

# The Scarman Centre

## Learning the lessons of disaster

by Dr Simon Bennett, Lecturer in Risk Studies, Scarman Centre for the Study of Public Order, University of Leicester

The world is a risky place. Millions of years ago the dinosaurs were made extinct by a meteorite impact. A few months ago, it seemed that we might suffer the same fate—a giant meteorite appeared to be heading straight for us.

Natural disasters abound. There are floods, earthquakes, dust storms, tornadoes and hurricanes. And to add to our woes, since the Industrial Revolution we have suffered an increasing number of man-made disasters, ranging from new 'wonder' drugs that deform, poison and kill to chemicals that contaminate drinking water supplies and strip away the ozone layer, bridge collapses, train and airplane crashes and multiple car pile-ups.

Often, technologies intended to improve our lives do just the opposite. Technology, you might say, is Janus-faced. But it would be incorrect to see our situation as hopeless. According to the German philosopher of science, Ulrich Beck, the modern era is characterised not only by a multiplication of risks and hazards, but also by an increasing public awareness of such phenomena—and a willingness to protest our condition.

It is in this context of increasing risk and risk consciousness that the University of Leicester, through the Scarman Centre for the Study of Public Order, runs its two year distance-learning MSc in Risk, Crisis and Disaster Management.

### The Scarman Centre Initiative on Risk, Crisis and Disaster

One of the great tragedies of our time is that we fail to learn from our mistakes. Disasters happen. Inquires are held. Lessons are there to be learned. But months or years later the same kind of disaster occurs again. It was this unhappy pattern that led the Scarman Centre to develop its MSc in Risk, Crisis and Disaster Management. (There is also a Diploma, which dispenses with the end of course dissertation).

The MSc mixes theory with real-life case studies. This innovative approach has two objectives. First, to encourage the student to critique their present beliefs about risk, crisis and disaster management, and secondly, to encourage the student to learn from successfully managed crises, and disasters (what you might call unsuccessfully managed crises). In offering an intellectual analysis of risk and crisis alongside practical case study work, the Scarman Centre MSc may be unique in Britain.

### Course structure and administration

There are six teaching modules. Each module contains nine 9,000-word units.

The intellectual theories of risk and crisis, such as that of 'risk communication' are described in *Module 1*.

*Module 2* introduces the student to some of the current debates in risk management and investigates the relationship between risk and security.

*Module 3* covers research methods—a vital precursor to the 20,000 word dissertation submitted by each MSc student at the end of the course.

*Module 4* contains seven detailed disaster case studies, such as a description and critique of the Dutch Emergency Services' response to the 1992 crash of a cargo-carrying Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet into a block of flats close to Amsterdam's Schiphol airport.

*Module 5* introduces the concept of 'social construction'. This module is premised on the assumption that different parties to a disaster experience the event in different ways, and that successful disaster management requires an understanding of this dynamic.

*Module 6*, the final module, provides some of the world's most prominent disaster theorists with an opportunity to propose a 'best practice' for their specialism. The module includes units on post-traumatic stress syndrome, land-use planning and optimum evacuation procedures for endangered urban populations.

The MSc's first students will graduate in 1999. It is expected they will be the first of many to benefit from this unique, challenging and badly-needed course.

### Biography

Dr Bennett was educated at Neath Boys' Grammar School, South Wales. He obtained a BA (Hons) in Public Administration from Sheffield City Polytechnic, an MA in Communications and Technology and a PhD in Industrial Sociology from Brunel University, London. His research interests include the iconisation of scientific and technological developments and artefacts, and differential constructions of scientific and technological risk and hazard. He has just published a study of the 1996 FBI investigation into the TWA Flight 800 disaster in the United States. He is a member of the Emergency Planning Society and of the British Sociological Association. His hobbies are sailing, gliding and watching rugby.

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