BITING THE LEAGUE TABLE THAT FEEDS: REFLECTIONS ON MANAGERIALISM AT WORK WITHIN UK UNIVERSITY SUSTAINABILITY AGENDAS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore the institutional impact of ecological sustainability performance league tables on current university agendas. It focuses on a narrative critique of one such league table, the UK's "Green League Table," compiled and reported by the student campaigning NGO, "People and Planet," annually between 2007 and 2013, through the popular and academic press. This article offers the proposition that such league tables could be acting as a hegemonic institutional mechanism for social legitimacy through universities' desire to show that environmental issues are effectively under control. It proposes that the espoused "carbon targets imperative" and "engage- ment" eco-narratives can serve as a form of deception by merely embracing the narratives as rhetorical devices rather than as a reflection of or an impetus for proactive, reflexive action. The article argues that this overarching managerial focus on sustainability league table position contributes to the broader ethical, social, and political tensions and inequities of universities, while satisfying the exclusive self-interest of a growing legion of "carbon managers," "sustainability managers," and "environmental managers," in satisfying the neoliberal institutional drive coming from their vicechancellors.

INTRODUCTION

The conventional wisdom holds that all education is good and the more of it one has, the better. . . . The truth is that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth. (Orr, 1994: 5)

It is hoped that this article contributes to a wider critical discourse around the way in which the natural environment has been managed through neoliberal education policies. Neoliberal ideas tend to situate environmental concerns within the logic of economic growth, resulting in the conceptualization of ecological sustainability within higher education as instrumental to dominant educational policies focused on creating economic development through new skills, technologies, and markets, often at the expense of other concerns (Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007). The dominance, and subsequently the contested nature, of neoliberal ideas requires that we examine how various neoliberal forms and processes impact the way in which ecological sustainability within higher education is conceptualized and implemented in formal, informal, and nonformal contexts and across scales, from the local to the global (McKenzie, 2012). As neoliberal discourses and practices circulate through multiple social, cultural, ecological, and spatial environments, continuing to track and understand the impact on the environment and education is vital, as is strategizing how to respond to the shaping power of neoliberalism (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood 2013). As Hursh and colleagues (2013) highlight, some examples of the wider effects that neoliberalism has on the environment and on education include the following:

(1) the ways in which neoliberalism promotes markets above all else, resulting in the valuing of nature for its instrumental market utility only;
(2) the re-inscription of people as entrepreneurs and consumers rather than as citizens of larger social and environmental communities;
(3) the changing educational relationships between individual and broader conceptions of community within neoliberal ideologies;
(4) the dominance of privatization schemes and enclosure of the commons;
(5) the diminution of government other than to serve economic growth and corporate interest;
(6) the adoption of environmental and sustainability policies that function as institutional green-washing;
(7) the professionalization and institutionalization of environmental work, such that it discourages alliance building among diverse groups with environmental concerns (such as indigenous groups, social justice and civil rights groups, and health advocacy groups); and
(8) the frequent lack of economic critique and critical socio-ecological analysis in environmental education research, policy, and practice.

Following Hursh and colleagues (2013), this article aims to track and understand the power and institutional impact of university sustainability league tables within the wider neoliberal critique. Could institutional reliance on sustainability league tables contribute to the broader, emergent neoliberal social and political conflicts and inequities of universities as discussed most recently by Acker, Webber, and Smyth (2012) and Van den Brink and Benschop (2012)?

Given the pivotal role of higher education in society and the potential for mutual learning (Scholz, Mieg, & Oswald, 2000), higher education has a unique potential to catalyze and/or accelerate an equitable societal transition toward ecological sustainability (Cortese, 2003). However, as Selby and Kagawa (2010) point out, most proponents of ecological sustainability within universities seem to have found a space where they feel they can more or less shrug off the need for such meaningful critical reflection. In this untroubled state, there has been a preoccupation with the instrumental and pragmatic task of embedding sustainability in institutions and systems through developing and establishing benchmarks, indicators, and checklists; devising skills taxonomies; refining auditing and monitoring tools; drawing up performance league tables; and introducing other potential mechanisms for targeting, standardization, measurement, and control (see, for instance, Tilbury & Janousek, 2007). The approach is one of "roll up your sleeves and start implementing!" (Jickling & Wals, 2008: 6). As Andrew Smith, the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) head of estates and sustainable development, points out, "We've got a load of plans and strategies, but what we really need now is delivery" (People and Planet, 2011).

The aim of this article is to explore the institutional impact of the ever-popular sustainability performance league tables on current university agendas. It focuses on a critique of one such league table, the UK's "Green League Table," compiled by the student campaigning NGO, "People and Planet." In 2007, People and Planet ran its first "Green League" for universities, assessing their environment-sustainability performance across a range of indicators, and then categorizing them as universities categorize student degrees—as first, upper second, lower second, third, and so on. Since winning the award for the best campaign of the year in 2007 at the British Environment and Media Awards ceremony, the Green League has amassed much publicity, particularly due to the fact that the Green League tables have been published in the popular weekly higher education magazine, *Times Higher Education,* and, since 2011, in the more widely circulated *Guardian* newspaper.

Such a critical focus on league tables could be particularly illuminating, as Dobson, Quilley, and Young (2010: 11) point out: "University managers are very sensitive to league tables; rightly or wrongly they believe that it makes a real difference to an institution's prospects whether it is near the top or near the bottom." Universities near the top of the table are externally rewarded and their actions legitimized for satisfying certain "sustainability criteria" (no matter whether well conceived or ill conceived). Therefore such tables and the criteria within them can institutionally direct sustainability strategy along particular lines. As John Hindley, Manchester Metropolitan University's environmental manager, pointed out after his university rose to the top of the 2013 Green League Table, "The Green League has had a great effect for the whole sector and despite being in effect compulsory, it's exceptionally competitive" (People and Planet, 2013).

More specifically, this article explores the institutional impact of the Green League Table over the seven-year period since its inception. As the People and Planet NGO annually audits and widely reports the relative espoused sustainability performance of UK universities around its own set of indicators, the resultant texts, along with the universities' performative responses, are readily accessible for such a comparative and critical narrative analysis over this seven-year period.

In the spirit of Kafka, this article could be construed as one of several counter-interpretations of the apparent "one truth" of contemporary mythical narrative texts, such as the texts around university sustainability league tables (Munro & Huber, 2012). As Kalman (2007) reminds us, Kafka pushes the act of interpretation itself into the foreground. In this sense, it is all about interpretation, which is not about the one and indivisible truth but about texts (Kalman, 2007). In other words, this article provides an interpretation of interpretations. As Kalman (2007) highlights, it represents an interpretation of the way in which the world around us is interpreted. It follows Barthes (1957|2009), who argues for "countermythology" as an effective antidote to the dominant contemporary mythology. This critique of contemporary myths may be seen to be an extension of Gabriel's (2004: 872) pioneering study of organizational mythology, which recommended that, "like all myths, [organizational myths] must be approached with suspicion." It follows Ball's (2003: 217) attempt to "get behind" the seemingly objective, hyperrational facade of performativity in higher education by identifying who determines what is to count as a valuable, effective, or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid. As Ball (2003) highlights, the research extends into examining the subjectivities of change and changing subjectivities that are threatened or required or brought about by performativity. In the context of the wider ethical sustainability agenda, this article explores the extent to which the wider neoliberal educational policy reforms are now changing the basis for ethical decision making and moral judgment around the "adding value," calculative incentive of performance, rather than embracing the multiplicity of values and meaning around sustainability. Has the space for the operation of autonomous ethical codes based in a shared moral language been colonized or even closed down? Similarly, to what extent does acquiring the performative information necessary for perfect control and managerial security consume "so much energy that it drastically reduces the energy available for making improvement inputs?" (Elliot, 1996: 15). As Shore and Wright (1999: 570) argue, "to be audited, an organization must actively transform itself into an auditable commodity."

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING

In order to make it possible to reflect upon the league table changes over seven years, with the number of criteria increasing from 8 in 2007 to 13 in 2013, primary narrative threads were identified at different points in time. Narrative analysis is

used in this article specifically to produce an intuitive reflexivity about the deceptive character of appearances—that is, going beyond or beneath the surface rhetoric, attempting to open out our understanding of surplus meaning (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Lewis 2000). The article aligns itself with postmodern approaches around the idea of incredulity toward any form of narrative closure—and hence provides an opening for research investigating linguistic constructions that on the one hand orient interpretation in a particular direction, while on the other they suggest a broader and more permissive interpretation than might be obtained without their use. The use of narrative analysis is justified by the depth of this permissive interpretation and the way in which it unmasks espoused and legitimizing narratives and rhetoric in the search for a deeper level of meaning (Fairhurst, 2011).

As underlying narrative intentions are often masked by what appear to be more legitimate narratives, this article concurs with Tourish and Hargie (2012) in their advocacy for the exclusion principle, in which espoused narratives can work by excluding categories of meaning from comprehension and discussion. In other words, those who encode narratives and those who decode them may register comparisons and differences between domains, but they may also exclude, partially or completely, other categories of meaning from consideration by their reliance on particular narratives. As Tourish and Hargie (2012) highlight, powerful organizational actors, such as the People and Planet NGO, seek to frame categories of meaning for wide audiences, such as university funding bodies, the media, university students, university management, and academics. This process of exclusion may be particularly important, and it is one that has been under-studied in organization theory.

A similar example of such framing is highlighted by Crane (2000), who provides evidence to suggest that where organizations actively implement environmental programs, they are likely to mobilize existing organizational and institutional narratives to frame the process of change, rather than to develop new ones. This is, in many respects, a rational approach to facilitating acceptable and uncontroversial frames of reference for what may be seen by many organizational factions as a "radical" or "left-field" activity (Crane, 2000). These "eco-narratives" seeking to explain and justify actions taken to deal with environmental issues are themselves open to deconstruction. The eco-narratives can serve as a form of deception to mislead critics, when the narrative is embraced merely as a rhetorical device rather than as a reflection of what is actually happening within organizations. These narratives may also cloak managers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to cope with what they perceive as an increasingly important but highly complex issue. Ball (2003) similarly describes such rhetorical eco-narratives as fabrications, as they represent versions of an organization produced purposefully in order to be "accountable." As Ball (2003) highlights, fabrications conceal as much as they reveal. They are ways of presenting oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which

only certain possibilities of being have value. However, there is a surplus of meaning in such exercises.

This article aligns itself with the deconstructionist project initiated by Derrida (1967), which highlights the multiple meanings as well as the intended meanings inherent in any text and in the categories of thought and interpretation that they sometimes seek to exclude. Conscious use of the exclusion principle in narrative analysis helps us to more attentively seek out such points of ambiguity and provide alternate readings that are essential to a fuller understanding of the Green League Table's impact. This requires an understanding of narratives as rhetorical framing devices, where framing requires the communicator to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Looking at the league tables over the seven years of their existence, we can see that they contain such emergent framing, which is manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments (Tourish & Hargie, 2012). Thus, framing is important because an "audience's interpretation of and reaction to a discourse can be shaped by the frame in which that information is viewed" (Benoit, 2001: 72). Through an understanding of the espoused narrative framing, the hidden, masked, excluded narrative can be brought to the surface.

Furthermore, as Tourish and Hargie (2012) argue, many narratives may be weak in unmasking complex relationships such as the influences from and impacts on multiple organizational actors. In the effort to identify a suitable root metaphor that accounts for such ambiguity of intention and impact, this article concurs with Tourish and Hargie (2012), who argue that context appears to be crucial, and that it merits greater attention in organizationally situated narrative analysis. Therefore, a pertinent narrative analysis would need to acknowledge and account for the various actors' inputs into and responses to such league tables as those considered here. In other words, a pertinent narrative analytical lens would need to acknowledge both the espoused and the excluded ambiguous narratives of the Green League Table and also acknowledge the particular relationships between the People and Planet NGO, university managers, and other relevant actors such as academics involved in the sustainability field.

Therefore, a narrative inquiry, in the context of this article, endeavors to bring to the surface narratives that are espoused and excluded around the People and Planet's Green League Table and, similarly, to critically analyze the various university actors' narrative responses, such as the response from "sustainability managers" involved in the leading universities' annual submissions. Jäger (2001) outlines an approach to data analysis that is consistent with the protocols for critical discourse analysis suggested by Leitch and Palmer (2010) and that is employed in this article. This methodology also conforms with the approach to

metaphor analysis outlined by Amernic, Craig, and Tourish (2007), Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008), and Tourish and Hargie (2012). Thus, the pertinent text that was first delineated was the annual Green League Table over the course of seven years. The seven league tables were read and reread, compared and contrasted with the intent of identifying any emergent espoused narrative and its excluded narrative coded pair or equivalent. At this stage, an academic colleague also independently and repeatedly read the text to help determine the depth and extent of the various narratives within the text. The final agreed narrative pairs were mapped. This process involved a word by word, line by line, and paragraph by paragraph reading and rereading of the text (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), and the enumeration of fresh narrative categories where clear instances occurred of narratives that did not fit a previously existing category. This task was accomplished by the author, who laid the narrative categories and examples next to one another, amalgamating some categories and examples, and circulating this fresh analysis for further elaboration to his academic colleague. The process was repeated on four further occasions, until agreement was reached on the major narrative pairs as well as on the perspectives of the primary actors involved in the input and output of the league tables.

OPENING PANDORA'S BOX: THE ESPOUSED AND EXCLUDED GREEN ECO-NARRATIVES EMERGING FROM THE GREEN LEAGUE TABLE

The Eco-Narrative Mask of the "Carbon Targets Imperative": 2007–Present

The most consistently espoused narrative thread running throughout the league tables over the seven years has been around the primacy of the "carbon targets imperative": the urgency of setting and promising to meet certain short-term and long-term carbon targets. As People and Planet's 2011 guide (People and Planet, 2011: 17) indicates, "the biggest emphasis" in assessing the environmental performance of universities is around carbon reduction, with the aim of urgently mitigating the consequences of climate change. Purely in terms of specific sections dedicated to "carbon," it is pertinent to note the much higher relative weighting given to the explicit categories of "carbon management" and "carbon reduction" within the Green League Table (categories that were worth a collective maximum of 17 points up to 2012 and 16 points in 2013 out of a total of 70 possible points distributed among a total of 13 categories). Such focused attention, representing almost 25% of the total points, also combines with the overarching "carbon targets imperative" narrative that is broadly interwoven within the other categories of the league table.

In order to understand the reason why the "carbon targets imperative" narrative focus is of paramount importance to the People and Planet NGO and to the

directors of estates, energy managers and sustainability managers within universities (which currently represent the primary external collective actor and voice in shaping the Green League Table methodology through what is called the Green League Oversight Group), we need to note the fact that the wider dominant institutional expectations of many NGOs, environmentalists, and neoconservatives lead them to warn that society needs to change its ways, and that their communications often rely on dystopic, fear-inducing themes: unless we change our lifestyles, societal collapse is right around the corner. This fits into the perspective that Newton (2002) describes as '"technicist kitsch" and the evangelical imploration that things "must" change because, ecologically speaking, they "have to," or the uncritical application of existing organizational change rationality such as that of culture change prescriptions. A compounding problem is the rhetoric of many environmental commentators, such as Krebs (2008), who simplistically say that we are living in a century in which the economic worldview will be superseded by the ecological worldview.

Moreover, it is proposed here that the Green League draws on the urgency and the "common-sense" doomsday imperative of the climate change agenda, rather than embracing the excluded narrative around the more uncertain and complex nature of the wider inherent social, environmental, and economic transitional stakeholder conflicts and the longer-term, systemic, transdisciplinary engagement challenges of sustainability. This article agrees with Clarke, Knights, and Jarvis (2012) and asks to what extent such league tables, along with many Western governments and institutions, such as universities, their funding bodies (like HEFCE in England), and nonprofit institutions like the Carbon Trust, are complicit in focusing on knee-jerk, short-term, top-down, technology-focused carbon management plans, targets, and performance. As the 2011 People and Planet guide (People and Planet, 2011: 11) warns us,

> A steep and annual reduction in global carbon emissions is required to avert catastrophic global climate destabilization and keep global warming increases to below 2 degrees. . . . The UK Government expects all sectors of society to contribute to the 80% reductions by 2050 enshrined in the Climate Change Act (2008) and Climate Change (Scotland) Act (2009). Carbon management is therefore central to the future of environmental management in universities, as recognized by the joint publication by HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHEs Carbon Reduction Strategy (2010) which set a sector-wide carbon reduction target for the first time. Although this strategy applies only to English institutions, similar requirements are in place for institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, for example through the Universities and Colleges Climate Change Commitment for Scotland (UCCCfS) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). . . . It rewards those universities with ambitious short-term targets as these are crucial to reducing the impact of cumulative emissions and getting an institution on track for a longer-term transition to low-carbon operations.

In responding to such a key carbon targets imperative narrative around the Green League Table, it is pertinent to note that university managements are focusing much of their attention on ticking the relevant league table boxes by drawing upon "Estates Management Statistics" data. Looking more closely at the short-term, retrospective, and technical orientation here, it is also pertinent to note that such carbon management statistics include energy, electricity, and heating data only from the previous academic year. Such measurements, initially questionable from perspectives of accuracy, comparability, and availability (People and Planet, 2012), are spurious to say the least, not only because prior to 2012/2013 indirect emissions (called Scope 3 emissions) from procurement, travel, and flying were not included, but more crucially because the statistics are silent with regard to assessing future wider stakeholder capability and engagement to reduce such emissions: the carbon performance of universities does not even factor into People and Planet's own limited stakeholder category of "staff and student engagement" (see below). It is no surprise that league tables and their university followership have focused on prescriptive, short-term techno-fixes and provision around such transport and waste initiatives as teleconferencing, use of recycling bins, printing quotas, and car-sharing schemes without any critical reflections around taking account of the various long-term, pluralistic, conflicting stakeholder attitudes, emotions, behavior, and lifestyles.

Similarly, universities typically set up discrete "environmental" working groups, following compartmentalized criteria from the league table, such as the "waste group," the "energy group," the "transport group," the "management systems group," and the increasingly popular "carbon management group," which measure, implement, monitor, and control "singular," "real" issues, without analyzing whether such management actually impacts upon the social and cultural context and the embodied practices of specific universities. Just reflecting upon the fact that average emissions per head across the UK university sector have actually increased adds weight to this critique of the primary "carbon targets imperative" narrative. Similarly, in 2012, the sector's carbon footprint as a whole was still 0.22 % higher than its 2005 baseline (People and Planet, 2012).

Following the present article's critical perspective, it is argued that the urgency, revealed above, of mitigating universities' negative impact on climate change, as legitimized by league tables, governments, and funding bodies, has provided a political argument that university "sustainability manager" technocrats can use to implement knee-jerk, quick-fix, uncritical, centralized solutions, from an increasingly judgmental, self-righteous, and unquestioning perspective. Clearly, more than ever before, university senior managers are embracing the environmental agenda, as many top-down decisions can now draw on the unquestionable legitimacy of the climate imperative rather than having to embrace the complexity and conflict of wider stakeholder involvement, participation, and legitimacy. This is in agreement with Holmqvist (2009), who similarly highlights the possibility that clothing an activity with a seemingly benevolent, legitimizing narrative may be a

mechanism of further organizational control over an organization's environment and its various actors.

An example of this espoused narrative enacted within universities is provided by Plymouth University, which has been consistently among the highest ranked overall in the Green League Table: no. 2 in 2007, no. 2 in 2008, no. 6 in 2009, no. 1 in 2010, no. 4 in 2011, and no. 2 in 2012 and 2013. Plymouth University aims to become carbon neutral by 2030 and reduce emissions from its own operations by 25% by 2015. Its representatives argue that over 60% of the carbon savings will come from what they call an "Intelligent Energy Control Centre" that analyses and controls all the energy-consuming devices and systems in their public and private buildings. In 2012, they claimed to have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 18% in comparison with 2005 levels, despite a large increase in student numbers over the same period. The university identified over 40 carbon reduction projects that it claims will make an estimated £2.3 million in financial savings by 2015 (People and Planet, 2012).

Given national funding body policies such as HEFCE's formal linking of capital funding with published carbon management plans having short-term targets (actively supported by institutions like the Carbon Trust), and given institutional legitimization by the Green League Table, it is no surprise that universities such as Plymouth are being increasingly driven by short-term, systemized, technological fixes and controls with an explicit financial incentive. The question remains as to whether such institutional incentives and legitimization only further the wider neoliberal agendas of universities, as university managers are rewarded for such narrow, instrumental, economics-driven, exclusive managerialism, favoring corporate interests. It is pertinent to note that Plymouth University's explicit strategic aim is to become "the enterprise university, truly 'business-engaging' and delivering outstanding economic, social and cultural benefits from our intellectual capital" (University of Plymouth, 2013).

The Emerging Eco-Narrative Mask of Engagement: 2010–Present

In response to wider stakeholder criticism, it is pertinent to note that, ironically, the league tables and the increasingly compliant and cooperative universities are increasingly using the language and espoused narrative of engagement, while maintaining their top-down, techno-centered set of quick fixes. In fact, the People and Planet league table of 2010 included, for the first time since its inception in 2007, an added criterion of staff and student engagement, though it dealt with this issue only as an add-on to the other 10 criteria at the time (People and Planet, 2010).

- Reflecting on this inclusion, one may note that universities could score a maximum of 3 points on this criterion compared to a maximum of 8 points for the inclusion of a management system such as ISO14001, EMAS, Green Dragon, and EcoCampus. As a review of the league table highlighted,

as engagement represented "only 4% of the overall marks available in the Green League, the impact on institution scores has been limited. . . . [but] given the tighter bunching of institutions about the mean, these few points will have affected placings in the League table" (Brite Green, 2010). This was indeed beneficial, as many universities unsurprisingly scored 2 out of 3 points if they performed the following four minimal actions:

- supporting an annual "Go Green Week" or "Environment Week";
- holding inter-hall energy saving competitions (e.g., "Student Switch Off");
- holding inter-hall recycling competitions; and
- providing land for student/staff food-growing projects.

It is proposed here that this situation of paying lip service to engagement had not changed in 2011, as although the number of actions had slightly increased (by 1), the maximum number of points for engagement was still 3. This means that universities could choose some easy options from this list, as explained above, and still score 2 out of the meager 3 points by performing 5 actions. In 2013, the weighting for this category increased by 1 point, but this still represents only a slight incremental change in the overall weighting.

Furthermore, such measures miss much of the complexity of the dynamic and situational quality of engagement (Bryson, Cooper, & Hardy, 2010). As Bryson and colleagues (2010) argue, the measures discussed here actually obscure the participant voice, with no opportunity for a perspective that does not fit the predefined options. As Kahu (2013) points out, blending such institutional practices with an apparent link to student behavior has resulted in the lack of a clear distinction between the factors that supposedly influence engagement, the measurement of engagement itself, and the consequences of engagement. The apparent link with student and staff behavior is highlighted within the rationale for identifying the different initiatives under the "engagement" category within the Green League Table of 2013:

> Universities that play an active role in encouraging and engaging students and staff in sustainable behaviour change will be able to make their transition to a low-carbon, lower-energy future much more smoothly, cheaply and quickly. Furthermore, behaviour and values learnt whilst at university have long-lasting impacts on graduates throughout their lives. (People and Planet, 2013)

However, much of the focus is on institutional practices such as annual environment weeks; while these may be important influences on engagement, they do not represent the psychological state of engagement (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Focusing only on elements that the institution can control means that a wide range of other explanatory variables, such as student motivation, expectations, and emotions, is excluded. As Kahu (2013) argues, a clearer distinction would be to recognize that what is considered to be the process is not engagement; instead, it is a cluster of factors that may or may not influence student engagement (usually the more immediate institutional factors). Moreover, the choice of focus ignores the

more long-term, broader consequences of student engagement, such as active citizenship (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010), that is, the students' ability to live successfully in the world and have a strong sense of self, as a lens in the conceptual organization of student engagement. This follows McMahon and Portelli's (2004: 60) critique that popular discourses of engagement are too narrowly focused on the procedural, as defined by management, and so "fail to address substantive ethical and political issues." Authors such as Knight (2005) argue strongly against what they see as the imposition of a specific value set, behavior, or "political ortho-doxy" on students and staff. In this context, legitimized initiatives such as environ-ment weeks could act as benevolent narrative masks to actually further what Mann (2001) highlights as alienating neoliberal sociocultural conditions and power imbalances within universities.

Furthermore, if a university was "savvy" about this and wished to make a spurious correlation between its carbon management performance and engage-ment, it would certainly endeavor to tick the easy, yet legitimized, checklist boxes. It is certainly pertinent to note that a report on the 2010 league table high-lighted that there was a strong correlation between the points gained in the engagement area and overall performance, with all but one of the first class institutions gaining 3 points (Brite Green, 2010). The report goes on to assert this correlation: "this illustrates the importance of grassroots support and behav-iour change to the success of environmental initiatives on campus" (Brite Green, 2010: 5). Of course, purely from a procedural critique perspective, such measures do not even remotely measure grassroots support and behavior change, and the short-term success of many environmental initiatives could be due to tech-nological, eco-efficiency reasons.

Moreover, it is particularly pertinent to this deconstruction to take a closer look at Plymouth University again, as it has consistently scored highly around the engagement category within the Green League Table while it is among the highest overall "performers" in the Green League Table up to the present day. In 2010, the Centre for Sustainable Futures at Plymouth University, one of the leading government-funded (through HEFCE) centers of teaching and learning, published an ethnographic research report, highlighting that its respondents "unanimously reported that at present, students felt somewhat excluded from contributing to a dialogue about sustainability at Plymouth" (Cotton, Winter, & Dyer, 2010: 2). Ironically, this finding is in the context of the explicit 2006 aim of the university to embed sustainability throughout the university curriculum, community, culture, and campus (University of Plymouth, 2006). As Plymouth University has also been certified with an international environmental management system standard of ISO140001 and has scored top marks in carbon management and performance, along with being honored with other externally awarded institutional awards, for example, gaining silver status for corporate social responsibility within a univer-sity scheme called "Universities That Count," this university's self-confessed lack of wider engagement and involvement of one of its key stakeholders represents a

concern not only for the leading universities, such as Plymouth (Cotton et al., 2009), but more importantly for "The Green League" as a whole in its efforts to provide what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA] (2005) calls an essential institutional context for education in order for sustainable development to become transformative.

The Emerging Eco-Narrative Mask of Research: 2011–Present

People and Planet may argue that, in 2011, it included an extra criterion acknowledging the importance and recognition of wider engagement: this criterion, "curriculum," purports to measure the extent of the integration of sustainability within teaching and research. Taking a closer look, however, it can be seen that this category is primarily satisfied with policy promises and offers a maximum of only 2 points. In fact, in 2011, even with such easy pickings, only 16 institutions scored full points in this category. Could this be due to the fact that this category offered a maximum of only 2 points rather than offering a larger number of points, recognizing the wider impacts of teaching and research? As the chief executive of Universities UK, Nicola Dandridge, argues, "it's important to focus also on universities' wider and invaluable contribution to the green agenda in terms of their environment-related research and teaching" (People and Planet, 2011).

Notably, drawing from the 2011 tables, it can be seen that Aberystwyth University, while running a number of courses on environmental management, gained only 111th position in the Green League Table. Similarly, in 2011, Cardiff University gained only 130th position despite the inclusion of the "curriculum" criterion. This was in spite of Cardiff's substantial, world-renowned sustainability research profile and reputation. Looking at this more deeply up to the present day, newer, teaching-focused institutions tend to be at the top, while research-intensive Russell Group members are hardly to be seen in the higher rankings. None made it into the top 20 in 2010. Only five of the Russell Group members received upper seconds, 10 received lower seconds, and three—Oxford, Sheffield, and Liverpool—managed only thirds. Cardiff was deemed to have failed.

In 2013, although "curriculum" was changed to the broader title of "education and learning" with an increased weighting of 1 point, this criterion still had a relatively low overall 3-point weighting. Notably, still only two Russell Group members had managed to break into the top 20, with Exeter placed 13th and Newcastle 15th, both receiving firsts. Bristol (23rd) and the London School of Economics (22nd) also received firsts. But six were awarded fails or thirds: Oxford (fail), and Cambridge, Imperial College London, Liverpool, Warwick, and York (all thirds). People and Planet itself admits that the weightings for this category are relatively low.

Why are many of the Russell Group universities not measuring up? As Louise Hazan, People and Planet's climate change campaign and communication manager, argues, "For non-Russell Group universities, being green is definitely a selling point and a way to attract students. . . . That's not the case for Russell Group institutions.

Being research intensive means that they are bound to be using lots of water and energy compared with teaching universities . . . in terms of policy, I think it could be said, for some institutions, to come down to a certain arrogance that this is not a priority for them" (People and Planet, 2011). This blinkered tick-box perspective, downplaying the wider research agenda in contrast to the quick, internalized techno-fixes, is rebutted by Wendy Piatt, the Russell Group's director general:

> Environmental concerns are taken very seriously. . . . All our universities treat their environmental obligations, policies and goals as high priorities. Research in science and engineering, particularly, involves a relatively high level of energy consumption and important work in the environment field is being carried out at Russell Group institutions. Researchers are working on new low carbon energy technologies at Imperial College London, for example, the development of greener aircraft at Bristol and catalysing cleaner fuels at Oxford. Such initiatives are crucial if the UK is to remain a world-leader in global efforts to deal with climate change. (People and Planet, 2011)

Clearly, a high level of environmental research does not seem to correlate with the present criteria and weightings of the league tables. In other words, universities could in effect develop leading transdisciplinary sustainability engagement and involvement cultures around teaching and research and yet be assigned to the lower levels of the tables. As a Cardiff spokesman points out, "People and Planet continually fail to credit Cardiff University for the number of core staff we have with designated environmental responsibilities, seemingly because they are not purely dedicated to environmental issues" (People and Planet, 2011). Seen from this perspective, such league tables, no matter how well intentioned, provide a dangerous signal to universities that they should pay lip service to systemic stake-holder engagement while strategy, policy, and resources are directed to a top-down, short-term set of technical carbon fixes that are rewarded and legitimized by the student campaigning group.

CONCLUSIONS

It is proposed here that legitimation function of the league tables by People and Planet has been developed using the benevolent, ecological espoused narrative of the carbon targets imperative and to a lesser extent, the benevolent, social espoused narrative of engagement. Furthermore, while the signed up universities are duly ticking the metaphorical boxes of the tables (which their university managers have played a key role in shaping), the argument here is that they are simultaneously enacting an institutional control narrative, which is excluded from this tick-box disclosure. Furthermore, such control narratives within universities could compound any institutional inequities promoted by neoliberalism, as highlighted by Acker and colleagues (2012) and Van den Brink and Benschop (2012). To put this in another way, engagement and inclusion may be espoused, but the

institutional impact of such espoused narratives are disengagement and exclusion within universities due to the priorities placed on other league table narratives such as carbon management within an overarching espoused narrative of continuous improvement of league table position.

The role of "sustainability committees" within universities becomes the pursuit of ticking as many boxes as possible so they can rise up the Green League Table and thereby portray themselves as moving toward the status of a "sustainable university" or toward the increasingly popular "carbon-neutral" state. So as Dobson and colleagues (2010) argue, while there may be issues regarding People and Planet's criteria and survey methodology, universities seem less bothered about the research niceties and more bothered about their league table positions. Those that reach high positions make a big play of the fact, and those that do not reach high positions keep very quiet about it. The "reputation factor" for sustainability issues seems to be very high, so Dobson and colleagues (2010) find a wide range of institutions proclaiming their success—in the belief that it really will make a difference to the way they are perceived, particularly by students. This focus on students could explain the specific attraction of People and Planet to university "sustainability" managers, as the NGO is student led. As Gabriel (2005) points out, managers are increasingly turning their sights away from employees and other actors and toward consumers, whose whims, desires, and fantasies they strive to satisfy. In this context, the People and Planet league table, representing a measure of the extent to which universities can stress that they are satisfying the desires and whims of students around sustainability, becomes university management's preoccupation. Furthermore, if universities can manage to convince student actors that more boxes have been ticked around these desires every year, then this becomes a powerful underlying institutional legitimation of the sustainability agenda for the university. Seen through a different neoliberal critique, this article is a reflection on whether the relationship between the student and the university in a sustainability context has been diminished through the league tables, becoming a relationship in which the main preoccupation is for a few managerial university technocrats to appear to satisfy and "engage" the students as customers, instead of embracing the complex and pluralistic citizenship voice of students together with the voices of the many other relatively silent actors.

As one of these other silent (or silenced) actors, a senior academic colleague (an organizational psychologist), who did become involved, "albeit at arm's length," on his university's "sustainability committee," recalled, "I represented a visible, token academic gesture."

A further subtext was the agenda of leading players on this committee. As the organizational psychologist also recalled,

> When I suggested that surely a central part of a university sustainability strategy is the fostering of student activism, I was immediately collectively lambasted for such an anti-sustainability philosophy. . . . Surely the

> point . . . is that we want the students and staff to do what we have decided is sustainable rather than questioning this.

A critical observer might ask whether the espoused rhetorical narratives of the carbon targets imperative, engagement, and continuous improvement are in actuality a masked mechanism intended to justify the personal political agendas and aspirations of the university technocrats, who are leading the students on such an apparently benevolent journey while succumbing to the market-driven, shortterm financial destination? Similarly, Milne, Tregidga, and Walton (2009) argue that organizations construct themselves as sustainable or becoming (more) sustainable while still engaging in pragmatic tradeoffs in their own interest. Vicechancellors, estate managers, and "carbon officers" as well as "sustainability managers," based almost exclusively within estates departments, are the real beneficiaries of such an agenda as they can still appear to conduct their ecological sermon from their office pulpit, while ticking off their own career achievements. Furthermore, many in the environmental lobby appear happy with and legitimize this situation, as the sermon appears to justify their own simplistic, top-down, dystopic solutions.

Ironically, this self-serving "ecological agenda" in fact serves a quick-fix, piecemeal, economic agenda that at best reduces unsustainability. The importance of such an economic outcome is illustrated by Grant Anderson, environmental officer, of Nottingham Trent University, ranked number 1 in the Green League of 2011, when he describes in glowing terms his university's chief financial and operations manager, Stephen Jackson, as "like a pit bull" in finding funding for projects that save energy and money. As Gray and colleagues (1999) argue, performance management is most likely to encourage a search for tactical improvements that result in only short-term improvements.

While such success stories around the "triple bottom line" rhetoric are being told and retold, carbon emissions are still increasing. Although Nottingham Trent has set the ambitious target of reducing its carbon emissions by 48% between 2005 and 2020 and 10% by 2012–2013, these emissions had gone up by 24% by 2013. Similarly, a sector-wide target calls for a 43% decrease in emissions from 2005 levels by 2020, but at 63% of the universities in the tables the emissions had actually gone up by 2013. The average increase per university is 7.4%, with rises of more than 50% recorded at nine institutions, and total emissions from 139 institutions have risen by 3.9% between 2005 and 2010. All this is despite the fact that the universities' capital funding, in England at least, is now linked to the reductions they can achieve against sector targets. Even People and Planet had to admit that these results were "incredibly worrying" and suggested that, unless there is a rapid turnaround, the sector would not achieve its commitment to cut emissions by 43% by 2020 (People and Planet, 2013).

It is also proposed here that the primary focus on the continuously improving carbon narrative while paying lip service to engagement within the People and Planet's Green League Table has provided legitimation for universities to sidestep

the ongoing debate on first principles and root values, thus obfuscating the understanding of tensions and conceding the impetus in the field to the neoliberal marketplace ideology now tacitly embedded in the international agendas of universities.

Could such a lack of recognition of tensions and ambiguity explain why none of the 142 universities which were included in the 2011 Green League, gained full points in the ethical procurement section? Notably, in 2013, Plymouth University scored full points for every policy measure apart from that of ethical investment. Overall, across the league table, although slight improvements have been made to date, progress in this area is extremely slow. As Louise Hazan, the compiler of the 2013 Green League Table, points out, in that table "Only eight out of 143 universities scored full points for their ethical investment policies, and 62 got no points at all" (Bawden, 2013). Considering the fact that Hazan (cited in Bawden, 2013) estimates that universities' endowment funds are worth more than 4 billion pounds while 8 billion pounds are spent each year on goods and services through many different supply chains, the pit-bull, financially driven mentality would need to be challenged or even tempered if, say, there are human rights issues connected to the supply chain of a company involved in a financially lucrative contract. Such a challenge would represent a movement beyond the links between education and estates to include not only academics of various humanities, social science, and environmental science disciplines but also nonacademic actors such as the local community, the government, and NGOs with a view to providing greater understanding and reflection of the ethical challenges universities face when attempting to implement sustainability (Orr, 2004). Similarly, ethical investment and endowments are of growing importance to students, as recent protests over Shell's 5.9m sponsorship of a new science laboratory at Oxford University show. Students, alumni, and academics came together in May 2013 to launch their new "Fossil Free Oxford Campaign," which aims to sever the university's ties with Royal Dutch Shell and other fossil fuel companies. Yet in the Green League of 2013, only three universities' investment policies made explicit reference to the ethical considerations involved in investment in fossil fuels, whereas the majority of institutions explicitly exclude investment in tobacco companies for health reasons. As Hazan, reflecting on the Green League Table of 2013, argues (Bawden, 2013), "It's high time that vice-chancellors put their money where their mouth is on climate change and took the symbolic and financially prudent step of divesting their holdings in fossil fuel companies before the carbon bubble bursts." In terms of workers' rights, only 10 universities in 2013—up from just one in 2011— affiliated themselves with the Worker Rights Consortium, through which their supply chains are independently monitored to avoid products made in dangerous working conditions, such as those involved in the recent Bangladeshi garment factory tragedy.

In summary, rather than pushing ahead with simply satisfying the league table criteria, this article, in agreement with Dey and Steyaert (2006), argues that there is

much merit, if universities and organizations in general are serious about the complexity of the transitional and transdisciplinary sustainability challenge, in moving away from the performative consequences of the techno-, systemized, short-term fixes of such emerging areas as carbon management plans and targets. As Weick (1979) puts it more bluntly, "Stamp out utility!" In fact, what might seem useful today may become an obstacle to tomorrow's success. As Nietzsche (1974: 301) argues, the notion of utility is "the most fatal stupidity by which we shall one day be ruined." What are the implications of this proposition?

Following on from the present article, further research is planned to increase our understanding of the lived experience of the various university actors involved in university "sustainability committees" in their response to the sustainability league tables. In order to extend this article's league table critique, it is planned to focus specifically on the "top" universities within the People and Planet league table, the so-called "best-practice" cases. Giving voice to the various silent actors involved in sustainability across these universities, such research could explore rhetorical eco-narratives and agendas in much more depth. The exclusivity of sustainability committees may be an issue here. Embracing plurality, future research could explore possible defamiliarizing narratives and metaphors, which are more inclusive, noninstrumental, contextual, and experiential. The inclusion of noninstrumental and experiential narratives within university sustainability discourse reminds us of Foucault's (1997) notion that universities could focus more fundamentally on how one is transformed by one's sustainability knowledge and reflect on one's "metamorphosis" as an aesthetic experience.

The lingering, overarching question and challenge here is whether the People and Planet league table and its international checklist cousins will reflect on such critiques and systemic questions and achieve the impact that they espouse. Ironically, in the context of the transitional challenge of sustainability, the People and Planet campaigning group recognizes the wider challenge of developing "Transition Universities" inspired by the "Transition Town" movement (People and Planet, 2011). The main question posed here is whether the Green League is a suitable organizational development pathway to an ecological sustainability transition. Maybe the planned major review of the Green League Table in late 2013/early 2014 will take account of the critique developed in this article as part of a recognized wider critique: "certain critiques of the Green League methodology persist and we know there is more to do ensure it is measuring each and every institution according to its own merits in a fair and flexible way" (People and Planet, 2013). More pessimistically, this article offers the proposition that People and Planet could be acting as a hegemonic institutional mechanism for social legitimacy using the desire by universities to show that environmental issues are effectively under control (Boiral, 2009). Or People and Planet could be accused of acting, without its knowledge, to produce a lack of reflexive activism toward sustainability by offering its rhetorical narratives of the carbon targets imperative and engagement. As an academic within what could be construed as one of the leading university exponents

of the neoliberal skills and graduate employment agenda, servicing oil and gas corporate interests, I pose the rhetorical question of whether a student campaign similar to the campaign at Oxford, say, "Fossil Free [University name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] Campaign," would be as welcome as the Green League has been to this neoliberal agenda. As Ball (2003) warns us, the wider policy technologies of market, management, and performativity leave no space for an autonomous or collective ethical self.

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