London and the Circular Economy: the role of Higher Education
Workshop summary, 3 June 2020

Following on from a successful first event in November 2019, this second workshop took place as part of London’s Circular City week (1-5 June 2020), bringing together the higher education institutions to network and find ways to work together to support London’s circular ambitions.

49 attendees from a range of organisations, including 12 universities being represented by academic staff, sustainability staff or students.

Universities in attendance

London Universities
University College London, UCL
University of Greenwich
Glasgow Caledonian University
University of the Arts London, UAL
Kingston University London
London Interdisciplinary School
London School of Economics
Royal College of Arts
SOAS University of London
Ravensbourne University London

Other Universities
York St John University
University of Hull
**Introduction**

The purpose of the event was to continue the discussions on how the higher education sector can best support London’s ambitions to become a circular city. The sector has a significant impact across the city in what it teaches, research it undertakes, how campuses are managed and the activities students get engaged in. Harnessing this in a coordinated manner and enabling collective action will support scaling the transition to a more circular economy.

We were delighted to have two academics join us to speak to the audience. Professor Raimund Bleischwitz, Director of the Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources at UCL opened the workshop and shared the many ways UCL is embracing circular economy in teaching, research and across campus management. Professor Bleischwitz encouraged others to engage with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and to come together and collaborate more. He talked about the sector’s role in innovation as well as skilling up students in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary working. Partnership, knowledge creation and transition management are key areas where the sector can play a vital role. Raimund spoke about the role London has in the world and how the sector can come together to attract students to continue to choose the city as a place to study.

Dr Feja Lesniewska, Co-founder, Law, Environment and Development Centre (LEDC) at SOAS, University of London, brought a different perspective from her work in circular economy law. Feja talked about the bioeconomy and the transition to a circular forest bioeconomy and how to take this forward into the teaching space in such a way as to open up the questions of equity and justice and many others.

Thank you to both academics for so passionately sharing their work and experience in the circular economy space and outlining why it is so important for collaboration across institutions and disciplines to support the transition to a circular economy in London.

**Collaborative project opportunities**

**Speakers**

Jame Close, Head of Programme, Circular London, London Waste and Recycling Board
Reniera O’Donnell, Higher Education Lead, Ellen MacArthur Foundation

James Close (LWARB) noted we can all agree that the circular economy is one of the enablers of a just transition to a low carbon future, noting that the last three months had been the warmest on record to date. James set out that London will continue to be a world-leading city and that the Mayor has given a strong message about reaching net zero targets by 2030 and that the circular economy plays a large part in this. The Mayor has said that embedding circular economy principles in our lives is vital and there is a real opportunity for the higher education sector in London to be a real leader here - both in research and in what can be trialled and delivered at a campus level that is then scalable.

Students are excited about the new business opportunities afforded by the circular economy and LWARB see this through Advance London. LWARB is keen to partner with more Universities across London.
Reniera then shared an idea with the audience to have a ‘Direction of Travel’ statement for the sector to sign up to. This direction of travel will set a vision whereby:

- Higher (and further?) Education institutions champion the circular economy
- Every student engages with the circular economy when they choose to study at an institution in London
- Applied research at London Universities supports London’s business’s circular ambitions
- All London’s higher (and further?) education institutions are circular in their operations
- Students are empowered to drive forward circular economy activities both on and off campus within the City

A short poll run after this idea was set out indicated that there is support from the sector for this and therefore, a draft direction of travel statement is linked for comment. Please comment on the (find link here) draft document by 7 August 2020. Please enable comment or editing function and comment directly on the Google doc.

LWARB and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation have discussed a range of projects we’d like the sector to engage with. These were shared prior to the workshop (see the attached project discussion document for details) and after a brief introduction to each of the breakout discussions, the workshop broke into discussion groups. A synopsis of each is outlined below:

**Project 1: Mapping London’s circular economy activity**

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation and LWARB are both wanting to understand the scale of circular economy activity there is in London as well as looking at material flows, what data is out there and how data can be used to help shape where the biggest impact activities might be. London’s Covid19 recovery board to set out recovery for the city and there is an opportunity to engage universities and this project group discussed how this might happen.

It was agreed that EMF plays a key role in bringing the sector together in London and can and should provide circular economy leadership to continue to drive collaboration. There were a number of suggestions for how impact might be made and these are grouped into broad themes below. There was a recognition that the actor is under significant strain at present with an uncertain future due to falling student numbers, Brexit, Covid and not being sure when access to campuses may happen. There was discussion about how to get around the competitive nature of universities but also recognition that there are many elements where competition is not a factor and that collaboration should occur.

**Behavioural change**

There was discussion about the importance of behaviour change and how to enact this. One comment was that universities are generators of travel patterns across the city and that while current circumstances are making a return to campuses difficult, could universities look to open up facilities to allow students to access online classes from a different campus so to avoid the need to travel across the city.
Collaboration
There is a need to be more collaborative and between those present, a desire to collaborate more. For students to innovate, they need access to data and lots of potential for collaboration across disciplines. Agreement that we need to teach students to be interdisciplinary and at curriculum level collaboration can help drive changes. There was a suggestion to form a cross-London programme with space for more collaboration on global topics such as circular economy. Could we form a circular economy PhD group in London?

Rosemary Nunn from Greenwich University and Chair of the Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise Network offered to feed topics in. There was broad agreement to come back together as a group to take this forward.

Data
What data exists and what can we do with it? There is probably good data on waste streams but what about other categories of waste. Can we look at it and the costs attached to waste to add economic value and work a bit upstream? There was a question on how to identify waste streams for collaboration with companies? LWARB made an offer to share data with the group and to ask if we can rally this group to do some of this data mapping work.

Key takeaways
- EMF to continue to lead this agenda and play a facilitative role in bringing the sector together
- Can we create an inter-university PhD group for the circular economy?
- LWARB to look at making data available for interrogation
- Look into accessing funding from UKRI red fund to support some of this work?
- Utilise Rosemary Nunn’s offer to take themes and topics into the Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise Network
- Definite need to collaborate more

UPDATE
One University has taken LWARB up on the offer of access to data to support a master’s student thesis and this student is currently working with LWARB with a view to outcomes being delivered in September 2020.

Please do get in touch if you have students who may want to get involved with data mapping work as there is plenty to go round! Email: jie.zhou@emf.org

Project 2: Food and circular canteens
This session was led by Henrietta Goddard from the Food initiative team and Jennifer Mealing, Higher Education Network Manager at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. After a brief introduction from Henrietta
on the Food initiative and Jennifer giving some great examples of circular food in action at Universities, the discussion kicked off with a question about alternative products such as plant milks that have packaging as part of the story and how that sits within a circular approach to food. Henrietta was quick to remind the group that alternative does not always mean better in terms of regenerative food sourcing and that plastic does play an important role in prolonging the life of food and reducing food waste. Companies such as Apeel have found a way to keep products fresh without plastic. It’s not packaging but performs a similar role. Rather than being anti-plastic, we need to ensure the design of packaging means it can be recycled or reused in another way to bring them back into the system, and that new thinking around the challenges to overcome (e.g. reducing food waste) continues to surface innovations such as the Apeel example.

There was a discussion about student behaviour and consumers and what the best consumer approach might be. There was general agreement that circular food solutions should be directed towards student bodies as they have the ability to apply pressure to the University to make changes. This is important as most Universities contract with multinationals and so the student voice is key to making a difference.

There was an interesting comment about rethinking how things are charged for to nudge consumer behaviour. Provide free water but charge for the vessel to carry it in as a way to encourage bringing reusable bottles as an example. It was noted that ensuring circular economy principles are embedded in contracts will be key and that can be rolled into new food and catering contracts.

Key takeaways

- Biohm is interested in engaging with Universities to support circular food initiatives so please do get in touch with them if your University would like a discussion on how your food waste can be diverted into new materials. Email: hello@biohm.co.uk
- Examples of what can be done and is being done by others are really useful
- Student action is useful for changing institution practices especially when it comes to the food sector.

UPDATE

One London University came forward following the event with a circular food idea linked to their incubator. This idea is currently being worked up but there is certainly space to hear more about what you are doing to work towards circular food on campus or if you have any projects you’d like to engage in with our support.

Project 3: Zero waste campus

Sarah O’Carroll, Government and Cities Network Manager at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, facilitated this discussion which was attended by 5 University representatives. The discussion was wide ranging with individual Universities sharing the activities already being undertaken. There was broad agreement that zero waste to landfill is not the same as a zero waste campus and that many universities have zero waste to landfill as their ambition. Some key themes emerged:
**Mapping circular economy activity** - one university shared that they are mapping circular economy activity across the University and are also talking to their closest Universities about how they can better work together to advance circular economy within their institutions and also how best to work with their Local Authority.

**New strategies, new buildings** - two of the universities in the group shared that they are developing either a new sustainability strategy or new buildings and seeking ways to integrate the circular economy more deeply in these new developments. The group discussed some of the challenges around shifting student and staff behaviour to be able to implement change. Sarah challenged the group by reminding everyone that if the right products are on the shelves, then students or staff won’t make wrong decisions or have to change their habits. Can Universities change business models or vendors to help provide that new environment? One University is currently in discussions with a local supplier to provide products for students, have a remakery to repair products and to have a take back scheme for resale / lease.

**Low hanging fruit** - there was a lot of discussion about some of the easier things the universities are already doing on the path towards being more circular but also the recognition that not all Universities do these. Some of the projects discussed included reusable coffee cups, annual library clear-out and sending books to emerging countries, cutting down on printer paper use and encouraging students and staff to ‘drink in’ as a way of using less take-away disposable cups but also to promote well-being and socialising. One university is also mapping building materials to be able to mine and reuse building materials in future.

**Waste flows**
There seems to be better data on some material flows than others. Electronic waste is an issue for higher education and there is a need to understand material flows on campus in order to better understand how contractors, suppliers can support more circular interventions. For this a trusted suite of contractors would be useful. One University helps students understand the value of their waste items by reselling through a charity and encouraging reuse.

**Behaviour change**
Although it is recognised that systemic change is key, there was a lot of discussion around the importance of behaviour change and recognising that there is a student population turnover regularly so embedding new behaviours has to be fast. It was agreed amongst the group that story-telling is a powerful tool for encouraging behaviour change.

**Key takeaways**
- Can we start to document the ‘low hanging fruit’ so Universities can see where they might start?
- There is a need to identify the key higher education vendors and bring the vendors and universities together to identify ways to improve circularity from both the procurement side as well as vendors.
- Need to document good practice and tell the stories
Project 4: Circular Procurement
Ilma Stankeviciute, Learning Designer at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, presented the circular procurement prototype that has been developed as part of a collaborative project between Phillips and Exeter University. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is currently looking for higher education circular procurement examples in order to develop the prototype to better suit the sector.

5 circular procurement intervention actions for HE sector were presented:
1. Reusing and repurposing existing assets and achieving cost saving benefits
2. Implementing circular procurement policy
3. Using university campus as a research test bed for improved material flows
4. Embedding circular economy criteria into the tenders
5. Opting for no ownership option by utilising new business models such as products as a service

One participant had an interesting reflection on reuse of atoms and taking materials back to their component atoms to reuse and recycle those, demonstrating the complexities and layers to circular procurement.

There are challenges around some of the higher specification requirements that Universities have as there are a handful of suppliers and therefore more conversation is required between higher education institutions and their suppliers to seek alternative options together that benefit both the procurer and supplier.

Key take-aways
- There is complexity around circular procurement but a first step is opening up conversation on the topic
- There is a need to create a good practice repository and identify the ‘low hanging fruit’ that most higher educational institutions could implement.

Project 5: Other ideas
Engaging local authority
Local authorities are starting to embrace design into their day-to-day work and understand what design could offer. There are desires and recognitions from them to make more ethical and sustainable decisions with their spending power. Working with local authorities who are key decision makers at community level can have tremendous impact. For instance, at one university, there is a module as part of the MA degree, that is available for anyone from industry to government. This module helps civil servants
to learn and gain new skills that resonate within their work situation, as well as bring a wealth of knowledge to the group. Going forward, it would be beneficial to both local authority and HE sectors to have more of these collaborative opportunities.

**Taking into account the social aspects, such as jobs**

While the translation to circular economy is taking off, there is a growing demand for circular professionals. Jobs enhance this wellbeing by contributing to thriving societies and the equal distribution of wealth. However, there is a risk that it could also lead to skill gaps if businesses and governments are unprepared. The education sector should take the lead to narrow the gap between the job market and academic or professional training. There are already initiatives emerging in the Netherlands, such as Circular Crafts Centre and Learning Community. Thought needs to go into how to widen engagement in CE to include a broad spectrum of education programmes, not just higher education.

**Combining academic rigor with commercial opportunities**

There was agreement in the group that bringing together academic rigour and research with industry is vital for exploring design for different circular contexts. One organisation in the group shared that their ability to attract talent is partly due to the combination of research and delivery that they are engaged in. There is a role for innovators, incubation hubs and for higher education to be key players in supporting their entrepreneurs in understanding the circular economy and how it might be applied in new businesses.

**Key takeaways**

- The need for better collaborative working between London Universities and London Boroughs
- Don’t lose sight of the wider labour market who doesn’t access higher education and how can higher education better support this
- University incubators and innovation centres play a key role in helping emerging businesses understand and implement the circular economy.

The document was written by Reniera O’Donnell with input from all participants and hopefully captures the workshop discussion in full.

**Thanks again for joining us and we look forward to seeing you in our next London Demonstrator Workshop. Stay tuned.**
About Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Higher Education Work

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is committed to working with universities and higher education institutions worldwide to enable the transition from a linear to a circular economy. Through collaborative efforts, together we develop, share, and scale circular economy learning.

What is our mission?
Since the launch of the Foundation in 2010, our engagement and collaboration with higher education providers has been a key approach in driving the shift to a circular economy. The Foundation has the ambition to scale this approach, aiming to reach a greater number of students, academics, and universities, positioning circular economy more centrally within these influential learning organisations.

Who is doing what, where, and how are the key questions we ask.

What do we do?
The Foundation aims to accelerate this approach by...

- Relationship and network building
- Activating shared projects
- Showcasing and informing excellence in circular economy teaching and research

Higher education is in a unique position to affect change, through teaching, applied research, student-led initiatives, and campus management, the Foundation is working with leading universities and institutions worldwide to find scalable and replicable solutions that deliver outcomes and long-term impact. Students moving through higher education systems are a key group of catalysts who can be mobilised to learn, think, and act differently to impact the linear system and act as agents of change. Distance learning is a key focus, with both blended and face-to-face approaches enhancing a range of events, courses, and open learning opportunities.

In key cities of London, New York, Sao Paulo and Shanghai, we are working to bring the higher education sector together to better support the individual Cities’s ambitions to be more circular.

How can you be part of the change?

- Please sign up our HE newsletter (link)
- Interested in joining our profiled university? please contact Jennifer Mealing (jennifer.mealing@ellenmacarthurfoundation.org)
- Continue to engage in our London Higher Education workshops, discussions and projects.