



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

# Building Sustainable Societies Conference

## Exploring Social Sustainability

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## Background



Through the **Building Sustainable Societies** project, the University of Leeds is pioneering a new research agenda into **Social Sustainability**. Social sustainability is the least developed of the 'three dimensions of sustainability' (environmental, economic and social) and the relative lack of understanding of the social dimension provides a tremendous opportunity for academics, practitioners, students, business, and policy-makers to contribute to better understanding this emerging idea.

The aim of our three day event was to explore social sustainability from different perspectives, bringing academics from around the world together with policy makers and practitioners from local and national organisations to discuss and explore the topic of social sustainability. Each day was themed around the topics of Sustainable Education, Social Sustainability and Sustainable Cities. Organised by the Building Sustainable Societies Transformation Fund, the conference was held in partnership with Thesis Eleven Centre at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and

with, the Bauman Institute, the Care-Connect sector hub and the Leeds Social Sciences Institute all from the University of Leeds. We were especially grateful to Professor David Hogg, PVC for Research & Innovation, whose support enabled this international event to take place here in Leeds.

## Sustainable Education Day

In association with the postgraduate **Roundhouse Journal** at the **Bauman Institute**, 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.



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The first paper of the day, entitled '*Social sustainability, mass intellectuality, and the idea of the university*', was delivered by **Professor Richard A. Hall** (*de Montfort University, Leicester*). 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. Professor Richard Hall spoke about the absence of a reward culture within Universities, arguing that there is a growing sense that there is no incentive to be good at your job anymore, as 'lazy' academics are never really sanctioned for not submitting grants, missing lectures and avoiding collegiate obligations, and 'hardworking' academics are never thanked or praised, but simply identified as 'willing horses' and so given a still greater burden to carry. Richard Hall claimed that the University is squeezing as much human capital as it can from its workers.

The notion of a student-centred and –led curriculum design was at the centre of our second paper, given by postgraduate student **Adam Elliot-Cooper** (*University of Oxford*) and entitled '*We are here because you were there: post-colonial Britain's academic future*'. In this discussion the question is not so much about 'sustaining' a particular, Eurocentric form of education as rethinking and reinventing it. Adam spoke about the need to consider the dramatic demographic changes in the UK when thinking about sustainable education and how these changes are disproportionate amongst young people meaning it will be the student population that will be impacted the most.

**Professor Martin McQuillan** (*Kingston University, London*), in the final paper of the day entitled '*To speculate: on Higher Education*', acknowledged the university's historical identification with the elite and addressed a number of different areas of higher education which are unsustainable, including the finances, operated through BIS, the expansion of student numbers which has driven an awful lot of regional growth in UK cities through the regeneration agenda and the transfer of 'the commons' into private hands. 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).

A full report on the **Sustainable Education Day**, plus presentation slides from our keynote speakers, is available at: <http://www.bss.leeds.ac.uk/bss-conference-2014/>

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## Social Sustainability: Practitioners Day



In association with the **Care Connect sector hub**, the Practitioners Day session began with presentations from **Shaun Webster** (*Change, Leeds*); **Johanne Orchard-Webb** (*University of Brighton*); **Sara Bordoley** (*NHS England*) and **Alex Fox** (*Shared Lives*), all of whom discussed the concept of social sustainability and how it linked into their work and/or roles.

Following these presentations, delegates participated in two workshop sessions exploring the concept of social sustainability, identifying possible definitions, barriers, 'ingredients', and areas where further knowledge / understanding was needed.

At the end of the workshop it was generally agreed that social sustainability is 'a process as well as an end'; that it is not simply 'a destination' but also an 'ongoing, dynamic, evolving journey'. The key words and phrases that came out of the discussions included *relationships* and *community*. For many people, community was central to their understanding of social sustainability, sharing skills and knowledge, a sense of social responsibility and common purpose. The importance of equity was emphasised by many groups, alongside the need to respect diverse needs.

After the groups had worked to define the concept of social sustainability and looked at the ingredients that make it up, they next looked at what the barriers were to achieving social sustainability.

In the final session, **Angela Catley** (*Community Catalysts*), **Caroline Mackay** (*Multiple Choice, Leeds*) and **Oliver Chrimes** (*West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project*) discussed the work of their organisations, and raised some key issues in relation to social sustainability. For us, this event was a valuable way of gathering together the knowledge, expertise and experience of our delegates and feeding this into our developing agenda around social sustainability.



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## Sustainable Cities Day



In association with the **Thesis Eleven Centre** for Cultural Sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, the final day of the conference explored what might be understood by a 'sustainable city' from a comparative international perspective.

Through the sociological impressionism of Ivan Vladislavic's travel writings around South Africa, to an inspired exploration of the public-private dialectic in Melbourne, Manila, and Istanbul, the concept of sustainability was interrogated by **Professors Peter Beilharz, Trevor Hogan, and Dr Sian Supski** from La Trobe University. We were told that a sociological understanding of sustainability was of great importance, as the Malthusian temptation in much natural and environmental science literature is better resisted. Crucial, also, is the question of what is it about our global cities that we want to 'sustain', as increasing similarities between cities does not stop at the many Starbucks and Macdonald's

restaurants, but also includes a growing segregation and polarisation of rich and poor neighbourhoods. Cities can be laboratories of creativity and experimentation with different forms of human cohabitation, but they can be crucibles of panic, violence and poverty also. What kind of cities do we want, how do we create them, and how do we sustain them for the greater good of people and planet?

The second-part of the day moved the discussion into a theoretical space with presentations from postgraduate students at La Trobe. **Tim Andrews** spoke about the precariousness of modernity and the tension between a dynamic and transformative movement of history and an urgent search for stability, certainty and sustainability. **Andrew Gilbert** offered a thoughtful critique of 'crisis-talk', noting that there are now no areas of social life that do not claim to be in some form of crisis. Crisis-talk legitimates certain forms of intervention and presupposes a state of balance, order and equilibrium can be reached, in spite of the fact it has eluded human societies until now. **George Jose**, also a fellow at *National University of Singapore* and currently studying at *Kings College London*, interrogated the notion of progress within mega-cities,



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using the case of Sopara/Mumbai to highlight our historical naivety in believing that we move only from less-developed to more-developed cities. Finally, **Nguyen Khai Huyen Truong** offered an interesting account of motorcycle culture in Ho Chi Minh City and how this shapes both the topography of the city's architecture and how it is experienced by its diverse groups of residents.

The day closed with two outstanding keynote presentations from our guests of honour. **Professor Amita Baviskar** (*Institute of Economic Growth, University of Delhi*) analysed the distinction between



'bourgeois environmentalism' and 'environmentalism of the poor' within modern Indian cities and critiqued the idea of 'normal city life' as a basis for sustainability. **Professor Jyoti Hosagrahar** of *Sustainable Urbanism International, Bangalore* and resident of *Columbia University, New York* provided a thought-provoking analysis of sustainable urbanism and highlighted the importance of culture within discourses of sustainability, noting the value of local heritage when thinking about sustainable futures for our first and second order cities around the world.

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