



Pre debate article: Generalist v. Specialist learning

Sustainable development requires a systematic approach driven by collaboration. Projects in the built environment tend to bring together the specialists necessary to create multi-disciplinary teams. At first sight, this collaboration of expertise complements the sustainable development agenda. However, the team often lacks a shared vision or understanding which can lead to a conflict in priorities, resulting in compromised sustainability performance. How then, do we best create graduates and professionals who have both the skills and knowledge to create and maintain a built environment that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable?

Traditionally the expert has been seen as the highly valued role; the person you go to for advice, consultation and input, utilising their substantial knowledge and experience. Their depth of knowledge in specific areas is highly valuable; but without wider understanding can lead to silo decision-making which can then negatively affect projects as a whole. Generalists on the other hand may be able to absorb and respond to complex decision-making more effectively

through greater exposure to a variety of specialisms in the built environment, but lack the specific understanding in certain areas.

The built environment industry is a multi-disciplinary space yet in higher education we tend to teach in specific disciplines where cross fertilisation isn't the norm. Specialist expertise is vital to develop good designs and buildings, but the holistic generalist who understands a range of disciplines, aims and processes is just as important. Learning in all forms, from the education of students to the continuing development of professionals, is vital to a sustainable built environment. The 'T' shaped person is surely the optimum – someone who has a broad understanding of the system and specialists they work with, whilst having more in-depth expertise in a specialism – so when is the optimum time to specialise? And how do we ensure that we have the right balance?

LSBU, CIBSE, APSBEG and the Edge will discuss: 'generalist' V. 'specialist' learning for a sustainable built environment in our next exciting debate.

We'll consider how those training and working in the built environment deal with the challenges of sustainability - is deep and narrow knowledge more beneficial or is shallow and broad knowledge more desirable?

The panel debate will draw on the opinions and expertise of a cross-section of professionals and academics in the building industry. Experts for Specialist learning include Satheesh Jacob, Head of Excellence, Building Services, Ramboll and Alex MacLaren, Assistant Professor – Architectural Design, Heriot Watt University. Arguing for Generalist learning is Paul Tymkow, Director of Learning and Knowledge, Hoare Lea and Robert Schmidt III, Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University. The debate will be chaired by Nigel Tonks, Buildings London Leader, Arup.

Official Partners: London South Bank University, CIBSE, All Party Parliamentary Sustainable Built Environment Group and The Edge