

The future of the RSA: Plenary session at the RSA Winter Conference, London, 6th November 2024

Session chair: John Harrison - RSA Board member (University of Loughborough, UK)

Speakers

Heike Mayer – RSA President (University of Bern, Switzerland)

Sarah Ayres – RSA Chair of the Board of Trustees (University of Bristol, UK)

Alan Kinder – RSA Chief Executive (Regional Studies Association)

Plenary abstract

As the Regional Studies Association (RSA) approaches its 60th anniversary year, this is a pivotal time in the development of the Association. We have a new Chief Executive (the first in a generation), a new President and will soon be appointing a new Chair. This is therefore an opportune moment to consider the future direction of the RSA.

In a break with tradition, this year's opening plenary invites a discussion on emerging ideas for a new RSA strategic plan. The process of formulating such a plan invites us all to revisit and re-articulate what regional studies and the RSA stand for today; to articulate what we want to achieve in the years ahead; and to build consensus on our priorities for action. Once completed, the aim of the strategic plan will be to enable the RSA to thrive in the world in which it will be operating from 2025-30 and to support all who engage with the Association.

This session on 'the future of the RSA' provides an opportunity for RSA leaders to share emerging ideas. Equally importantly, the session will invite all audience members to share their views on the challenges, opportunities and priorities that lie ahead for regional studies and the RSA.

Remarks from Heike Mayer (RSA President)

Thank you all for coming to the RSA Winter Conference here in London. The theme of this year's conference is "Driving Regions Forward: Transitioning to Brighter Regional Futures". It is a theme that we need more than ever because a positive agenda for regional change and development is necessary given the multiple crises cities and regions are facing.

My name is Heike Mayer, and it is a privilege, but also an honourable task to serve the Regional Studies Association as its new President. I would like to thank John Agnew (UCLA) for his work as RSA President for the past several years.

In my view, the RSA is a wonderful community of scholars who care about the future of our cities and regions. For me, the RSA is an organisation that strives to be inclusive, international and interdisciplinary. Values that we need for a brighter future!

I came rather late to the RSA in my academic career. I received my PhD in Urban Studies in the early 2000s from Portland State University and moved to Virginia Tech for an assistant professorship in urban affairs and planning. In these formative years, I associated with the academic community in urban studies and planning in the United States.

When I moved to the University of Bern in Switzerland about 15 years ago, I joined the Regional Studies Association and never regretted this decision. There were two reasons for me to join RSA: one was that I did not want to fly to conferences in the United States anymore and to keep my CO2 footprint small. The other reason was the closeness of the RSA to policymaking and the networks that it helps to form between academics and policymakers.

My research focusses on innovation and entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of small and medium-sized towns, rural and mountain regions. I am strongly engaged in shaping policy dialogues in Switzerland and helped to define a new approach to fostering sustainable development in rural and mountain regions. For the past 12 years, I was a member and president of the extra-parliamentary commission on urban and regional planning, which advises the federal council. Through this work, together with my regional studies colleagues in Switzerland, we have been able to initiate a dialogue about regional development that goes beyond the traditional economic growth paradigm.

Some of the issues that we have successfully implemented are social innovations are now officially recognised in the Swiss New Regional Policy. We were able to define peripheries in Switzerland in a very different and more positive way and I am hopeful that policymakers now use this change in perspective and that they recognise the need to engage with the concept of strong sustainability. I hope that they look at peripheries more positively and not just as “left behind”.

So, much of my academic work has been driven by the need to translate research results into practice and to engage with policymakers.

Last year, I took another step in my professional career as I noticed that I need to also influence academic practice. I was appointed as Vice Rector for Quality and Sustainability at the University of Bern. I am now in charge of quality assessment, equal opportunity and sustainable development at the University of Bern. I am confronted with questions about how to evaluate academic excellence and how we can move beyond mere rankings and value a broader range of research impacts. I also ask question about how to make academia more diverse and increase opportunities not only for women but also for first generation students, professors and lecturers. And I am confronted with the question of how our university can contribute to climate neutrality and the ambitious goals of becoming net zero.

Sometimes I despair at these tasks. But most of the time, I draw a lot of energy from this work, and I benefit from insights on all these topics, particularly when it comes to the role of the university in society from all of you and your work on urban and regional development.

When I started as Vice-Rector, the University had the goal of becoming climate neutral by the end of 2025. This would have meant that we would compensate our CO2 emissions, which can

directly control – about 8000 tons – through the purchase of climate certificates. Now, you are all aware of the critique of such an approach and the limited effectiveness. I was able to convince the university to take another approach. We are now in the process of developing a Roadmap to Climate Neutrality 2030. This is not new, but what is new is that we will not compensate all our emissions in a traditional way, rather we take a leap and will fund transdisciplinary projects that move us further on the road of transforming our communities towards being more sustainable. My hope is that I will instil a culture of research at my university that engages with society and where knowledge and solutions are co-created. We call this project *Engaged University of Bern*.

We will still compensate our emissions from flights, but at the same time we will put emphasis on such alternative ways to contribute more positively to our surrounding communities. These kind of handprint projects instil positive change. In addition, we call on the academic community to think hard about reduction measures in all areas – ranging from making labs greener to reducing flights to conferences or for field work.

Why do we need to take such efforts in academic practice seriously? Why do universities but also academic associations like the RSA take the net zero goal and engaged scholarship seriously? It is my belief that we need to invest in these two areas for several reasons:

- Since the COVID-pandemic we are back to doing ‘business as usual’. At the University of Bern, we are now back at the level where we were in 2019 in terms of CO2 emissions from flights.
- Yet, the climate and biodiversity crises show us almost on a weekly basis that we need to make changes in the way we live and work. In March of this year, there were floods in southern Germany that not only caused a lot of damage to buildings and infrastructure, but also took lives. In August, just a few kilometres from my house, we had a huge landslide following heavy rains in the mountains. And last week, you remember the devastating floods in Spain.
- In addition, we see increasing attacks and doubts about academia. Here in Switzerland, media but also politicians are increasingly attacking academia. And this comes at a time when we also face huge financial pressures and budget cuts. Academia needs new ways to engage with society and policymaking.

So, what we do from here? This is a pretty bleak picture, but the conference theme is positive and forward-looking. And I would like to also end with a more positive notion.

I see four topics that are critically important for the RSA and for the regional studies community. These four points raise questions about a more normative turn in our academic work and practice and they perhaps also entice discussions:

First: we need to embrace more seriously the limits of economic development particularly when it comes to planetary boundaries. This means that we need to set a regional studies agenda that takes the environment in the sense of strong sustainability serious.

Second: how can we embrace planetary boundaries in our academic practices? How can we effectively lower our carbon footprint? What are the opportunities and the challenges of addressing carbon neutrality and net zero goals seriously? Can we find ways to reduce the footprint also as a membership association that thrives on international conferences? Are there new ways of holding such conferences? Can we utilise national networks to hold regional hub

conferences at the same time as for example the annual RSA conference takes place in Porto? Can you take the time to travel by train to London?

Third: how can we engage with society? Do we need different methods like living labs, real world laboratories, future visioning, etc.? In what ways can we engage in constant transdisciplinary exchange and collaboration with stakeholders? Do we compromise academic integrity? Or even enhance it? Can the RSA contribute to reflecting new research methods and addressing the acceptance of such methods in our community?

Fourth: how can we as an association address social sustainability goals? How can we be more inclusive and diverse? How can we promote inclusive practices that are in line with the above-mentioned challenges?

These are questions and certainly not a proposal for action, but I think they will be important in the future for our individual practices, the practice of the institutions that employ us and for the urban and regional communities we live in and work with.

And I look forward to working with you, with Sarah and Alan and all the others in the RSA in addressing these and many other challenges.

Remarks from Sarah Ayres (RSA Chair)

It's an honour and privilege to be elected as Chair of the RSA, an association really close to my heart. I introduced myself to the RSA community 20 years ago at a conference in Angers in France. I was a junior research fellow at the time, working on a funded project. If someone had said then, in 20 years' time you'll be Chair of the RSA I wouldn't have believed it.

But my journey represents the values at the heart of the RSA. I was an early career researcher who was warmly welcomed into an established community. I had the chance to build my contacts and networks through RSA events. I published in the RSA's journals and was awarded funding through its grant schemes. Our previous Chief Executive, Sally Hardy, saw me presenting at a November conference. She introduced herself and shortly after I was asked to sit on the Board as Trustee and Treasurer. That was in 2013. And now I have the privilege to serve as Chair for the next three years.

The RSA has played a prominent part in my own professional development and career opportunities. These are the values that we want to protect and develop moving forward for the benefit of all our members – from PhD students to our global academic superstars. The association has so much to offer, whatever your career stage. I recall 20 years ago thinking that the RSA was a home for economists, geographers and a few political scientists like me. But I know from recent experience that we are now a much more diverse community both in terms of geographical coverage and discipline. At a meeting with early career scholars at our conference in Florence in June, I met sociologists, anthropologists and public health experts. I also met colleagues from Kazakhstan and Nigeria who had taken the time to attend a conference in Europe. That vibrancy and diversity is to be welcomed – it's an element I really enjoy as a scholar.

So, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and what I hope to bring to the role as Chair. I'll share my personal view on some of the opportunities and challenges facing the association in

its 60th year - I'm mindful that my own disciplinary background and academic experience shapes my view of the field and association. Over the next year we really want to reach out to our members and our community to ensure that all voices shape our values and strategy moving forward.

I'm a public policy scholar interested in theories of policy making, governance and devolution. Much of my work has explored the process of devolution in England in the UK. I describe myself as a transdisciplinary scholar – with experience of working across disciplines and non-academic partners to find solutions to complex social challenges. For example, I'm currently working on a large research project called TRUUD. That project is looking at how we can improve urban development decision making so that health outcomes feature before it's too late. The project includes a range of disciplines working together to try to create healthier cities for people to live and work in. I've been working with over forty scholars from economics, engineering, law, public health, psychology, planning, management, to bring our collective expertise to bear on that problem.

I've learned a lot from that project in the last 5 years. Working with such diversity is not easy but the reward is considerable. Working across disciplines and non-academic communities takes time, patience, goodwill, humility and in my view, there is no substitute for face-to-face communication. I have had to be confident and bullish in the areas where I have knowledge and expertise. I have also had to get comfortable with what I don't know and look to other team members for support. The investment of time is considerable, but the rewards are great if you can make it work.

I strongly feel there are lessons here that I can bring to the role of Chair of the RSA. I believe that we can only solve society's complex challenges like climate change, health inequality and the migration crisis if we work together as a regional studies community. We need to demonstrate our public value by extending the traction and influence of our expertise by reaching out to other fields, including the hard sciences, medicine and engineering. And we need to ensure that our excellent science is applied in the non-academic world in politics, business, media and social debate. I look forward to championing that work as Chair.

In terms of the challenges – the academic sector is a pretty brutal environment. Universities in many parts of the world are facing financial pressures – leading to ever more pressure on academics to do more for less. Publishing in reputable journals is more competitive than ever before. Grant income is often hard to come by. For example, the success rate for some UK government funded grants is as low as 3%.

So, to some degree - we are in the business of rejection – from journals and grant funding. Most seasoned scholars I know have had more failures than successes. As one of my most esteemed colleagues once told me, 'If you're not failing, you're not trying hard enough.'

So as scholars and as an association we have to be pretty resilient and strategic in how we use our time and focus our efforts. Within this challenging context, I'm mindful that the RSA relies on the expertise, goodwill, dedication and commitment of our members as volunteers. A key challenge for us will be to retain the goodwill and commitment of the members who give up their time to serve the different needs of our community. This includes journal editors and boards, those who undertake timely reviews of article submissions and colleagues on our research

committee who award grant funding. Whether they are ECRs or established scholars – they are always the best and most appropriate people in the field for the task. Moving forward, we have to be mindful of nurturing and supporting that most valuable resource in an environment where dedicating one's time is ever more challenging.

In terms of opportunities: our biggest asset is our community and our members. I salute the dedication of our volunteers across the different operations of the RSA: The RSA board and the Board of RSA Europe, our various committees, the territorial representatives in different parts of the world, including India, China and Latin America, and our team of global ambassadors who ensure that the RSA is represented around the world. I salute our conference delegates who have come back in earnest since the pandemic. We have had the biggest conferences we have ever had in recent years. I express my thanks to John Harrison who is our events organiser on the Board and who has worked so hard to organise this event in London.

There is a real appetite for dialogue and networking face to face in our community. Finding the time and resource to attend and being away from your families is a sacrifice but pivotal to the future success and vibrancy of the RSA. I thank you for that investment of time.

We also have to recognise the legacy, hard work and dedication of our previous chief executive, Sally Hardy who devoted over 36 years of service to the association. She was pivotal in the development of our global networks, social contacts and membership. I look to honour Sally's legacy by trying to ensure that no matter where in the world our members might be, their scholarship will have a chance to shine through the opportunities afforded by the RSA.

Moving forward, under the stewardship of our new (ish) Chief Executive, Alan Kinder we can ensure that we remain a proactive and professional association that places a commitment to scientific excellence at its heart. Without that, we have no legitimacy. We must maintain our prominence as the pre-eminent association representing the field of regional studies – in all its guises. We will continue to be an open, transparent and welcoming association - fit for business in an increasingly difficult academic and social environment.

Remarks from Alan Kinder (RSA Chief Executive)

I'd like to thank Heike and Sarah for sharing their thoughts about 'the future of the RSA'. I aim to build on their ideas in a moment.

Before I come to that: my starting point is I think complementary to that of Sarah and Heike. When I introduced myself at the closing plenary of last year's conference in this very room, I made clear that my background is in geographical education and in the leadership of membership organisations. In other words, I'm not a regional researcher - although I've shared your commitment to place knowledge, professional community and to working at the intersections of policy, practice and research throughout my career. Standing here today, I feel ever more closely aligned with the RSA's charitable mission. At the same time, I do hope to bring a fresh perspective on how we might pursue it.

Since arriving in post in February, I've made what I hope is good use of the privilege of my position to talk with staff, Board members, editors, territorial ambassadors, conference delegates and others about their perspectives on the RSA. I've gained a good sense of our achievements,

resources and capabilities; and the things we might cherish or change as we move forward. It's been a fascinating process, and I'd like to thank all those I've spoken with.

My private conversations are now being bolstered by two more formal exercises. At last June's Board meeting and over the summer, we invited staff and Board members to make observations about the trends they feel are likely to influence our work in coming years, be they in academia, policymaking or society more broadly. In October, we published this work as an RSA Blog, called *Horizon scanning*. You can still find the blog on our website and the invitation to respond to it remains open.

Since September, with the help of several Board members, we have also convened a number of focus groups, with the aim of holding at least 10 1-hour sessions by December. We're now halfway to that target. We've taken care to include people at different career stages, those involved in our territorial and research networks, and those with valuable perspectives we need to hear, such as members of our Women's Network.

I'd like to share with you a 'distillation' of the themes emerging from all this talking and listening, before turning to the implications for the RSA.

Let's start with the value people ascribe to the RSA

- Our interdisciplinary nature is seen as an essential part of our DNA. Most people experience the Association as a supportive and approachable community – things that aren't taken for granted when it comes to academic and professional societies. For many, interdisciplinarity and openness are seen as reinforcing one other.
- The opportunity to build relationships (indeed, friendships) is widely described as the most valuable feature of the RSA community. People value human relationships for their own sake and because trust is a pre-requisite for co-creating and sharing knowledge with others. The moral support that comes from being part of a like-minded community is also recognised as sustaining people over the course of a career.
- Many of the people we've spoken to acknowledge that researchers often come to regional or urban studies at Master's level or later. For this reason, particular value is attached to the way the RSA helps shape researcher identity (e.g. through joining networks) and 'gives voice' to people and ideas (through opportunities to present at a conference or author an article).
- Connected to this: the range of RSA support for PhD students and those early in their career stands out in the feedback we've received – and is something people at all career stages support strongly.
- Finally – people value the dialogues the RSA helps create across international borders and between researchers and policymakers. On that second point: the desire to *make a difference* is frequently cited as a motivation for conducting research in the first place, as well as for being involved with the RSA.

Turning now to the 'words of advice':

We're also asking about those aspects of the RSA's support people use less often, see as less valuable or where they see a need for change.

- Policy influence emerges as a really interesting area. Many people recognise that one of the aims of the RSA since its founding has been to have policy impact, and there are numerous examples where this has happened successfully. Nevertheless, searching questions are being posed for us here, with people wondering what our ambition ‘looks like’ in this space now that we operate globally.
- The success of the RSA in transforming itself from a UK to an international association is a source of energy and pride. Nevertheless, concerns remain about UK or Euro-centricity, and the need to widen participation, broaden representation.
- The difficult trade-off between the desire to meet people face-to-face and the environmental and financial costs of attending conferences is being felt very keenly across our community; and the RSA is urged to think about the implications of this.
- While many people value the RSA’s online offer and see it as inclusive, others find it impossible to ringfence time for free online events – what one focus group member called the ‘curse of the webinar.’
- RSA grants attract both praise and improvement advice: could they be increased, used more strategically, and/or made easier to apply for?
- Finally, the sheer breadth of the RSA’s offer presents a challenge. Some people feel overwhelmed by this, and by our communications. More than one person wondered aloud whether ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ is the best strategy for advancing regional knowledge and research.

We are just beginning to think about what this evidence suggests the RSA needs to do – and do differently - to ensure it continues to advance regional knowledge in the future.

Firstly, I’d suggest we need to build on the attributes as an organisation that have served us well, but put these at the heart of our conversations and use these to guide all that we do:

- interdisciplinarity
- community and collaboration
- equity, diversity and inclusiveness
- openness and transparency
- environmental responsibility and social impact.

These are things everyone should see and feel, whether we work for the RSA, serve on its Board or attend a conference for the first time.

Second, a sense is emerging of the strategic goals or objectives we might set ourselves for the next phase of our mission, which could be for the RSA to:

- become *the* ‘go to’ organisation for regional and urban research (which would mean more practitioners and policymakers – as well as researchers - knowing about us, getting what we stand for, trusting in what we say and do)
- drive policy and practice agendas (ensure that ‘research today’ really does become ‘policy tomorrow’)
- become a larger, more international, more diverse member organisation.

We haven't yet done much work on the 'mechanisms' for achieving the above or the metrics for assessing our progress, for understandable reasons. However, I'd suggest we need to think carefully about:

- Finding ways to make use of our collective intelligence and to mobilise our vast knowledge base. (This might mean identifying compelling cases where the RSA can be a 'champion for regions'; producing collections of evidence for specific purposes; defining and addressing at an organisational level questions of societal importance.)
- Convening researchers and policymakers together and helping with knowledge translation in new ways. (Here, we need to acknowledge that we want to support critical and problem-defining research; but also engage policymakers with the authoritative and actionable outputs of our research.)
- Decentralising some of our decision-making processes and resources. (Such as enabling network leaders and division Chairs in their work; creating more informal networks that operate independently.)
- Seeking and securing joint projects and collaborations with partners.
- Personalising and targeting our support and advice more effectively.

Next steps

Our aim is to produce a new RSA strategy by the end of 2025 – our 60th anniversary year. Our working assumption is that this will cover the period 2025-2030. There are a minimum of three Board meetings between now and next December, in February, April and November. After today's session, we therefore anticipate opportunities to consult with members on the emerging strategy during the first half of 2025 and ideally around the time of a final draft in October/November 2025.

Thank you for listening and we look forward to your questions.