
Introduction

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1 Introduction

The papers in this special issue emerged out of a seminar series funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), looking at the potential strategic benefits accruing to universities willing to adopt a pioneering ‘whole institution’ approach to sustainability.¹

2 Sustainability as a cost and strategic risk

The agenda for sustainable development is now an entrenched feature of the strategic landscape for both the private and public sectors. Organisations and institutions of all kinds are being encouraged to address environmental concerns, especially in relation to carbon emissions and Kyoto. In most cases, this trajectory is presented in terms of a *cost*: Environmental benefits as a long term public good (an aspect of ‘the global commons’) are weighed up against the cost to individual citizens and organisations of becoming good environmental citizens. Whilst a strategy of sustainable re-development and re-orientation may bring cost-savings for an organisation (for instance, reduced energy costs), there is no doubt that sustainability involves considerable outlay both in terms of

capital investment and in terms of the logistical and intellectual inputs required to transform the routines, conventions and individual habits associated with an established organisational culture. It may also entail a paradigmatic re-orientation of the business model, redefining what goods or services are produced, in what way and for whom.

3 Managerial caution as an obstacle to eco-entrepreneurship

Given this combination of cost and potential strategic risk, both public and private sector managers are often wary of embracing the sustainable development agenda with sufficient enthusiasm to effect lasting change. Further problems are

- a that by its very nature, sustainable development demands interventions which involve *time-horizons* longer than the business cycle or the political rhythms of public administration
- b the need for a broader *accounting framework*: the 'joined-up' rationale for such interventions straddles institutionally separate budgetary channels and cost-centres, and even separate firm or organisations (e.g. combined heat and power schemes, linking domestic heating with industrial power requirements).

A significant example of this problem is when a change in the organisational modus operandi requiring capital investment, delivers compensatory material benefits in completely separate spheres such as strategic marketing and public relations, and the qualitative nature of 'market presence'. These problems of high initial *investment*, potential *strategic risk*, extended *time-horizons* and a more integrated and qualitative *accounting framework* engender a high degree of managerial caution and in many cases scepticism about the viability of sustainability as a key strategic driver.

4 Sustainability as a strategic opportunity

The most general point of departure for the seminar series was the extent to which these costs of environmental participation can be off-set for first movers by marketing opportunities and the long term benefits of anticipatory regulatory re-orientation (by marking out the trail, first movers lead regulatory interventions in a direction to which they are already becoming adapted, engendering a regulatory climate less amenable to less environmentally proactive competitors).

5 The university as an object of research

The ecological redevelopment of universities is an ideal focus for an exploration of this topic for three main reasons. Firstly, combining commercial, domestic, and teaching buildings and activities – and a multiplicity of interconnected cost-centres – on connected sites, universities provide an excellent case-study through which to explore the possibilities and limitations of more integrated and qualitative *accounting frameworks*. Secondly, with *longer time-horizons* than many firms, strong actual or potential

connections to local communities, and with greater medium term stability in the financial base, universities are also better placed to view the problem of competitive advantage in relation to a long-term trajectory. Likewise it is incumbent on any university initiating a major programme of expansion and refurbishment to ensure the maximum return on such major investment. But in the context of increasing national and international competition in the HE sector, sustainability offers a highly plausible *strategic marketing opportunity*, providing an orientating framework for attracting students, teaching and research staff and research funding.

Although sustainable development has become a pervasive feature of both corporate and public sector discourse, progress in shifting to an ecological paradigm has been slow. Where firms and public sector organisations have adopted sustainability as part of a corporate benchmarking process, the bar has generally been set at a very low level – leading to criticism of ‘green wash’ and a distinction between mainstream (weak) and radical (transformational) sustainability. One key problem is that sustainability is often construed by protagonists on both sides of the debate as a *regulatory cost*. Whilst a few large organisations have recognised potential benefits in terms of image and market orientation (e.g. the Cooperative Bank), none of these have implemented a strong programme of sustainable re-orientation consistent with the thermodynamic and eco-cyclic precepts of ecological economics (e.g. Daly, 1973; Rees 1995). On a small-scale, the numerous eco-show-houses, and on a larger scale experiments such as Beddington Zero in London, the eco-suburb of Kronsburg in Hannover and Västra Hamnen in Malmö, well illustrate the techno-social viability of sustainable systems management. But they have not demonstrated its economic viability for large organisations operating in an otherwise orthodox market place. Though positive and highly successful in their own terms, such experiments have not succeeded in re-orienting the tramlines of city design, nor the unsustainable and profoundly non-cyclical structure of urban consumption. A major reason for this is that they have reinforced the perception of sustainability as a cost to be born, rather than a strategic opportunity for developing an embedded competitive advantage. The central question addressed by this seminar series was under what conditions sustainability can become an orchestrating driver of competitive advantage.

6 The seminars

The five seminars took place over eighteen months between 2006 and 2008 – three at Keele University, one in Leeds and one at Goodenough College in central London.

The series was conceived as a piece of action research through which the convenors could explore, at a theoretical level, the political economy of sustainability as a source of competitive advantage for higher education institutions. It was hoped that the events would provide an opportunity for a network to form that could forward the agenda of sustainability in universities and develop a clear strategic vision of the opportunity/costs that might be involved, whilst establishing working relationships across disciplines, between academics and administrators and with the private sector. Participants and speakers included Jonathon Porritt of the UK’s Forum for the Future and the Sustainable Development Commission, Alison Johns (Chief Executive of HEFCE), film producer Rebecca Hoskins and TV chef Thomasina Miers.

The seminar was very successful in creating a three-way exchange of ideas between academics, university executive officers and expert witnesses from the private sector. The success of the networking objective is most evident in the subsequent appointment of Roger Levett as a Visiting Research Fellow at Keele, as well as the activities that have followed in the wake of the seminar. We were heartened by the willingness of HEIs that have established best practice in sustainability issues to share their experiences with us and with other participants. Senior managers and academics, as well as members of the policy community (ranging from HEFCE to the student campaigning organisation People and Planet) were fully engaged. On occasions the sessions were truly inspiring. A number of senior university managers took the opportunity to learn from the experience of leading private and HE organisations. The organisers were able to develop a generic model of the conditions under which the opportunities opened up by sustainability as organisational driver outweigh the immediate costs – a model that we will publish in due course.

7 The papers

The six papers in this special issue are representative of the more academic contributions to the series, and together provide a good sense of how the sustainable development agenda is taking root in UK higher education. In the opening paper the seminar coordinators Andrew Dobson, Stephen Quilley and William Young review the overall findings of the series. Outlining a steady transformation in the way that environmental considerations have featured in the higher education agenda, the paper concludes by developing a generic model of sustainability and competitive advantage in the sector. One factor that emerges, in their paper, as a pivotal criterion for developing a successful university sustainability strategy, is the presence of a dedicated sustainability officer. Keith Pitcher, who has been fulfilling this role for Leeds University since 2001, provides a view from the trenches, summarising the role of environmental manager in an HE context and discussing the opportunities and pitfalls in developing an environmental management system. Providing some counterpoint, William Young et al. shift the perspective from the level of operations manager to that of academics developing a critical perspective on their own institution, and report on research into the University of Leeds' supply chain and its efforts to develop a sustainable procurement strategy. One of the most ambitious whole institution approaches in the UK has been that of Bradford University. In his paper Peter Hopkinson reviews Bradford's ongoing Ecovercity project, focusing in particular on the problem of managing expectations and linking change at the level of the estate infrastructure and operations to innovation in teaching and research. John Blewitt's paper foregrounds the role of education for sustainability in catalysing and facilitating change in the wider economy. He argues that academic education for sustainability professionals needs to prioritise leadership, transdisciplinarity and the use of new media technologies. Finally a recurring theme in the seminars was the idea of the university as a place-bound community. This came across vividly in presentations by Roger Levett (whose 'Sticks and Carrots' report to HEFCE is referred to in the opening paper by Dobson et al.) and Peter Roberts, Chair of the UK Government's *Academy for Sustainable Community* (ASC). In the last paper Peter Roberts and Amanda Lane explore this idea of universities as sustainable, place-bound communities with the potential to

combine eco-cyclical and metabolic integrity in their biophysical operations, with a catalytic role in promoting sustainability among stakeholders in the wider community.

The papers presented here are only a small sample of those that animated our debates during the course of the seminar series. All of the papers and powerpoint presentations – including contributions from people such as eco-architect Bill Dunster of ZEDfactory, Roger Levett and Alison Johns (HEFCE) – are available for download at the seminar website http://www.keele.ac.uk/research/lpj/ESRC_Sustainability/index.htm.

References

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Rees, W. (1995) 'Achieving sustainability: reform or transformation', *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp.343–361.

Notes

- 1 'Sustainability as a Vehicle for Competitive Advantage: Ecological Redevelopment, Strategic Marketing & The University Campus' (ESRC reference RES-451-25-4256). Award holders Stephen Quilley, Andrew Dobson and William Young.