

# A Tenth Year Anniversary Retrospect: The Effect of the Halifax Declaration on Canadian Signatory Universities

Tarah Sharon Alexandra Wright, Dalhousie University, Canada

## **Abstract**

*In 1991, sixteen Canadian universities endorsed the Halifax Declaration (HD) at the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This Declaration recognized the leadership role universities could play in a world at serious risk of irreparable environmental damage and asserted that universities must re-think and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices in order to contribute to environmental sustainability on local, national, and international levels. This study discusses the degree to which initiatives outlined in the Halifax Declaration Action Plan were implemented at signatory universities, identifies emerging patterns in the implementation of Declaration initiatives, and examines the extent to which the Declaration encouraged universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices.*

## **Résumé**

*En 1991, 16 universités canadiennes ont adhéré à la Déclaration de Halifax (DH) dans le cadre d'une conférence à Halifax, en Nouvelle-Écosse, sur les actions entreprises par les universités dans le domaine du développement durable. Cette déclaration reconnaissait que les universités pouvaient jouer un rôle de premier plan dans un monde sérieusement menacé par d'irréparables dommages environnementaux. Elle affirmait également que les universités se devaient de repenser et de reconstruire leurs politiques et pratiques environnementales afin de contribuer à l'avenir durable à l'échelle locale, nationale et internationale. La présente étude sonde l'ampleur de la mise en œuvre, par les universités signataires, des initiatives énoncées dans le Plan d'action de la Déclaration de Halifax. Elle cerne en outre les nouvelles tendances de cette mise en œuvre et examine dans quelle mesure la Déclaration a encouragé les universités à repenser et à reconstruire leurs politiques et pratiques environnementales.*

In 1991, sixteen Canadian universities adopted the Halifax Declaration (HD) at the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This Declaration recognized the leadership role universities could play in a world at serious risk of irreparable environmental damage. Additionally, the Halifax Declaration asserted that universities must be challenged to re-think and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices in order to contribute to environmental sustainability on local,

national, and international levels. The year 2001 marked the ten-year anniversary of the Declaration. In an era where environmentalists and critics are purporting that major environmental and sustainability declarations from the past decade are far from being realized, this study endeavoured to document the environmental initiatives resulting from the Declaration at signatory universities, and examined the extent to which it encouraged universities to rethink and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices.

Declarations for sustainability in higher education have been in existence for over 30 years (Wright, 2002). While there is much information as to which institutions have signed these declarations, there is a current gap in knowledge of the degree of implementation of such documents. A critical step in promoting sustainability in higher education must involve developing a clearer understanding of how sustainability declarations are implemented in institutions as a whole, rather than solely in “best practice” cases. Only when we understand both the challenges and failures experienced by universities can we move forward along the path of sustainability. This study examines the background and the implementation of the Halifax Declaration and accompanying Halifax Declaration Action Plan, and discusses the implication these findings have for institutional environmental change and environmental declarations in Canadian Universities.

### The Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development

The Halifax Declaration was a direct result of the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, December 9-11, 1991. The conference was sponsored by Dalhousie University, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the International Association of Universities, and the United Nations University. There were approximately 89 participants present at the conference which included university presidents, administrators, faculty, students, and officials from all levels of Canadian government, non-governmental organizations and the business community. Participants also represented a wide range of nationalities; however, the majority of participants were Canadian representing all of the provinces except Saskatchewan. Participants were invited to the conference based on their interest in sustainability issues, or previous experience in post-secondary environmental education and sustainability activities.

The principal goal of the conference was to consider the role universities could play in improving the capacity of countries to address environment and development issues, and to discuss the implications the Talloires Declaration (which was the first written statement of a commitment to environmental sustainability by university administrators) had for Canadian universities. Additionally, the conference explored how the international university community could assist and influence the United Nations

Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in promoting environmental sustainability worldwide. Sessions during the conference included panel discussions on the implications of sustainable development for university leadership, strategic steps for university sustainable development action, and workshops designed to address how universities could support sustainable development activities. During these sessions, one group met with the expressed desire to create a declaration that reflected the ideas discussed at the conference. This was not a spontaneous meeting, but something that had been planned for some time by the conference planning committee:

From the very beginning, the organizing committee for this conference felt that some document should come from this meeting. It should not compete with the Talloires Declaration, nor endeavor to say the same things in finer fashion, but should be the initial expression of concern of those who participated here. (Lester Pearson Institute, 1992, p. 138)

The result of this session was the Halifax Declaration, which was presented to participants on the final day of the conference. The Declaration stated that universities must take a leadership role in affecting environmental change, and challenged universities to re-think and reconstruct institutional environmental policies and practices, and to contribute to environmental sustainability on local, national and international levels.

At the conclusion of the conference, leaders from 16 Canadian universities (Calgary, Carleton, Dalhousie, Manitoba, McMaster, McGill, Memorial, Moncton, Montréal, Mount Saint Vincent University, New Brunswick, Queen's, Saint Mary's, Trent, Western Ontario, and York) declared their university's commitment to becoming more sustainable, and endorsed the Declaration. Each university representative was asked to become a Halifax Declaration Ambassador within their institution and charged with the responsibility of ensuring that it was implemented.

Following the conference, an Action Plan was created to accompany the Halifax Declaration and distributed to all signatory universities. This Action Plan was created by conference organizers who compiled lists of suggestions for action they had received during discussions at the Conference. The Action Plan outlined short-term and long-term goals for signatory universities, and identified frameworks of action for institutions. The Action Plan was intended to provide a clear sense of direction for signatory universities, and included key core activities that universities should engage in to implement the Declaration within their institutions. While the Declaration and Action Plan never gave a clear definition of sustainability or sustainable development, the wording of these documents suggest that the authors viewed sustainability initiatives as those that addressed environmental, economic, social, political, and cultural issues together rather than separately. Areas covered by the Action Plan include public outreach measures, the encouragement of inter-university cooperation, the development of partnerships with

government, non-governmental organizations and industry, and programs to increase the ecological literacy of the university community (Wright, 2002). Specific activities included creating programs that would increase environmental literacy amongst faculty, students, and the public at large through:

- the development of local, regional, national, and international environmental education programs;
- sponsoring prizes in sustainable development for students, faculty, and staff;
- approaching national media services to identify practical ways the university could contribute to sustainable development;
- establishing and/or linking to a national university network focused on sustainability; and
- preparing an advisory paper to encourage and guide faculty and students on how they might link their research to the goals of sustainability.

Ten years later, this study strives to understand whether the Halifax Declaration had the impact on signatory universities that the original Declaration authors hoped it would. This was done in three ways. First, this paper examines the degree to which initiatives outlined in the Declaration Action Plan were implemented at signatory universities. Second, the paper discusses emerging patterns in the implementation of environmental initiatives resulting from the Declaration as a whole. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion of the extent to which it encouraged universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices.

## Methods

Three main methods were used in this study:

- questionnaire distribution and analysis;
- informal telephone interviews; and
- document research and analysis.

*Questionnaire.* A questionnaire was designed, and used, to understand if the environmental initiatives listed in the Halifax Declaration Action Plan were implemented at signatory universities, as well as to gain some insight into the effect it had on universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental policies and practices. The use of a questionnaire was chosen as an appropriate data collection tool in order to efficiently access a large number of individuals over a wide geographical area. The questionnaire was based on the initiatives listed in the Declaration Action Plan and was designed so that each question gave the respondent a chance to offer open-ended and closed-ended responses. Closed-ended questions were used for the purpose of quantitative

analysis (respondents could answer “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know” to the existence of specific initiatives). Open-ended questions allowed respondents to explain their answers to the closed-ended questions.

Questionnaire participants were purposively selected from each of the 16 signatory universities. Universities that endorsed the Halifax Declaration after 1991 were not included in the study as the research hoped to understand the effect it had on institutions that had been signatories for 10 years. Questionnaire recipients differed amongst the signatory universities since each university was sent four questionnaires in total. One copy of the questionnaire was sent directly to the President’s Office at each university. Another copy was sent to the university representative at each university who attended the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development and endorsed the Declaration on behalf of their institution (often a vice-president or dean). If this individual was no longer present at the signatory university, a letter was sent to this individual’s replacement. Two more copies of the questionnaire were distributed at each university to individuals who had attended the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development as a representative of their university. If there were no individuals at the university who met this criterion, the final two copies of the questionnaires were sent to individuals who were familiar with environmental policies and initiatives on their campus. These individuals were identified with help of the Environmental Studies Association of Canada (ESAC), and the University President’s Office at each signatory institution. A total of 64 individuals were contacted.

*Interviews.* Eighteen informal telephone and personal interviews with key representatives at each signatory university were conducted. The purpose of the interviews was threefold. First, the interviews were used to add validity to the data collected in the questionnaire regarding which environmental initiatives were implemented at signatory universities. Second, the interviews were designed to collect information on what the university had done in order to implement the Halifax Declaration outside of Action Plan initiatives. Third, the interview questions were designed to better comprehend how the Declaration had helped universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental practices and to take action towards becoming more sustainable institutions. Interviews were considered beneficial as they allowed for in-depth probing of issues. Interviewees were purposively selected because of their involvement in their university becoming a signatory to the Declaration, or because of their involvement with the implementation of environmental initiatives at their university. Interview participants included 3 university presidents, 4 vice-presidents, 3 chairs of environmental studies and science departments, 3 directors of facilities management, and 5 faculty members within the institution that were present at the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development but did not hold the positions mentioned above.

*Document Analysis and Archival Research.* Document and archival research was conducted in order to add validity to the results obtained through the interviews and questionnaires, and to gain a better understanding of the situation at each signatory university. Documents regarding each signatory institution were obtained through registrar's offices and webpages as well as through inter-library loan. These documents included university calendars, brochures on environmental programs, minutes of various university environmental committees, annual reports, and books on the history of various universities.

### The Individual Responses

As Table 1 illustrates, each university returned at least 1 of the 4 questionnaires distributed to their institution. However, many of the questionnaires were not completed by the individual who was originally sent the questionnaire. A large number of University Presidents forwarded their survey to other administrators, staff, or faculty within the university whom they felt were more able to answer the questions posed in the questionnaire. In one case, the survey was sent to a retired faculty member. On another occasion the individuals contacted at one university combined their knowledge and returned only one questionnaire. In total, 31 questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 48%.

Early in the analysis of the questionnaires a characteristic of the data set revealed a disturbing trend. It was found that 13 of the total 31 returned questionnaires (41.9%) displayed the answer "do not know" for each of the 40 questions posed in the questionnaire. Of those 13 questionnaires, 8 were returned by university administrators (president's, vice-president's, deans), 3 by faculty members, and 2 by staff. Many of these respondents indicated that they had heard of the Declaration, but possessed no knowledge of its implementation. One respondent stated:

I don't have time to look up the answers to these questions for you. My university doesn't value work in this area, and it does not seem clear to me how the Halifax Declaration has had any impact on our university. (Respondent #18)

Other respondents took an interest in the study topic, although few respondents had immediate answers to the questions. However, many of the questionnaire respondents put considerable effort into answering the questionnaire. This was apparent from telephone calls made to the primary investigator by the respondents, the reflections offered in the open-ended response questions, the inclusion of supplementary materials about their university sustainability initiatives, and requests to be sent the final results of the study.

| University          | President/<br>Administrator | Faculty   | Staff | Institutional<br>Rate of Return<br>(%) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-------|----------------------------------------|
| Carleton            | 1                           | 3         |       | 100%                                   |
| Dalhousie           | 1                           | 3         |       | 100%                                   |
| Trent               | 1                           | 2         |       | 75%                                    |
| Calgary             |                             | 1         | 1     | 50%                                    |
| McGill              | 1                           | *1        |       | 50%                                    |
| Montreal            | 1                           | 1         |       | 50%                                    |
| Mount Saint Vincent | 1                           |           | 1     | 50%                                    |
| New Brunswick       |                             | 1         | 1     | 50%                                    |
| Western             | 1                           |           | 1     | 50%                                    |
| York                |                             | 2         |       | 50%                                    |
| Manitoba            |                             | 1         |       | 25%                                    |
| McMaster            |                             | 1         |       | 25%                                    |
| Memorial            |                             | 1         |       | 25%                                    |
| Moncton             | 1                           |           |       | 25%                                    |
| Queen's             |                             |           | 1     | 25%                                    |
| Saint Mary's        |                             |           | 1     | 25%                                    |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>8</b>                    | <b>17</b> |       |                                        |

Table 1. Questionnaires Returned by Signatory Universities. (\*One questionnaire completed by a number of individuals who combined their efforts.)

The return of 13 questionnaires with “do not know” answered for each question resulted in a data set skewed in the direction of lack of knowledge regarding the implementation of the Declaration in signatory universities. While disappointing, this is a very interesting result and valid to the discussion of how it influenced signatory institutions.

41.9% of respondents, who were purposefully selected either because of their position as the President of a signatory university, or for previous involvement with the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development or Halifax Declaration, or for knowledge of environmental policies and initiatives on campus, had no knowledge of how the Declaration had been implemented within their institution. Further, all of the administrators who returned questionnaires in this study answered “do not know” for each question posed.

The literature regarding environmental sustainability in higher education stresses the need for administrators to be leaders in the development and implementation of environmental policies and programs in order to ensure continued success (Allen, 1999; Clugston, 1999; Keniry, 1995). Additionally, it is important for the university community to be aware of the various environmental policies and programs on campus. If the case of the Halifax Declaration is congruent with the literature, these results suggest that the implementation of the Declaration was most likely not successful. Such a claim, however, warrants further analysis.

## Did the 16 Signatory Universities Implement the Halifax Declaration Action Plan?

One of the key objectives of this study was to determine the extent to which the 16 signatory universities had implemented the initiatives outlined in the Declaration Action Plan. The individual responses to the questionnaires suggested little knowledge of the influence it had on signatory universities. When the questionnaires were compiled into individual institutional responses (i.e., the 4 responses from Carleton University were combined into 1 university profile), it was found that more information was necessary in order to determine which initiatives from the Action Plan had been implemented. This was required as some institutions had “do not know” responses to every question, while other institutions had conflicting responses when comparing individual questionnaires for one university (e.g., one respondent said that an initiative was implemented at the university while another respondent from the same institution said that it had not). To gain a better understanding of the initiatives that were implemented at each signatory university, questionnaires were supplemented with additional information from document analysis and informal interviews.

This study found that few of the 40 Action Plan initiatives had been implemented in the majority of original signatory universities. The highest rate of implementation for an institution was 19 of the 40 initiatives examined (47.5%), while the lowest rate of implementation was 1 out of 40 (2.5%). The mean rate of implementation was 5 out of 40 (12.5%). Because of an assurance given to questionnaire and interview respondents that only aggregate data would be reported as a result of this study, this paper cannot report the degree to which each individual signatory university implemented the initiatives listed in the Declaration. The paper will, however, discuss the degree to which the initiatives were implemented in the 16 signatory universities as a whole.

An examination of the initiatives found that few that were implemented were common amongst the signatory universities. Of the 40 environmental initiatives the questionnaire examined, there were only 3 activities that had been implemented in over half of the 16 signatory universities (Table 2).

Further analysis revealed that 7 of the 40 activities examined had not been established in the majority of signatory universities. Table 3 lists the initiatives that were not implemented in over half of the institutions.

An examination of Tables 2 and 3 reveals that the activities the majority of universities implemented from the Declaration required little capital input, while those initiatives that were not implemented by the majority of signatory universities necessitated more financial support, and potentially required fundamental changes in the traditions and administration of the academic institution. Creating public forums for awareness, for example, cost a university very little money and time when compared to designing a new environmental



literacy program. Asking faculty to review curricula to see how environmental concepts might be integrated into all courses involves a fundamental change in the way universities perceive teaching activities whereas encouraging collaborative research projects involving faculty and students does not.

| <b>Activity</b>                                                                                            | <b>Number os Signatory Universities that Implemented the Activity</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Public forums for awareness and information exchange, education, and public debate.                        | 10                                                                    |
| Programs and initiative related to sustainability education and/or environmental literacy.                 | 9                                                                     |
| Collaborative environment and sustainable development research projects involving faculty and/or students. | 9                                                                     |

Table 2. Activities Implemented in the Majority of the 16 Signatory Universities.

| <b>Activity</b>                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Number of Signatory Universities that Did Not Implement the Activity</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| University designed an environmental literacy program.                                                                                                                                   | 13                                                                          |
| University adjusted the reward system to account for community service and outreach in the context of sustainable development, as a balance for other criteria for tenure and promotion. | 13                                                                          |
| University expressed a commitment to encourage faculty to review curricula to see how environmental concepts might be integrated into their courses.                                     | 12                                                                          |
| University established scholarships for work in environmental fields.                                                                                                                    | 12                                                                          |
| University sponsored prizes for environmental projects for students, faculty, and/or administration.                                                                                     | 12                                                                          |
| University encouraged innovative educational technologies for communicating sustainability issues to the general public.                                                                 | 11                                                                          |
| University established chairs in environment and/or sustainable development.                                                                                                             | 10                                                                          |

Table 3. Activities Not Implemented in the Majority of the 16 Signatory Universities.

The initiatives listed in the Declaration can be divided into 4 categories:

- public outreach measures;
- the encouragement of inter-university cooperation;
- the development of partnerships with government, non-governmental organizations, and industry; and
- educational programs designed to increase the ecological literacy of the university community.

An examination of patterns of implementation within the 16 signatory universities revealed a preference for implementing educational initiatives. The majority of initiatives implemented at 9 of the 16 signatory universities were from the educational programs category (curriculum development, workshops, forums).

Analyses of the questionnaires and interviews revealed clues both as to why educational initiatives seemed to be implemented more often than others, and why many initiatives were never implemented at all. One university indicated that their institution favoured educational initiatives because of the interests of its senior administrators:

Our VP Academic was the main instigator for the implementation of the Declaration. He had an interest in environmental education . . . so we focused on educational projects. The other stuff we sort of forgot! (Respondent 7)

Some universities found that students were the driving force behind environmental activities on campus. For that reason, the activities that were implemented from the Declaration were those that affected students directly.

The cost of implementing some initiatives was deemed prohibitive in many of the universities. One respondent, who was the Halifax Declaration Ambassador in his university, stated that the administrators in his university would only agree to develop specific initiatives if there were no costs involved, or if costs could be recovered within a reasonable amount of time. Other respondents indicated that economics forced their universities to modify some of the items listed.

The information gathered through the questionnaires and interviews suggested the existence of many barriers to implementation. These statements led to an examination of the influence the Halifax Declaration in general had on universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental practices and policies.

### **Did the Halifax Declaration Help Signatory Universities to Re-Think and Reconstruct Their Environmental Practices and Policies?**

A second objective of this study was to determine the extent to which the Halifax Declaration had encouraged signatory universities to re-think and reconstruct their environmental practices and policies. This meant going beyond assessing the implementation of the Declaration Action Plan and determining if there were other initiatives on campus that the Declaration was at least partially responsible for. The high return rate of questionnaires with “do not know” given to every question was the first hint that the Declaration might not have been as effective as it was once hoped it would be. However, to verify this, and to go beyond the Action Plan, the qualitative data collected in open-ended questions of the questionnaires were analyzed and supplemented with

information from 18 interviews conducted with representatives from all 16 signatory universities (3 university presidents, 4 vice-presidents, 3 chairs of environmental studies/science departments, 3 directors of facilities management, and 5 individuals within the institution that were present at the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development).

An analysis of the interviews and questionnaire responses indicated that to a large extent, the Declaration was ineffective in influencing signatory universities to create changes in environmental practices and policies within their institutions. Perhaps the most interesting comment expressed by respondents was that while their university may have initiated certain environmental activities on campus since the signing of the Declaration in 1991, most were not a direct result of the it. One respondent suggested that none of the environmental activities at his university were a consequence of the Declaration, but were initiatives based on various individuals' interests. The reasons cited for this lack of strong action on the part of the university as a result of endorsing the Declaration included problems with communication, a scarcity of leaders, a lack of support for valuing work in university sustainability, and economics constraints.

Some respondents believed that the Declaration had not been implemented because of a lack of awareness of the document on campus.

There is very little awareness of the Declaration at (our university). Instead, most initiatives have come about because problems or opportunities have been noticed by either students or faculty. (Respondent 1)

To be perfectly honest, most members of the (university) community are not familiar with the Halifax Declaration. Whoever was supposed to increase its profile in the university didn't do his job. (Respondent 5)

Those interviewed for this study who were initially considered a Halifax Declaration Ambassador at their university claimed that the problem with implementation was not because of lack of communication about the Declaration, but was a result of a problem in leadership:

My goal was to make this as big of a deal as possible. I had the president excited, I had faculty excited, but nobody wanted to do any work. Rather, they wanted everything done for them. After a year of working on this on my own, I realized that if I wanted to remain in a tenure-track position and keep up my teaching and publishing record, I could not continue to work on the Halifax Declaration on my own. Besides, if I was the only one who wanted to work on it (HD), it seemed futile for the future. (Respondent 9)

Our president was really excited about this. He made sure that all academic units within the University were informed of this Declaration and asked each department to come up with a plan for implementing it within their areas of the university. When he left the university, however, things changed. Our new president

knew about the Halifax Declaration but had no interest in being actively involved with it. Since then, the document has basically disappeared from our university. (Respondent 13)

Other respondents stated that while senior administrators were more than willing to sign the Declaration in principle, there was a lack of political will to take action that would help the institution to adhere to the Action Plan.

Governance issues were identified as a key barrier to implementation in the case of one university. At this institution, the Vice-President Academic adopted the Declaration for his institution at the Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development, yet when he returned to the university he found that he did not have the authority to do so. In that particular university, all declarations had to be ratified by the Senate, and Senate would not do so until a cost-benefit analysis of the Declaration was conducted. Realizing that this would be prohibitively expensive, the Vice-President stopped pursuing the issue.

A further barrier for universities to reconstruct environmental practices and policies was identified as a lack of economic support. Many of the signatory universities were excited about the Declaration, but were unable to implement it because of the initial economic costs associated with it. One Vice-President Academic stated:

Creating a sustainable development network in my region, creating awards for sustainable research, and approaching the media to contribute to national programs on sustainable development all cost money. That would mean taking money out of other resources, or raising tuition. I didn't like either of these options. (Respondent 11)

To return to the original question of whether the Halifax Declaration helped signatory universities re-think and reconstruct their environmental practices and policies, it seems that a multi-part answer is required. The responses to the questionnaire and interviews in this study reveal that it may have had some influence on the development of environmental activities at some of the signatory universities, however the influence was minimal. It is also evident that it may have had some influence on universities to re-think their environmental practices and policies, yet numerous challenges prevented any concrete reconstruction of practices and policies.

Should these results have been expected? The difficulties experienced by signatory universities in implementing the Declaration are consistent with existing research that examines the barriers to institutional environmental change in higher education.

Leadership, for example, is considered crucial to the development and continuance of sustainability initiatives in higher education (Keniry, 1994; Orr, 1992; Rainsford, 1990; Riggs, 1997; Smith, 1993; Wood, 1990). A lack of leadership or support from administrators is also viewed as a common barrier to

the successful implementation of environmental initiatives within institutions (Allen, 1999; MacTaggart, 1996; Perrin, 1992). This study found that leadership was a key factor in developing positive environmental initiatives and activities within the university. Consistent with Keniry (1995) who claims that executive staff play crucial roles in stewardship initiatives, forging of partnerships, and making commitments to sustainability, this study also found that the support of senior administrators was crucial in the success or failure of the Declaration within individual universities. This study found that only three universities assigned a responsible administrative body or individual to oversee the implementation of the Declaration beyond the Declaration Ambassador (e.g., environment committee). The majority of universities gave little financial or administrative support to the HD Ambassadors, and did not assign anybody to the task of implementing it. In only one case was an executive staff assigned to oversee the implementation of the Declaration. This may have been key to the ineffectiveness of the declaration within many signatory universities.

Further, Allen (1999) argues that within universities, institutional environmental change will only be successful if there is a steady supply of money and the availability of staff to work on environmental initiatives. This was indeed an oversight made by many who endorsed the Halifax Declaration. While some of the signatory universities were committed to working towards creating more sustainable institutions, many found themselves with a lack of economic ability to do so and had to abandon previous plans. The results of this study are consistent with the literature and suggest the need to re-examine how environmental policies are developed and implemented in higher education in order to be effective in the future.

### Can We Learn from the Past?

There are lessons we can take from the Halifax Declaration experience and apply to future declarations. The failure of it to be an effective document in creating change within signatory institutions was the result of some key deficiencies in the design of the document. What the Declaration teaches us, for example, is that one individual alone cannot lead in the implementation of a declaration (as was the case with the Declaration Ambassadors). Rather, it would be more pertinent for universities to set up leadership teams for such declarations, with representatives from all sectors of campus. Responsibilities must also be assigned to people before, or at the adoption of a declaration. This way it is clear to the university community who has the responsibility for each aspect of the declaration and who is to be held accountable. Additionally, universities should understand the economic implications of signing a declaration and be prepared to offer a statement of how the implementation of the declaration will be funded at the time of endorsing any document.

This study has highlighted the need for individualized implementation plans. Wright (2002) indicates that universities that are most successful in implementing national and international declarations are those that have created implementation plans that are specific to their institution rather than using a prescribed plan offered in declarations. This study confirms this notion, showing that many universities found the Declaration Action Plan either irrelevant or inappropriate for their institution. Initiatives were often too costly for the university to implement, or did not recognize the politics and governing structures of the individual universities.

With the lack of success most Declaration signatories had with this format of declaration, one might assume that universities would be wary of signing such documents in the future. It is interesting to note, however, that since the signing of it, 7 of the original 16 signatory universities have also adopted the Talloires Declaration (a similar document to the Halifax Declaration that was created at the Tufts University European Centre in 1990, and currently has over 275 signatories), as well as other national and international declarations related to sustainability within higher education. This suggests that there are perhaps other motives at play when signing national and international declarations of sustainability. Universities who continue to sign these declarations but have no success in implementation could be accused of attempting to “greenwash” their institutions by endorsing such declarations. (For more information on the notion of greenwashing, see Greer and Bruno, 1996). The signing of the declaration becomes more of a public relations event rather than an actual statement of intent. On a less cynical level, it can also be hypothesized that signatory universities felt some sort of moral obligation in creating institutional environmental change and endorsed it to make a public statement of their intent but have found many roadblocks on the way to effecting change. Regardless of motive for the Declaration, there was, and currently is, no accountability for universities who have endorsed or signed the declarations and no formal follow-up to see if a university has met its obligations to the declaration.

The results of this study suggest that for university sustainability declarations to be effective and meaningful in the future, there must be a change in the way national and international declarations for sustainability in higher education are created and promoted. Authors of declarations must build accountability into the structure of the document. I would suggest that universities must present the secretariat of the declaration with a specific plan of action before being allowed to become signatories to a declaration. Such a plan would include a draft implementation plan, a list of those responsible for overseeing the implementation of the declaration, and proof that funds are, and will be, made available to undertake initiatives related to the declaration.

The bodies responsible for the creation of the declaration, or the secretariat should also take some responsibility for the implementation of the declaration. Such bodies should provide a support system for signatory

universities, offering expertise, and perhaps even financial aid in the implementation of the declaration. At the very least, such bodies should be responsible for documenting the implementation of the declaration they created.

## Conclusion

Declarations for sustainability in higher education are a meaningful way to develop support for the movement towards sustainability in higher education and to communicate the “green campus” message around the world. This study has revealed, however, that in the case of the Halifax Declaration, there was a clear lack of knowledge regarding the Declaration and university environmental initiatives, a lack of implementation of Declaration initiatives within institutions, and barriers to institutional environmental change within the university. Further this study has demonstrated that the signing of it was not enough to influence significant and fundamental institutional environmental change within a university setting. Future declarations must be modified and improved in order to truly affect an institution’s ability to re-think and reconstruct its environmental practices and continue along the pathway to sustainability.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support of this study.

## Notes on Contributor

**Tarah Wright** is Assistant Professor and Director of Environmental Programmes for the Faculty of Science at Dalhousie University, Canada. Her research is in the area of sustainability policy implementation analysis and collaborative development of institutional sustainability policies, and she has worked on a participatory action research project focused on the development of indicators of sustainability for Canadian universities.

## References

- Allen, A. (1999). *Institutional environmental change at Tulane University*. Unpublished BSc Honours Thesis, Department of Ecological Studies, Tulane University, Massachusetts.
- Clugston, R. (1999). Introduction. In W. Leal Filho (Ed.), *Sustainability and university life: Environmental education, communication and sustainability* (pp. 9-11). Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Greer, J. & Bruno, K. (1996). *Greenwash: The reality behind corporate environmentalism*. New York: Apex Press.
- Keniry, J. (1995). *Ecodemia*. Washington, DC: National Wildlife Federation.
- Lester Pearson Institute for International Development. (1992). *Creating a common future: Proceedings of the conference on university action for sustainable development*. Halifax: Atlantic Nova Print.
- MacTaggart, T.J. (1996). *Restructuring higher education: What works and what doesn't in reorganizing governing systems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Orr, D. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Perrin, N. (1992). Colleges are doing pitifully little to protect the environment. *Chronicle Of Higher Education*, 39(10), B3-4.
- Rainsford, G. (1990). The demographic imperative: Changing to serve America's expanding minority population. In D.W. Steeples (Ed.), *Managing change in higher education. New directions for higher education, No. 71* (pp. 77-91) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Riggs, H. (1997). Industrial strength academies. In J.W. Meyerson & W.F. Massy (Eds.), *New models for higher education* (pp. 53-96). New Jersey: Peterson's Princeton.
- Smith, A. (1993). *Campus ecology: A guide to assessing environmental quality and creating strategies for change*. Los Angeles: Living Planet Press.
- Wood, R. (1990). Changing the education program. In D.W. Steeples (Ed.), *Managing change in higher education. New directions for higher education, No. 71* (pp. 11-18). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wright, T.S.A. (2002). Definitions and frameworks for environmental sustainability in higher education. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 3(3), 1467-6370.