

Professor Rick Trainor



Name:
Professor Rick Trainor

Position/occupation:
Principal, Kings College London.

Residence:
City of London.

“It is hard to exaggerate the problems we face.”

In his role as Principal of Kings College London, Rick is responsible for all aspects of university operations, from the academic curriculum, to ensuring a vibrant life for students, to promoting Kings College domestically and internationally. Sustainability is something he would like to see more promotion of in higher education and is something he believes King’s College will continue to stand for.

“King’s College was one of the first universities in the country to have 100% of its contractual electricity sourced from environmentally friendly large scale hydro generation and we received the Green Gown award for the sustainable construction methods used in the refurbishment of our historic Strand campus. As a major educational institution with environmental research interests we have a role in promoting sustainability - we must practice what we preach.”

“London has an increasing sense of its own identity – it is a very exciting, culturally interesting and ethnically diverse place, which attracts a large number of nationalities and adds to London’s credibility as a world city.” Whilst Rick is optimistic about London’s prosperity continuing for another 25 years, he is concerned that by 2050, if current predictions are correct, London will struggle to meet the sustainability challenges it faces. “London is not yet equipped to deal with the predicted changes to the climate, such as increases in temperature and rising sea levels. This adds further urgency to the sustainability agenda.”

Sustainability experience

Rick is a relative newcomer to sustainability, taking a more active involvement in promoting sustainability since taking up his current role three years ago. Before that, Rick was Vice Chancellor at Greenwich University for four years and is a historian by training. “Historians are concerned with civilisations and how society evolves, so sustainability is a key consideration - historical developments like pollution matter.” Rick was also recently appointed President of Universities UK, the body that represents the interests of all universities in the UK, for the next two years.

With five campuses, nearly 20,000 students and over 5,000 employees, King’s College plays a significant role in the fabric of London life. Rick is keen that the university’s wealth of expertise is used to promote new and innovative solutions to the sustainability issues facing London and the UK. “Since I started in 2004, sustainability has really gone up the agenda. It’s hard to exaggerate the importance of the problems we face.”

Rick sees his role in promoting sustainability as two-fold – firstly, in promoting further sustainable practices within King’s College’s internal operations and secondly using the teaching and research expertise the College has to generate more appropriate public policies to push the cause of sustainability in London. “Across the College, we have people with the skills to tackle sustainability issues, from scientists monitoring London’s air quality, through to urban climatologists and geographers, to public policy experts that interpret the evidence and put appropriate policy solutions to both regional and national government. King’s College are also recognised as the largest centre for health education in Europe, and health and social well-being are key components of a sustainable city.”

The fact that King’s College is seriously consulted on major proposals such as the cross-River Thames tram reflects the body of sustainability expertise held in the university.

This expertise is something the College has been working to develop further in the last year in order to influence the national debate on sustainable development. “We make an effort to ensure our input is compatible with sustainability.”

The sustainability challenge

Rick believes London’s current sustainability position is critical – “we are poised between glory and disaster with potentially huge long-term disruptions to the world’s climate and system of economy. By definition, sustainability is important – if something is unsustainable, it will eventually collapse. When this is applied to whole cities and civilisations, it becomes a very serious matter.”

“As a historian I believe we need to look backwards to appreciate that London is a much more forward-looking place than it used to be. In the 1960’s London would not have been foreseen as the world city it is today. We live in place of high cultural offerings, a place which people come from all over the world to work and live in – London is a truly a ‘world city’.”

But being a world city also brings its issues – in London’s case Rick feels the congestion in the city is the worst thing about living here. “Despite the benefits brought by the congestion charge, central London remains chronically congested and it is still very difficult to get around the city, except by tube. London can learn from other major cities such as New York and Paris in this regard, or else face the prospect of losing out to another city where these issues are better addressed.”

In addition to transport, Rick believes that other issues like the high cost of living, sustainable design (including efficient heating and cooling of buildings) and air quality need to be addressed to ensure London meets its goal of becoming the world’s leading sustainable city. “Cost and convenience are also key challenges to mainstreaming sustainability. London is already an expensive place to live. We need to know

that sustainable options will be comfortable, practical and still enable us to ‘balance the books’. In opting to make more sustainable changes to their personal life people can only choose from what is available, so it is up to the big organisations to provide things such as more eco-friendly buildings for people to live and work in.”

London Leaders

As a London Leader, Rick aims to come up with new, collective solutions to the sustainability problems London faces. He hopes to use his role as a Leader to increase the profile of sustainability within his own institution and more broadly in higher education.