

SRHE 2010

Creating a sustainable university place: a research agenda

Research domain: Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality

Outline

From the perspective of environmental sustainability, universities, as physical entities, are disaster areas. Space is provided to meet peak-load demands, which is then used typically for a short working day, five days a week (if that), for about eight months of the year. Universities are naturally becoming more aware of the need for sustainable buildings – like some of those at the University of East Anglia, with such good insulation and recycling of natural heat and “coolth” that they need hardly any additional heating in winter or cooling in summer (Tovey and Turner, 2006) – although bringing any university’s inherited estate up to anything like this standard will be a formidable undertaking.

But looking simply at the carbon footprint of the physical estate is probably the easiest dimension of the sustainability challenge: physical changes may be expensive in capital terms and may raise technical issues, but they will bring recurrent savings – and pose no particular organisational difficulties. This is what Dunphy et al (2003) characterise as the second phase - after initial rejection - of the corporate response to sustainability, focusing on compliance and efficiency. The real problems will come in trying to create a different sort of organisation, as in Dunphy et al’s third phase in which sustainability is internalised: and the challenge here, as I have proposed elsewhere (Temple, 2010), is essentially a managerial one. (This paper does not deal with curricular engagement with environmental sustainability – not least because this issue is already covered extensively in the literature (for example, Cotton *et al*, 2009; Scott and Gough, 2006; Sterling and Scott, 2008). Progress overall in the UK might be described as patchy.)

A way to conceptualise this problem of internalisation is to distinguish between space – the physical form – and place – the result of human interactions within this physical form. The distinction has been well worked-over in the literature (Dovey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991; Neary *et al*, 2010 among others). In this context, I suggest, what need to be created are university places, not merely spaces, that are environmentally sustainable. The idea of place is important here because the internalisation of sustainability is going to demand a different, more intensive, use of the university estate: people are going to have to work in new ways, during different hours. This will be easier to manage if both students and staff come to think of the university in terms of a place that has special meaning for them.

How can this be brought about? A number of inter-related matters need to be considered. Human-scale complexity, and what I have described as “encounter engineering” (Temple,

2009), where buildings and the entire campus are designed in ways that allow people to meet and socialise in both planned and (crucially) unplanned ways, will help to create this kind of place. These places will need to be used intensively, and so making them attractive becomes not an optional extra but a fundamental requirement. Many universities in the UK and elsewhere are of course pursuing projects with just this aim in mind: the University of Kent's remodelling of a central area to create social and informal learning spaces is a good example (Friday, 2010).

Collegial management styles come in here: they are usually the most effective approaches in knowledge-intensive organisations because they allow access to the organisation's stored knowledge (Birkinshaw, 2010: 89). In this case, collegiality is going to be needed to firstly gather and then to sort and reconcile the different - some conflicting - perspectives that there will be on achieving sustainability: a classical example of supercomplexity in action (Barnett, 2000: 75).

Transport is an example of where conflicting perspectives need to be managed. Campus universities are largely car-dependent, despite efforts to improve bus services, support car pools, and so on. City-centre universities will have a strategic advantage here: the Victorian civics are where they are for a reason, and the out-of-town campus may come to be seen as an historical anomaly. But research universities, however good their public transport links, will have to grapple with the equally intractable problem of air travel, whether by staff travelling for research, or by international students. Indeed, it has been claimed (although I have not seen the supporting data) that international student travel to the UK alone generates a carbon footprint equal to that of all UK university buildings (People and Planet, 2009). It seems to me that we have not begun to face up to these problems.

What would a research agenda that squared-up to all this look like? We might classify what needs to be done under two broad headings: *managing the learning community*, and *place-shaping*. Under the first heading we might study different approaches to managing collegially (I am not setting up a contrast here with "managerialism": that is another debate); what teaching and learning strategies might deliver reduced carbon emissions, showing their effects on building and transport use; the same for research; and what kinds of institutional restructuring might be needed to allow these changes to happen. The second heading, place-shaping, would cover building and campus design; facilities management; and university travel plans.

It is the nature of the problem that many topics under one heading will need to be thought about under the other: an example would be e-learning, where the design of a teaching and learning strategy will have implications for space use but also for emissions from ICT use (JISC, 2009). Rigorously quantifying the carbon footprint, and the various contributors to it, is another research issue that spans all kinds of sustainability actions: there is little point in

making great efforts to reduce paper use (a largely sustainable product) while air travel is increasing.

Another conceptualisation is to envisage a set of research activities based around the intensification of space use. This might examine how turning space into place may support intensification; how planning for connections between spaces may help in place-shaping and intensification (the original University of York masterplan, for example, had this in mind (University of York, 1962)); and what the implications of changed working days and working years will be. In other words, the organisational, social and physical forms of the university have to be studied together, if long-term sustainability is to be achieved.

[NB: this paper and Denise Batchelor's submission, provisionally titled 'Values in creating the sustainable university place', have been prepared in collaboration and, if both papers are accepted, they could usefully be scheduled together.]

References

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