

## The Sustainable University: Progress and Prospects

Stephen Sterling, Larch Maxey, and Heather Luna (Editors) Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2013, 352 pp., ISBN 9780415627740 (PB), 9781138801516 (HB); 9780203101780 (ebook)  
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In the literature dealing with the interface between higher education and sustainable practice, it is often remarked that universities are charged with a unique moral imperative to embrace sustainability, given that universities are responsible for preparing the world's next generations of leaders, policy makers and professionals. In a world increasingly impacted by climate change, university graduates are promoted as the change agents who will reimagine business, political and social systems, such that the global community operates on a fairer basis for all, in harmony with the life support system that is our Earth. However, what is not so often discussed is that universities have tended to perpetuate the teachings that underpin the very 'business as usual' approaches that cause so much damage and impede the changes that must be made to secure a more sustainable future.

*The Sustainable University* is a forthright collection of commentary, analysis and case studies that makes the candid argument that *both* the business and moral imperatives must be integrated for universities to be able to honestly 'walk the talk'; and also provides practical approaches, solutions and strategies to support the journey towards genuine organisational transformation. While the book focuses on the UK sector, the authors' lessons and insights are transportable across higher education globally.

*The Sustainable University* is the follow-up to 2010's *Sustainability Education: Perspective and Practice Across Higher Education*, extending the discussion from sustainability in curriculum to the need for sustainability as a core element of all aspects of the organisation. The book opens with an acknowledgment from the editors that while universities have a leadership role to play in supporting the global transformation to a more sustainable future through learning, teaching, research and their own operations, the evidence indicates that they are not generally doing so. Despite many years of effort, no university can yet be characterised as a 'sustainable university' — sustainability in higher education is noted as still largely a 'minority sport'. Further, the editors recognise that within the context of the global sustainability debate (which does not always distinguish the need for education and learning as integral components of any change agenda), higher education is both part of the solution (i.e., education itself as an agent of change) and part of the problem (universities are characterised as slow to learn and undertake transformative change of their own accord).

The introduction to *The Sustainable University* provides the global context of sustainable practice, and signals the urgent need for change, given that the rhetoric of commitment is not being matched by the reality of practice. Despite pockets of excellence, higher education is no exception. The constant re-examination of the role of modern higher education through mechanisms such as changing accountability requirements and funding regimes, coupled with the change-averse nature of universities and

increasing evidence that students and industry are pressing for total curriculum reform rather than new course generation, is fuelling an enormous tension within higher education about identity, purpose and future direction.

Part 1 of the book explores what the ‘sustainable university’ might look like and the barriers that are impeding its emergence. Chapter 1 focuses on the conundrum that the ‘future’ that higher education institutions seem determined to prepare graduates for (based on university policy and practice) actually bears little relation to the future that is actually dawning on humanity (based on the ever-accumulating evidence about how our world is changing — environmentally, economically and socio-culturally). Stirling makes a compelling yet simple case for change, noting that when the lens of sustainability is applied to universities, there is a sudden clarity to the real role of higher education in our world — ‘to contribute to the achievement of a sustainable future through education and research’. The University of Plymouth’s sustainability journey from 2005 to the present is illustrated as an example of how the case for change can be mobilised.

More dramatically, Chapter 2 provides a scathing assessment of the impact of neoliberalism on higher education, and the corporatisation of universities. Blewitt highlights the particular subordination of Education for Sustainability (Efs) by these forces to serve the capitalist paradigm, with higher education institutions being complicit in the reductionism applied to Efs, such that it is often taught in its most reductionist form (i.e., resource efficiency), rather than as ‘education for change’. Blewitt notes the disservice to students and society as a whole being done by universities in subordinating Efs in this way, and explores options on how to rebuild Efs teaching and research (and universities more broadly) in a new form that can provide an empowering counterweight to the commodification of education and the public good.

In concluding Part 1, Tilbury provides an illustration in Chapter 3 of the tapestry of charters, declarations and other instruments that have been developed for sustainability in higher education since the 1990s, and notes the broad progress made in a global sense during the past 20 years. Tilbury notes that the commitment embodied in these charters has intensified in recent years, particularly with the launch of the 2012 *Rio+20 People’s Sustainability Treaty for Higher Education* — perhaps the first such document primarily focused on transformative, whole-of-organisation change, particularly with regards to governance, leadership, structure, culture, and systems.

Part 2 provides various examples of integration of sustainability into aspects of higher education practice, including the United Nations University Regional Centres of Expertise, Efs, sustainability research, student engagement, leadership in sustainability implementation, and staff and community engagement. Common themes in the examples analysed in Part 2 include the differentiated nature of the sustainability journey, which must be tailored to each individual institution/project; the contestability of the sustainability landscape in higher education and the subsequent need for preparedness to engage with the political elements of sustainable practice; the importance of hidden/informal learning as well as formal learning; and interdisciplinarity as a defining feature of sustainability initiatives, whether initiatives are academic or operational. White’s exploration of sustainability research captures the central point — that sustainable practice in higher education must be concerned with the transformation of mindsets and values, as well as organisations, if humanity is to become a better version of itself for the benefit of all.

Part 3 builds on Part 2 and examines specific institutions’ efforts at whole-of-organisation transformational change. Valuable insights are provided by Hopkinson

and James (the University of Bradford's 'Ecoversity'), Taylor (Kingston University) and Luna and Maxey (the Higher Education Academy's 'Green Academy') into both the successes and failures of these strategic reorientations. The key point to note is that despite setbacks, these institutions have continued to make progress toward becoming sustaining organisations. Important lessons learned include the need for varied approaches, a willingness to try different things at different times, persistence, the ability to learn from failures, the importance of pilots as well as whole-of-system change, and the critical need to monitor and evaluate progress. Unsurprisingly, aligning 'quick win' initiatives with enthusiastic 'early adopters' is often the best place to start, while understanding that sustainability has to compete with many other agendas — ensuring that sustainability maintains a continual presence is key to forward momentum and broader engagement, and ultimately long-term success.

Stirling concludes *The Sustainable University* by noting that while the journey has started, the end is not yet in sight, and the eventual outcome of the transformation that higher education will need to undergo in relation to sustainable practice remains unclear.

*The Sustainable University* does lack strong commentary and analysis on one of the most vexing issues in relation to sustainability and higher education — that of leadership (or the lack thereof) by governing bodies and university executives. Leadership studies relating to sustainability in higher education, focusing specifically on governing bodies and university executives as change agents for the 'sustainable university' are lacking, although aspects of sustainability leadership as they relate to particular initiatives are explored in the literature (e.g., this volume, and studies such as those conducted by Scott et al., 2012), particularly with regard to EfS. However, if the equivalents of Ray Anderson or Yvon Chouinard, of Interface Inc. and Patagonia Inc. fame respectively, are driving transformational change in universities at the executive/board level with the goal of becoming sustaining organisations, then we are hearing about little, if any, of their work. As institutions and their staff, students and communities change and adopt transformative approaches to sustainable practice, so too should governing bodies and university executives. This is a significant gap in the research on (and practice of) sustainability in higher education that needs to be addressed.

Overall, *The Sustainable University* is essentially making a critical argument for the birth of a new breed of higher education institution — one that does not 'tinker' with sustainability at the edges (or worse, not address it at all) and instead, adopts an approach to sustainable practice that embraces transformative change and organisational renewal. In the 'sustainable university', sustainability is at the core of, and integrated with, every aspect of the organisation — only through this process of rebirth will universities truly be able to realise their leadership potential in a world undergoing life-altering change.

## Reference

- Scott, G., Tilbury, D., Sharp, L. and Deane, E. (2012). *Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education*. Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, Sydney, Australia. Retrieved April 28, 2015, from [http://www.uws.edu.au/bringing\\_sustainability\\_to\\_life/sustainability/research/turnaround\\_leadership\\_for\\_sustainability\\_in\\_higher\\_education](http://www.uws.edu.au/bringing_sustainability_to_life/sustainability/research/turnaround_leadership_for_sustainability_in_higher_education)

### Reviewer Biography

Dr Lorne Butt is the Sustainability Coordinator at TAFE NSW Western Institute. Lorne trained as a biologist before joining the higher education sector. With a background in quality management, strategic planning and corporate governance, Lorne now specialises in sustainability practice, governance, education and research. Lorne is an Associate Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, and a member of the British and Australia/New Zealand academies of management, the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and the Australian Association of Environmental Educators. Lorne is also a member of the Advisory Board for the Institute for Land, Water and Society at Charles Sturt University.

## Sustainability Frontiers: Critical and Transformative Voices from the Borderlands of Sustainability

Edited by David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa, Barbara Budlich Publishers, Opladen, 2015, ISBN: 9783866494763

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*Sustainability Frontiers* sets out to provide an alternative view to environmental and sustainability pedagogies grounded in hegemonic assumptions of ‘green’ and ‘business as usual’ consumer capitalism, assumptions that emanate from the metaphorical global north. Selby and Kagawa instead frame a critical and transformative view that locates the cause of environmental, social, and economic injustices in the inherent globalising and exploitative nature of capitalism itself.

Accordingly, the book explores a variety of pedagogical insights, practices and case studies, proposed as an alternative to the weak sustainability ethos of growth or progress often mainstreamed in and through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) discourse and practice. Those environmental and sustainability educators who wish to unsettle dominant paradigms of ideology and pedagogy will find much in these pages to inform and inspire renewed practice.

These alternative approaches arise from the margins or borderlands of mainstream ESD. David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa offer an evocative definition of borderlands as:

*... special spatial and ideological spaces. They are where people go to emancipate themselves from the trammels of ingrained assumptions, orthodoxies, habits and practices... They are shifting, mold-breaking spaces, catalyzing the production of hybridized knowledge, understanding and insight. As such they are spaces of resistance, reconfiguration and renewal. They are also*