

Panel: Fair trade and universities: Transformative sustainability education for social and ecological justice?

Overview

This panel explores how fair trade is practised in universities in different cultural contexts, reflecting on the roles of universities within the Fair Trade movement as key actors to promote not only adoption of Fair Trade principles and practices but also in relation to sustainability and wider transformation. The papers recognise the importance of Fair Trade ideas in supporting ethical consumption but how fair trade within education in a university context needs to extend beyond consumption to supporting critical thinking and skills development on the part of students, including with respect to trade justice and environmental change.

In discussing the contributions of the papers we also hope to explore the role of Education for Sustainable Development and how Fair Trade organisations can work with universities to develop a deeper relationship to sustain longer engagement both with higher education institutions and students.

There will be two papers presented and an opportunity for discussion amongst participants.

Paper 1:

Fair Trade Universities in East Asia: A Comparative Case Study of South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong (E) Dynamics among Fair Trade Institutions, Consumers & Markets

Authors: Seungkwon Jang, Jiyun Jeon, Jiwon Park, Soomin Park, Daeyeong Lee, and Doyeon Kwon (Sungkonghoe University & Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, Korea)

Paper 2 :

Universities and fair trade: engaging with tensions and opportunities through the lens of education for sustainability

Authors: Anne Tallontire (University of Leeds, UK) and Elena Fernandez Lee (Fairtrade Foundation, UK)

Abstracts

Fair Trade Universities in East Asia: A Comparative Case Study of South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong (E) Dynamics among Fair Trade Institutions, Consumers & Markets

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Keywords: Fair Trade Universities, Ethical Consumption Literacy, East Asia

This study examines how universities in East Asia engage in Fair Trade practices and analyzes the role of universities as institutional actors in advancing Fair Trade. Drawing explicitly on institutional theory, the study conceptualizes universities as key societal institutions that shape norms, values, and practices through education, governance, and everyday organizational routines. From this perspective, Fair Trade Universities are understood not merely as sites of ethical consumption, but as institutions for building Fair Trade literacy and strengthening long-term Fair Trade capacities.

Focusing on South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, the study analyzes universities that have been awarded as Fair Trade Universities or actively engaged in Fair Trade initiatives. Existing Fair Trade research has focused on Fair Trade Towns and Cities, while universities have been treated as supportive actors. This gap is particularly evident in East Asia, where Fair Trade movements remain less institutionalized and under-researched. To address this gap, the study adopts a comparative case study method, examining universities in South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong.

Through comparative case study method, the study identifies similarities and differences in institutional arrangements, modes of engagement, and strategies for promoting Fair Trade and ethical consumption literacy education.

The findings indicate that the number of Fair Trade Universities in East Asia remains limited, reflecting the modest scale and policy capacity of Fair Trade movements. However, the study argues that universities play a critical role in Fair Trade capacity building by integrating sustainable consumption literacy-based education, procurement practices, and participatory activities. Such practices contribute to the development of skills, awareness, and collective competencies necessary for sustaining Fair Trade initiatives beyond individual consumption choices. The study contributes to Fair Trade scholarship by providing evidence from East Asia and by highlighting the policy relevance of universities as institutional actors in Fair Trade movement. It offers practical implications for policymakers and university administrators by outlining how higher education institutions can design and implement effective Fair Trade strategies that support ethical consumption and processes of social innovation.

Universities and fair trade: engaging with tensions and opportunities through the lens of education for sustainability

Panel: Transformative sustainability education for social and ecological justice

Authors: Anne Tallontire, University of Leeds & Elena Fernandez-Lee, Education Campaigning Manager, Fairtrade Foundation

Keywords: sustainability education, fair trade, institutional frameworks, engaging young people

Universities can be an important for raising awareness of fair trade and promoting ethical consumption and trade justice, both as centres of learning and due to the scale of individual institutions. But there are a number of tensions in current models that often focus on specific approaches to fair trade through procurement and curriculum engagement that focuses on content. Indeed, there is concern that despite models like fair trade accreditation, fair trade is failing to interest students and young people, with institutional certification potentially reinforcing passive approaches to fair trade engagement.

Whilst similar risks of box ticking, focus on league tables, metrics and audits exist in the context of education for sustainability, the focus on experiential learning, student voice and collaboration that are at the heart of sustainability pedagogies offer potential to shift perceptions and practices in universities with respect to fair trade.

This paper draws on the experience of academic and professional service colleagues at the University of Leeds who have been involved in embedding sustainability across the curriculum and into institutional practices. This has involved working towards accreditation as a Fairtrade University, which has led to reflection on what we have learned over the past two decades, including how we connect monitoring of fair trade to our wider sustainable procurement practices and underpinning principles, and building more solid links with our sustainable curriculum programme.

We have explored the relationships between fair trade and education for sustainability making a case for more focus on skills-based, experiential learning.

Our paper also reflects on a dialogue between academics and the campaigns team at the Fairtrade Foundation to help shift the relationship between UK universities and fair trade to one focused on student leadership, co-creation, and meaningful, justice-focused engagement. This builds on broader networks across the education and third sectors offering hope of a new form of ongoing learning partnership.