have expertise related to sustainability. **The Faculty of Environmental Studies** is ideally suited -- indeed, almost uniquely suited -- for the development of the Centre. Since the establishment of the Faculty in 1968, FES has demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental leadership in Canada and abroad. This position was enhanced in 1991 when both a BES and PhD programme were added to the original MES graduate programme in Environmental Studies. The expansion of the Faculty has allowed a continual examination for the current practices of sustainability through the studies of undergraduates, to critical thinking necessary to develop and critique theory at the graduate level. More than ever, FES supports the faculty members, students, research activities, and public events which foster developments in the field of sustainability. The record as reflected in publications, research grants and contracts, conferences, non-degree programmes, and other activities, provides important evidence of the Faculty's commitment and performance (see Appendices 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). Over the past 10 years FES faculty members, usually numbering about 25 full-timers, have raised 13 million dollars in external research grants and contracts, have authored about 100 books and monographs, and have prepared approximately another 1000 publications and conference papers. In the past two years alone the Faculty has hosted or co-hosted 16 conferences and seminar series, as well as eight non-degree studies programmes.

The FES concern with sustainability relates to the Faculty's traditional commitment to trans-disciplinary inquiry; to study of the natural, built, social, and organizational environments; and to the need for theory to be informed by and reflected in practice. FES faculty members, who come from a great range of disciplinary backgrounds, are recognized within Canada and beyond

for their willingness to challenge traditional paradigms, and to engage in the sort of thinking and activity which can engender the new approaches necessary for advances in the application of sustainability.

Additional support for the Centre lies in several other academic units within York University. The Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Environmental Studies have carried out numerous joint initiatives furthering environmental education. Through the Centre there will be increased potential for public education and the facilitation of policy development. The Schulich School of Business has developed a strong environmental focus through its internationally distinguished Haub Chair on Business and the Environment. The Faculty of Law participates with FES in a joint LLB and Masters of Environmental Studies degree programme. A number of departments in the Faculty of Pure and Applied Science have environment-focus programmes and research including seminal work on remote sensing as well as the Centre for Atmospheric Chemistry. Several units (e.g., the Department of Geography) in other Faculties have demonstrated their commitment to sustainability and collaboration through joint initiatives with FES. Similarly, York has relevant experience in the field of alternative dispute resolution and, particularly, multi-stakeholder approaches to problem solving. All of these activities and connections have allowed York to develop an extensive network of environmental researchers, educators, governments and industries at the local, provincial, national and international levels. Many are listed in Environment@York, an inventory recently published as a working draft by FES¹. Annex 1 includes the CVs of some of the York faculty members, both within and outside FES, who are expected to be centrally involved in the activities of the Centre for Applied Sustainability.

Faculty of Environmental Studies, Environment@York (working draft), York University, February, 1996, 203 pp.

III. THE CENTRE FOR APPLIED SUSTAINABILITY

A. The Mandate and Functions of the Centre

The primary function of the Centre will be to serve as a University-wide focus for activities that foster the *application* of sustainability practices and procedures. This will be accomplished by working with the multiple sectors of society that must be involved in the transition to sustainable development through facilitation, collaboration, applied research and education. The Centre will focus the efforts of business, academia, government and other stakeholders on applying knowledge about environmental sustainability to our political, economic, health and social systems.

Specifically, the Centre will pursue the following, at both the domestic and international levels:

Gathering and Generation of Information

The Centre will:

- gather information on how the concept of sustainability has been put into practice in projects around the world;
- initiate and foster focused, interdisciplinary applied research that will inform and implement sustainability in a variety of settings;
- provide insights into how sustainability practices work and how they provide benefits economically, environmentally and in terms of social equity;
- develop Action Learning approaches that involve joint exploration of Sustainability issues;
- identify policy, guideline and training needs and opportunities related to stakeholder networking;

Dissemination of Knowledge

The Centre will:

- act as a disseminator of practical know-how in the area of environmental management systems that respond to international standards and requirements;
- make its findings available to a variety of general target groups;
- facilitate networking amongst groups in Ontario and beyond through establishing an Internet site and face-to-face interaction;
- create linkages to community-based Sustainability initiatives;
- work in partnership with a variety of organizations and groups that require assistance in

developing policies;

Leaders in Practice

The Centre will:

- bring together experts and/or stakeholders to work together to initiate sustainable development practices;
- act as a central clearinghouse of information about sustainability; and
- work in partnership with organizations and community groups seeking help to develop their own policy and programmes for sustainability;
- strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to formulate and implement policy in regard to Sustainability;
- develop mechanisms for facilitating networking (computerized and meetings);
- explore questions of public policy that affect sustainability at the local, regional and national levels;
- provide a forum to explore the mutual interests, activities and needs of stakeholders across the sectors - governments, industry, universities and non-governmental agencies;
- create a structure that allows for comprehensive and representative participation by stakeholders in the management and implementation of strategies for sustainability.

B. Membership and Organization

In keeping with the inclusive and interdisciplinary nature of the Centre, membership will be open to any faculty member or graduate student within York University. The criteria and costs for members beyond York University will be developed by the Advisory Council during the Centre's first year of operation. Members of the Centre will be kept fully informed of the Centre's activities, and invited to participate, where appropriate.

An External Advisory Council will be appointed to maintain a broad review of projects to be undertaken, and to assist with identifying resources. The Council will include representatives from a number of sectors.

The Academic Advisory Board will act as an executive committee to the Centre. It will include a maximum of eleven people, at least six of whom will come from the Faculty of Environmental Studies. The committee will be chaired by the Director of the Centre, and will

include the Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, the Chair of the Centre Advisory Council, the Associate Vice-President (Research) for York University, and the holder of the Haub Chair on Business and the Environment.

Research Fellows will be those faculty members and other principal investigators who are conducting research funded through the Centre. The title "Research Fellow" will continue throughout the duration of the project. Junior Fellows will be graduate students working on Centre projects.

The Centre will provide a report to the Advisory Boards and to the Council of the Faculty of Environmental Studies and to the broader Community on an annual basis. The Director of the Centre will report to the Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Studies.

C. Location

At least in the short run, the Centre will be located at 1 Dundas Street West, Suite 2502, Toronto, Ontario, the former location of the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy. While this location has a number of advantages, including proximity to a number of stakeholders in downtown Toronto, the long-term location for the Centre may be on the York campus, perhaps in a new building. The best location will be related to cost, proximity to stakeholders, and the need to provide a central focus for researchers on the York campus.

D. Directorship

The Director of the Centre will be Dr. David Bell, who is just completing his term as Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Dr. Bell has a long record of collaboration with researchers in a number of units at York University (e.g., he is the former Dean of Graduate Studies, and co-chair of the Coordinating Committee on Environmental Research and Education at

York University). He also served, from 1992 to 1995, as a member of the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy.

E. Benefits to York of the Centre for Applied Sustainability

The Centre will position FES, York University, and collaborating institutions at the forefront of applied sustainability. The bringing together of researchers and stakeholders, both within York University and the broader regional, national, and international community, will permit the development of concepts and practices of sustainability which are so badly needed. The first benefit of the Centre, therefore, is to provide a point of contact for a range of collaborators which will foster real development in the field of sustainability.

Secondly, the Centre will provide public visibility for much work that has already been underway, within FES, elsewhere at York, and previously under the auspices of ORTEE. Visibility will be greatly enhanced by the active programme of community outreach and communication which is planned. The visibility will enable researchers and others to focus their activities, and to achieve higher levels of success in raising the funding necessary to support the Centre's activities.

Thirdly, the Centre should provide a much needed focus for learning and employment for graduate students. The Centre's activities will provide opportunities for a variety of experiences for York students -- through participation in research projects as Junior Fellows, conferences, publications, and community action.

As part of their curriculum, Master in Environmental Studies students have the option of earning part of their academic credit through on-the-job experience, providing an opportunity to gain further knowledge and insights into "other real world" situations, develop or hone specialized skills, integrate theory with practice, evaluate their career aspirations, and become better prepared

for entry into their careers upon graduation. Recent examples include field experience with the South Riverdale Community Health Centre, McLean's Magazine, the Fort Matthew First Nation, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Further, in order to assist students interested in international work to obtain relevant field experience FES has established an internship program that enables graduate students to work on specific research projects and/or research for their major paper or thesis. Some recent examples include serving as interns at the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements in Nairobi, the United National Environment Program in Nairobi, Geneva and Jamaica, the Human Settlements Division and the Interdisciplinary Natural Resources Development and Management Program of the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok, Thailand. In Canada, internship appointments have been made available with a wide range of organizations including the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront and the World Wildlife Fund. Finally, the Faculty awards graduate assistantships, including research assistantships. Over the past several years many of these assistantships have been shared with external partners including the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy, the Sierra Club, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, and the Canadian Standards Association. The Centre will build about this tradition by providing enhanced opportunities for field experience, graduate assistantships, and internships.

IV. CENTRE APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES

A. Approach

The Centre will foster opportunities to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills required to act in creative and innovative ways in an everchanging world. The emergent global condition of complex environmental issues is characterized by contextual interdependencies and turbulent unpredictability. Under such conditions conventional approaches to problem-solving are no longer appropriate. Rather, new response capacities are required that:

- reflect an interdisciplinary perspective that transcends any one individual discipline and fosters collaboration across disciplines and yet can draw from the strengths of existing disciplines;
- recognize that single organizations are incapable of responding to the "metaproblems" emanating from turbulent environments -- these large scale problems are exceedingly difficult to manage and therefore stipulate co-operation and coordination;
- maximize the use of networks which because of their open character provide channels of communication that are swift and fluid; and
- employ research methodologies that allow for participation, critical evaluation of assumptions, actions, and interdependencies, reframing, and the facilitation of new consciousness.

The Centre's approach is a natural extension of the Faculty of Environmental Studies' perspective on the problem of sustainability; that is, to examine it in all of its dimensions. No single discipline or perspective is sufficient to comprehend the complexities of many environmental issues. Studies should be interactive and bring in multiple stakeholders who are involved in both relevant practice and theory. Further, studies should be examining the problem of sustainability in relation to local, regional, national, and global forces and issues.

Underlying all of these points is the desire to build capacities and mediate consensus through bottom-up planning.

Capacity Building: The process should include contributing to strengthening the capacity in existing institutions to make policy in regard to Sustainability and the institutional forms to deliver that possibility.

Mediating Consensus: Participation structures in the Centre will be organized to facilitate the inclusion of a full range of stakeholders. The function of the Centre is to assist interested parties in arriving at mutually agreeable solutions to Sustainability issues. To this end, the Centre should remain flexible enough to allow for the incorporation of hidden or secondary stakeholders that come to light later on in the consultation and collaboration process.

Bottom-Up Planning: The Centre will remain open to a participatory planning process which incorporates community-level input. Public planning efforts are likely to be more effective if they reflect local people's concerns.

B. Activities

For twenty-eight years, the Faculty of Environmental Studies has worked to develop an interdisciplinary approach to thinking and acting environmentally, integrating the natural, built, social, and organizational environments. Both in terms of research design and curriculum development, the Faculty seeks to achieve integration of theory and practice, knowledge and action.

The last few years have seen an astounding level of activity in FES related to sustainability. This includes the publication of special books focusing on the theory and practice of sustainability, a large volume of other publications, dozens of special conferences and non-degree programmes, the publishing of the first version of an inventory of environmental activity throughout York University, and the creation of an Internet Worldwide-Web page focusing on sustainability. Several of the activities have been undertaken in conjunction with the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy. A perusal of Appendices 2 through 6 presents striking evidence of this very high level of activity. Further, York has pioneered the development of business and environment education and research through the Erivan K. Haub Program in Business

and the Environment.

Activities of the Centre will draw on the substantive strengths available at FES, the Haub Program, and other Faculties at York. A sample of the areas of strengths include the following:

- business and the environment
- bioregionalism and food
- globalization and justice
- gender and environments
- planning and urban restructuring.

Activities of the new Centre for Applied Sustainability will involve, initially, a continuation of those activities already initiated jointly by the Faculty in conjunction with ORTEE. Indeed, Appendices 4, 5, and 6 include a number of conferences and other activities which are planned in association with the new Centre. FES is also in the negotiating stages for a renewal of some of its large international projects, and is hopeful of negotiating one or two new international initiatives. The formal creation of the new Centre, therefore, will be accompanied by a smooth transition from existing to planned patterns of action. At the same time, creation of the Centre will provide a most important focus for the activity, and will provide a particularly attractive institution for planning, integration of University activities with outside stakeholders, and fund-raising.

Initially, several of the joint activities initiated by the FES/ORTEE partnership will be carried further through the Centre. These activities are examples illustrative of the work of the Centre: policy instruments to promote sustainability (including full-cost accounting, sustainability indicators, and environmental taxation); transportation and global climate change; sustainable communities; chlorine compounds; waste and waste management; learning for sustainability partnership; and sustainability and environmental management in the south.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This prospectus has described the need for a new Centre for Applied Sustainability which will build on established patterns of activity within the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Formal establishment of the Centre will bring York University and collaborating institutions to the forefront of applied sustainability research and problem-solving. The establishment of the Centre will provide an institutional base for exploring the many dimensions of sustainability. The Centre can make a valuable contribution to finding acceptable forms of development. It will help in practical ways to develop and introduce policies that recognize that today's actions have significant and perhaps irreversible impacts on the future quality of life of our children and generations yet unborn.