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# Finalist's case study

## University of Cambridge Food & Drink

*Cambridge, cups, compost:*  
Vegware's compostable  
disposables enabling zero waste  
catering

### About the project

#### Summary

Conventional takeaway packaging is challenging to recycle, with most going to incineration or landfill. In November 2015, University Catering Services (UCS) switched to Vegware's compostable takeaway packaging. All 1.5 tonnes of used compostable takeaway cups, containers and cutlery are plastic-free, and go in the food waste bin every month. This goes to a local facility where it's combined with other waste and composted into soil improver, or anaerobically digested into biogas within a matter of weeks.

#### Project partners

The UCS team worked with Vegware on the project. As well as designing and producing the products, Vegware offers expert recycling support; their environmental team helped the University identify the right collector and processing facility for used compostable packaging and food waste, created bespoke bin signage and awareness posters, and ran Green Days to engage staff and students in the new system and help them use the correct bins.

### The results

#### The problem

Conventional takeaway packaging is challenging to recycle, with most going to incineration or landfill. Many common takeaway packaging products are difficult to recycle, for instance because they are made from expanded polystyrene, which is not widely recycled, or because they are made from combined materials such as plastic-lined paper cups or 'windowed' sandwich boxes which can be difficult or labour-intensive to separate. Those products which are recyclable will often become contaminated after use with food or drink and can be rejected from the recycling stream, ending up in landfill. A recent publicity campaign by Hugh Fearnley-Wittingstall, dubbed 'CupGate', generated significant public interest in the issues around recycling takeaway cups in particular, due to the estimated 2.5 billion "paper" coffee cups ending up in landfill every year.



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#### Profile

- Higher Education
- 18,000 students
- 10,000 staff
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## The approach

Vegware's environmental team helped the University of Cambridge make a seamless transformation from the previous landfill and mixed dry recycling bins to an almost entirely compostable system by identifying the right collector and processing facility for used compostable packaging and food waste. It was then a case of communicating the change to staff by creating bespoke bin signage and awareness posters, as well as providing 'table talkers' providing information on tables in cafés. We held a launch event, covering all of the UCS cafés, which included a 'waste challenge' showing students how to segregate the Vegware items into the correct bins and to raise awareness of the scheme. The event was filmed by Vegware, who produced a video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nonPkRxhsvA>) of the events entitled 'Vegware at the University of Cambridge - Catering for Zero Waste', which has been promoted and shared by both Vegware and the University's Environment & Energy section via social media. To continue the success of these schemes, the Café Manager has been running similar events on a regular basis across the catering locations to engage students.

## Our goals

The University's Environmental Sustainability Vision is that *'the University is committed to making a positive impact through outstanding environmental sustainability performance'*. The 'underpinning principles' of the vision include:

- *'to maximise the wider positive impact of the University's environmental sustainability actions at local, national and international level through communication, collaboration, partnership'*. The project has demonstrated clear collaboration and partnership through the cooperative efforts with Vegware. This has also helped to maximise national action on compostable packaging by bolstering the profile of compostable packaging, for instance through the production of the YouTube video 'Vegware at the University of Cambridge - Catering for Zero Waste'
- *'to create a culture where the University community is engaged, empowered and supported in improving their personal and collective environmental sustainability practices'*. The consumption of more sustainable food, and consideration of greater sustainability throughout the food chain inside the University is seen by the UCS as a key way to help encourage positive lifestyle changes outside of it for both students and staff. Clear promotion and explanation of the Vegware scheme and its benefits also aim to contribute to enhancing the staff and student experience
- *'to protect and enhance the natural environment by reducing our direct environmental impact'*. The Vegware scheme has contributed to this principle by leading to a reduction in indirect carbon emissions and in waste to landfill. It is calculated that the University of Cambridge's monthly usage of the new system saves 1.5 tonnes of carbon, and replaces 710 kilos of packaging with entirely recycled content.

## Obstacles and solutions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Marginal price increases</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Vegware products cost slightly more than regular un-recyclable catering disposables. However, the UCS worked hard to ensure that this price increase was not passed to the customer.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Working with suppliers/stockists</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Catering Service worked hard to identify a supplier who could supply Vegware products, and having identified one worked hard to set up a good relationship and ensure quick responses to changes in demand etc. For instance, when it emerged that customers were having trouble identifying the compostable items, the Catering Service approached the supplier about getting more prominently labelled items into use.</li> </ul>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generating interest and ensuring customer awareness</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A number of awareness-raising and promotional initiatives, such as events, information booklets, 'table talkers', bin labels and signage helped overcome this issue. For events catering, menus had a section on Vegware added to raise awareness and secure buy-in among customers, while several 'showcasing events' for customers were held to explain the Vegware products to prospective users.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Maintaining momentum</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and consistent communication about the scheme has been key to its success, as well as a fast response to issues and queries on the scheme as they have arisen.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communicating success</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing communication on the successes of the scheme, in the form of audits showing reductions in waste to landfill and savings in carbon emissions, have also helped gain buy-in.</li> </ul>

## Performance and results

The latest Vegware eco-audit shows that over the second 6 months of the scheme, it has led to a saving of 5.4 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e, a saving in 2.6 tonnes of virgin materials, and resulted in a diversion of 6.6 tonnes of waste from landfill. These figures only account for the effect of Vegware products replacing 'regular' plastic and paper in the waste stream. However, it is also worth noting that food waste collections were set up at UCS locations solely as a result of the introduction of Vegware. From July 2015 to July 2016, 57 tonnes of food waste were composted. This demonstrated the total amount of waste (packaging and food waste) which would otherwise have gone to landfill, or which would have led to contamination of the mixed recycling waste stream with food wastes.

## The future

### Lessons learned

- 1 Collaborate with suppliers to find the best solution.
- 2 Communication is great for delivering action, but should be secondary to making new systems easy and intuitive for users.
- 3 Don't get complacent after the successful roll out of a new initiative. Keep reviewing to make sure it's working like it should.

### Sharing your project

Communication of the Vegware scheme has been highly prominent within University Catering Service cafes and catering venues via posters, table talkers, bin signage, notice boards, information booklets as well as verbal communication by staff briefed on the scheme or through the running of regular engagement events. We have also worked hard to disseminate the results of our project by:

- writing articles about Vegware in the University's sustainability newsletter, 'Greenlines'.
- publicising the scheme via the University Catering Services' website and the University's Environment & Energy section website.
- regularly promoting the scheme via social media accounts run by the University and Vegware, including publicising 6-monthly results of the Vegware 'eco-audits'.

In addition, Vegware have produced 2 videos, one filmed on the University estate during the launch of the scheme and one focusing on compostable cups in the wake of the 'cupgate scandal' initiated by Hugh Fearnley-Wittingstall. The University of Cambridge believes it is, at the time of writing, the only higher or further education



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institution using Vegware. Sustainable food and associated operations are increasingly of interest to students, and initiatives such as Vegware are proving to be a cornerstone of the University of Cambridge's emerging work around sustainable food.

## What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

Becoming a Green Gown award finalist recognises the vital importance that the University of Cambridge attaches to embedding sustainability across our estate, and it rewards the efforts of all of our staff and our sustainability champions who have worked tirelessly to get projects off the ground and to bring about meaningful, sustainable change.

## Further information

Web: [www.environment.admin.cam.ac.uk](http://www.environment.admin.cam.ac.uk)

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