



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Building Sustainable Societies Conference

Exploring Social Sustainability

Building Sustainable Societies:

Sustainable Education

Summary of the discussions from June 30th 2014

Sustainable Education – Discussion summary

The multiple meanings and interpretations of the concept of ‘sustainability’ were the subject of much scrutiny and reflection over the duration of the Building Sustainable Societies conference. At the centre of this debate, three questions were repeatedly raised: What do we want to sustain? Why do we want to sustain it? And who do we want to sustain it for? These questions are especially pertinent in higher education, an area which is undergoing rapid transformation.

This session was held in order to fulfil two objectives, one theoretical and one practical. On the theoretical side, it was designed to establish what ‘sustainable education’ might mean and to debate the extent to which it might be useful conceptually. On the practical side – slightly more self-interestedly – it was designed as a platform to generate ideas about what Roundhouse, as a fledgling alternative education group, ought to be and ought to do, in order to act according to its constitutional refusal of the precarious and individualistic ‘[student-as-consumer](#)’ model so prevalent in higher education.

The first paper of the day, entitled *Social sustainability, mass intellectuality, and the idea of the university*, was delivered by Richard Hall. Reflecting on the interconnections between critical pedagogy and the idea of mass intellectuality – that is, the genuinely democratic process of knowledge production at the level of society – Hall situated the current ‘crisis’ of higher education in the context of the historical crisis of capitalism, or the systemic inability of capitalism to reassert stable forms of accumulation. What is appealing about Hall’s work particularly is his desire to situate the crisis of HE in this much wider context. The links that he makes, for instance, between the crisis of the university and climate change and liquid fuel availability – in short, *environmental sustainability*, which might be argued to be a more tangible concept than ‘educational’ or ‘social’ sustainability or the meta-concept in which the latter derivations must ultimately be situated – are well worth a read and are available to view on [his blog](#).

In a [Newmanesque](#) move, Hall described the fragmentation of the ‘idea’ of the university – as a democratic and inclusive community of thinkers working in the name of the ‘public good’ – into a large and ever-growing number of competing ‘higher education providers’, each specialising in particular vocational niches. This is reflected in the importance attributed to NSS survey results, Research Excellence Frameworks, university and subject league tables, and the aptly-acronymed Future Earnings and Employment Record (FEER). It has become fashionable in some quarters of late to talk of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ ([Beck & Goldstein](#), [Hagen](#), [Taylor](#) ...), and the aforementioned instruments certainly encourage ‘higher education providers’ to find ‘innovative’ methods (presumably from ‘outside the box’) in order to perform according to their requisite standards. The results then feedback into the competitive arena of the university market place. FEER, for instance, [might](#)

[allow specific courses at certain universities to charge more](#) (without a cap) on the basis that their graduates are statistically better at paying off loans.

The entrepreneurialising of 'higher education providers' is mirrored by the transference of the same logic to students. Convincingly, Hall stated that the university does not engage its students so much as consumers – buying higher education and tailoring it according to their personal preferences and choices – but as entrepreneurs, investing in higher education in order to equip themselves with the necessary attributes required to 'stand out' in an increasingly difficult and precarious job market. Indeed, the idea of the entrepreneurial university above situates the creation of innovative, entrepreneurial minds as HE's remit. Students are thus encouraged to gain skills and experience beyond their degrees: to intern, to volunteer, to commit to extra-curricular activities, and so on. At Roundhouse, we've long been interested in the idea that such interpellation results in an individualising and atomising environment in which peers are treated more as competitors than collaborators. As Ben recounted in his introduction to the afternoon, this was manifest in the response of a first-year student to [Guy Standing](#)'s recent seminar in the sociology and social policy department here at Leeds, who felt that the phenomenological effects of the 'precarisation' of the labour market being described was at the same time an accurate depiction of his first year at university.

This logic also afflicts academic staff. Hall characterised the university as an 'anxiety-producing machine', an apt moniker given that mental health problems are on the rise across academia, largely seen to be due to the [pressures of greater job insecurity, constant demand for results and an increasingly marketised higher education system](#)'. The 'anxiety-producing machine' produces a host of 'culturally acceptable self-harming activities', such as blogging, emailing out of hours, publishing-so-as-not-to-perish, etc. Richard writes about this at length on his [blog](#) from which it is worth quoting at length:

I am performance managed to the point where I willingly internalise the question "am I productive enough?", which aligns with "am I a good academic?", which aligns with "am I working hard enough", which risks becoming a projection onto those around me of "are you working/producing enough?" My example is potentially toxic because being good enough in this productive space is never enough. My culturally acceptable self-harming activities militate against solidarity and co-operation that is beyond value. The defining, status-driven impulse is to increase my value as an entrepreneur, and to demonstrate that through the traces I leave in publications, or managing a team, or in leading research bids, or in blogging and emailing at all hours.

Perhaps herein lies the answer to a question that was evoked at various points throughout his presentation; why aren't the 'professoriate' rebelling? Why is it only the marginal(ised) figures, such as the [Latin American migrant workers at the University of London](#), or student activists on the fringes, who are rebelling? It might

be because, for now, with academic freedom relatively intact (so long, of course, as that freedom is able to provide demonstrable 'impact') academics remain fairly comfortable amongst the changes made to higher education. However, as an attendee provocatively put it, the precariatization of academic work with its attendant atomisation might be the greatest barrier to collective mobilisation.

Hall pointed to the University of Lincoln's '[Student-as-producer](#)' programme (for more information, see Project Director Mike Neary's article in the [Reimagining the University](#) edition of Roundhouse) as an interesting development in the fostering of 'mass intellectuality'. To quote from the Student-as-Producer website:

The focus of Student as Producer is the undergraduate student, working in collaboration with other students and academics. Undergraduate students will work alongside staff in the design and delivery of their teaching and learning programmes, and in the production of work of academic content and value. Students are supported by student services and professional staff so they can take greater responsibility not only for their own teaching and learning, but for the way in which they manage the experience of being a student at the University of Lincoln.

There are definite resonances here with the overall tenet of Adam Elliott-Cooper's call for an increasingly diverse student body to have a voice in designing a curriculum that speaks for a variety of different histories and experiences. The notion of a student-centred and -led curriculum design was at the centre of his paper, the second of the afternoon, entitled *We are here because you were there: post-colonial Britain's academic future*. According to some demographers, notably David Coleman ([professor in Human Sciences at Oxford University, co-founder of Migrant Watch and member of the eugenicist Galton Institute](#)), Britain's white population is set to become a minority by 2066, mainly due to migration of people from the former commonwealth (Elliott-Cooper and Askok Kumar discuss this at length in a [Novara podcast](#), which is well worth listening to). On the one hand, such a projection is fodder for [those who deem current levels of immigration 'unsustainable'](#), including Coleman himself it seems. On the other hand, and as Elliott-Cooper convincingly argues, the rise of the 'mixed-race population' requires an altering of our parochial '[island story](#)' to include the marginalised histories of those whose imperial subjugation was pivotal to it, and subsequently the re-working of a university system that is no longer tenable, particularly given that the [people from BME backgrounds are attending universities](#) in ever-increasing numbers ([in spite of institutional segregation and inequality in the education system across the board](#)).

There is a need, therefore, to create a more inclusive curriculum, particularly in the social sciences. Here, the question is not so much about 'sustaining' a particular, Eurocentric form of education as rethinking and reinventing it. The way that postcolonial history is generally taught, for instance, as distant and detached narratives generally extraneous to 'Western' history, ordinarily addressed in optional modules highly attended by BME students, is not so much 'unsustainable' as

untenable in a modern world that has been forged by historical connections. These connections, embodied in the relationships of colonialism and slavery central to modernity, have been under-emphasised (for some, outwardly disavowed) in mainstream accounts of modernity. This has been changing recently, with theorists like Gurminder Bhambra [stressing the place of colonialism, empire and slavery in contemporary understandings of the 'modern'](#). There is still much to be done however, particularly with regards to teaching. Introductory social theory courses do indeed tend to predominantly privilege '[Dead White Men](#)'. However, it should be borne in mind that many of these figures were Jewish émigrés who have offered some of the most influential critiques of European modernity (Marx; Freud; Adorno, Horkheimer and the rest of the Frankfurt School; Benjamin; Arendt; Elias; Bauman; Heller, etc.). There is an extremely interesting debate to be had here concerning the idea of a struggle over a 'legitimate' claim to true pariahdom in modernity. In the interdisciplinary subfield of Genocide Studies, much [important recent work](#) has focussed on the relationship between slavery, colonial genocide and the Holocaust, a 'connection' (to use Bhambra's terminology) that might provide fruitful when considering 'silenced' or 'traumatic' modernities.

Drawing from the history of the US Civil Rights movement, Elliott-Cooper draws attention to the institutionalisation of programmes such as African-American studies and Black studies, departments of which were created during the 1960s and 70s as a result of activism on part of students who deemed their cultures and histories were underserved by traditional academic structures. In the discussion section afterwards, it was suggested that the flipside of the creation of these programmes is that they are then be deemed specialist pursuits. Issues around race might then conveniently be located on the margins so as to excuse the mainstream from worrying about not addressing them, 'because *they* are doing it'. Elliott-Cooper acknowledged this, though argued that in the current climate the establishment of these programmes are the most practical and realistic demands of the university. Also worth considering is the point that those who run these programmes and attend their classes certainly don't see their involvement with the subject as a mere specialism and part of their remit is to force marginalised histories into areas where they have previously been unacknowledged. And they have seen a great deal of success in this regard. To quote at length from the aforementioned [Gurminder Bhambra](#):

The university has been a very particular site for knowledge production, and to the extent that it's been an elite space, it's been a space for the reproduction of elite world-views. But I think that something quite distinct happened in the last fifty years in Britain and Europe to broaden education and to have an idea of mass higher education. And what opening up education at that level began to do was to enable women, working class people, ethnic minorities and other groups to begin to be a part of an institution where knowledge is produced and validated. So being able to introduce different perspectives and different ideas, and to think about the

world differently *and to have those views validated* has been incredibly powerful for the democratization of knowledge production more generally'

The importance of this to the issue of sustainability is obvious: how can we sustain these gains made in the context of the '[neoliberal university](#)'?

... One would hope that everybody who has benefited from this broadening of education over the last 50 years – and this also includes elite groups, whose world view, it is hoped, has also been enriched through this expansion – would recognize what is going on, realize that a historic achievement is in danger of being lost, and organize to defend it. What this means is that we have to recognize our responsibilities in relation to a system we have benefited from – so let's make sure that those benefits continue for future generations

To task, then, is to protect and prolong these benefits so as to stave off a return of the university as a site of knowledge production for elite world-views. Martin McQuillan, in the final paper of the day entitled *To speculate: on Higher Education*, also acknowledged the university's historical identification with the elite. Not more than a century ago, he stated, the university was 'akin to the opera house'. McQuillan thus set out to address three questions, each of which were answered rather pessimistically: Where are we now? (in an enormous mess) How did we get here? (through idiotic and short-sighted financial mismanagement/ideological restructuring) And where are we going? (who knows, with more of the same).

During the recession, McQuillan argued, it became clear that higher education is a big player in terms of growth. Now, McQuillan is very knowledgeable about the financial aspects of changes to higher education and I won't try to summarise in a great amount of detail for fear of misrepresentation (you can read McQuillan's own words in many places, including [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). I would therefore like to summarise the key points and some of their implications.

The most manifest changes to higher education are in the loan system. McQuillan spoke at length about Income Contingent Repayment loans, first introduced in 1998 and excluding a host of prior existing protections. Originating in the neoliberal laboratory of Pinochet's Chile, ICR loans are repaid according to the relative levels of income of graduates. [The original debt taken can limit the total amount repaid, though it is more likely for most that the debt will be written off \(after 25 years after graduation for those with recent loans, 30 years for those taking out the new loans in 2012/13\).](#)

Infamously, the Browne review concluded that the removal of the cap on fees combined with a higher threshold at which the graduate would begin repayment would sustain the university in the era of austerity. The previous cap, it was deemed, would be exceeded in exceptional cases. Predictably, however, the £9000 fee became the norm for almost all universities across the UK. [McQuillan](#) lambasts this as an idiotic decision:

Only someone with no knowledge of Higher Education management or who had never met a Vice Chancellor before would have imagined it otherwise. Only a complete naïve or someone acting in extraordinary bad faith could not have foreseen this. The naïve policy maker has never met a Vice Chancellor, the bad faith policy maker has but is prepared to connive with them to say one thing in theory and expect another thing in practice. What are we to conclude from David Willetts' interview on Sky News (20.02.11) in which he warned Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial that they risked 'looking silly' and having students 'turn away' from them if they charged £9,000? Surely, the whole point of the upper limit was to allow such institutions to charge it? Which is it bad faith or naivety that leads the Conservative universities minister to say: 'It would be a great pity if we had this idea that you have to charge a very high price in order to establish prestige'?

Of late, the Russell Group have even started to moot a campaign to introduce variable fees for different types of institution, suggesting that the true cost of an 'elite' education was £16,000 per year. This system doesn't even actually [save money](#), and it's been deemed '[financially unworkable](#)' recently by a group of MPs. Surely, then, there is an ideological reasoning behind the apparent lunacy. It is politically advantageous for universities to compete with each other for students. Graduates saddled with debts and well-versed in living on borrowed money are ideal citizens in the neoliberal society of consumers. Of course, any idea of the university as a pathway to increased social mobility is dealt a blow here. Those willing to gamble on their future are obviously going to be drawn from backgrounds of privilege, where anxieties around money and debt are much less pronounced. Gambling, without a reserve stock of capital to fall back on if it all goes wrong, is reckless. This is, then, a return of the university to the elites, though not so much an institution akin to the opera house as the racecourse. As Richard Hall states:

This is education as bourgeois consumption for an elite that sits asymmetrically against those driven towards universities which are forced to compete via riskier, more volatile engagements in the finance (bond) markets. A life predicated on and disciplined by personal or institutional debt; the socialisation of production for the market rather than for society through debt and indenture; education indentured forever.

A university predicated on borrowing – borrowed money, borrowed time – is a fertile environment for the feelings of precariousness, atomisation, and individualism discussed above.

At risk here is the fate of the humanities and social sciences. Thinking, it seems, is an increasingly unaffordable luxury, a drain on the resources necessary for the production of 'useful' knowledge. Humanities and social sciences, contrary to popular opinion, are not subsidised by the 'hard' sciences. In fact, the [reality might be the other way round](#). Again, then, their decimation seems a calculated move, one

which comedian [Stewart Lee](#) summarises well. [McQuillan](#) summarises what's at stake especially powerfully. To quote at length:

I could make a defence of the worth of the humanities but if legislators cannot recognize their value from the outset then no words here will persuade them. Nor will I make the obvious case for the social mobility afforded by a university education—as if a Conservative-lead administration gave two figs for the education of the lower orders. However, the fundamental reason to oppose tuition fees of any kind is that those who benefited from a free higher education as a democratic right should not when in government (as a result of that free higher education) tell future generations that they must now take on mortgage-sized debts to pay for the same privilege. How this is 'progressive and fair', as our politicians like to say, is a mystery. One should not just resist this situation; it has to be refused utterly. Distracted by the chimera of RAE results and QAA inspections, academics in the United Kingdom have not had the best track record in saying no to government in the last twenty years, but if this does not rouse us nothing ever will. And if it can happen in England it will without doubt be rolled out across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Europe, and Australia. This is a culture war in which critical thought is threatened with extinction.

In line with these developments is the entry of 'alternative' private providers into the frame, which has led, according to McQuillan, to a proliferation of bogus providers at enormous cost to the taxpayer (and a huge hit to the universities budget). McQuillan had noted with trepidation the advert in Leeds train station for the University of Law (opening September 2014). The circumstances of this particular private provider's elevation from the mere 'college of law' are [legally suspect](#). To quote from Andrew McGettigan:

This has raised eyebrows, since it is in the midst of a complicated sale of its teaching business to Montagu Private Equity. As a charity cannot be bought outright, the details are murky. The charity that was College of Law will receive £200m from the sale and change its name to Legal Education Foundation, while a new company, "College of Law Limited", will receive the teaching business and associated staff, assets and liabilities. The limited company is a wholly owned subsidiary of the private equity firm to which it will distribute profits. It is this new company that will benefit from the change in status, beating BPP to the mark.

But does the new "University of Law Limited" even have the power to award degrees to its students? This power belonged to what is now the foundation and is not meant to be a tradable or transferable asset. To date this ban has been an impediment to private companies purchasing any charitable higher education institution.

The University of Law, then, should essentially be seen in the wider context of a deliberate policy pursuit to make the higher education sector amenable to privatisation, part of a wider offensive to transfer the commons into private hands:

The government has yet to provide a clear account of how due process has been ensured in this case, but if there is no legal challenge, such a transfer of powers could set a precedent and open the way to the purchase of established universities. So as the 10 new universities set about finalising their new names, the danger is that they and their more established competitors may soon become opportunities for investors seeking to make a profit out of what should be the public good.

What's more, it is a process that is largely occurring without public scrutiny or primary legislation, with no discernable telos. It is, in McGettigan's terminology, [a great gamble](#).