



## CGHE Annual Conference 22-23 May 2023

### Session Details

#### **KEYNOTE 2 & BURTON R. CLARK LECTURE - Tertiary Education and the Sustainability Agenda**

22 May 2023, 11:15am - 12:15pm (UK)

*Chair: Claire Callendar*

*Speaker: Tristan McCowan*

The idea of sustainable development has grown steadily in prominence since the 1970s, and by 2015 had captured the global centre ground with the agreement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The notion plays the important role of bringing together environmental and social concerns, but as a 'shell' concept has been interpreted in very different ways, running the gamut from anarcho-communist and decolonial positions to efforts to shore up the durability and profitability of global capitalism. Tertiary institutions are closely linked to this agenda. While the invoking of 'education' in international agreements is generally vague, tertiary education sectors have actively embraced sustainability and the SDGs in their activities. Institutions commonly map their teaching and research in relation to the goals and are expanding efforts to ensure environmentally-friendly campuses and moves towards carbon neutrality. This lecture attempts to map the multiple and intersecting ways in which tertiary institutions relate to sustainability, drawing out implications for the nature of the institution and planetary futures. These engagements are sometimes projective – in the sense of aiming to bring about changes in individuals or society outside of themselves – and sometimes expressive – embodying the principles within their activities and communities. The lecture argues that, while often reduced to greenwash for continuing marketisation, sustainable development can play a generative role in institutions in drawing attention to their commitments to society and the public good, and opening questions about epistemic monocultures and complicity in environmental destruction. Ultimately the most important and distinctive role that tertiary educational institutions can play in relation to sustainable development may be to question and recreate its meaning.