

Keele University Sustainability Champion - Student Ulrich Pohanka

Summary

During my time at Keele I have led several sustainability initiatives at Keele and provided leadership and inspiration to many other students. I set up the **Keele Food Co-op**, providing the campus community with more than **6 tonnes of organic produce** over the course of two academic years. I have also represented the University at two World Student Environmental Network Global Summits, after which I secured to host the conference at Keele in 2016. **I have not flown between the UK and my home country Austria** during my entire degree, choosing rather to spend many hours on coaches and trains, providing a role model for other students (and staff).

Description of my sustainability activism

I am an international student from Austria, studying BSc Environment & Sustainability at Keele. During my degree I have had the opportunity to try out a lot of different things, including different ways of getting involved with sustainability initiatives on campus. Being part of Think:Green, a student-led service that serves as a platform for students to realise their own 'green' projects, motivated me to set up a new 'Vegetarian & Vegan' society during my first year. For this group I organised a trip to the local dairy farm, leafletting sessions on campus as well as conversations with the catering managers of the university to improve labelling of vegan food on the menus.

At the student sustainability bungalow, a sustainable housing initiative on campus, I cooked regularly for communal evening meals - often for 10-15 people - showing fellow students how easy it is to cook with fresh vegetables. Since there was no way of buying organic produce on campus we had to go into town to buy our food from a supermarket. Since this was both time consuming and also very costly, I decided to set up a food co-operative in order to improve the provision of organic produce on campus. To keep set-up and infrastructural costs low, I started the **Keele Food Co-op** as a Veg- and FruitBag scheme. Students, staff and locals could order a bag of assorted organic produce on a weekly basis, which we in turn ordered from an organic wholesaler (Phoenix Organics). Their weekly delivery was sorted into bags, which were then collected by the customers during a four hour time window. This meant we didn't have to worry about storage and also that we could work with an overhead of only 10% due to the low overall risk. Since its set-up in November 2014, **1114 VegBags (4.4 tonnes) and 1150 FruitBags (2 tonnes)** were sold, creating income of about £7,500 and almost **£1,000 profit** (due to additional lines being sold on the day). The initiative reached almost 200 individual customers, including students, staff and local residents. During its first year, the project was given an award for the *volunteering project of the year*.



Profile

- Higher Education
- 10,000 students (includes full and part time students)
- 2,000 staff
- Rural



Setting up a food co-op was also one of the main pledges on which I ran for the position of the Students' Union's **Environmental Representative**, which I was elected for during my first year. Holding this position also automatically made me the co-president of Think:Green for the following year and required me to attend meetings of the University's overarching **Environmental Sustainability Steering Group**.

At the end of my first year I was nominated by Keele's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Environment & Sustainability to attend the **World Student Environmental Network (WSEN) Global Summit 2014** in Stellenbosch, South Africa. In order to make the most out of travelling around half the world, I decided to stay in South Africa for two months in total, which were spent travelling alone before the conference and together with other delegates after the conference.

During my second year I was the driving force behind Think:Green, setting up meetings, starting a new sub-group that runs cloth swaps (*K-SWAP*) and implementing the food coop as a local trader so we could start with the weekly Veg- and FruitBags. While this seemed like a daunting task at first, attending the **Students for Co-operation conference** in October 2014 was a great opportunity to connect with other students running food co-ops.

Besides running Think:Green and setting up a food co-op during year two, I also worked together with a student from Sussex University to win the nomination to jointly host the **WSEN Global Summit 2016** at Keele and Sussex. Between then and the end of 2015 I was leading the organising group at Keele, after which I handed over to another student. Being the future host also enabled me to volunteer for the following global summit at the end of my second year in **Perth, Australia**, where I worked closely with the organising group and also held a workshop on simple living.

During my second year I also went to the second meetup of the Change Agent Network in Norwich, as well as the **IARU Sustainability Science Congress** in Copenhagen in October 2014.

My final year at Keele was dominated by my dissertation about the air travel emissions of Keele's international student body, but I was also still running Think:Green and the Keele Food Co-op. For the latter I came up with a new addition to the initiative. Using leftover cotton bags from the Students' Union, I used a custom silkscreen to print our own logo on those bags (designed by myself), which could then be bought by customers for a £1 deposit. I also set up weekly film screenings during the last semester, showing a range of movies around sustainability. In my final year I also wanted to expand the Keele Food Coop to a full-sized food cooperative, offering dry goods, spices, oils as well as canned goods. For this I set up a link with **Essentials Trading**, an organic workers cooperative wholesaler, and ordered a pallet of goods which were sold at our Winter Market. To determine what we should order, I ran a survey which generated >100 responses, providing us with a good understanding of which product lines are of most interest. Unfortunately I did not manage to sort out all issues regarding the permanent storage of the coop's stock before the workload of year three became too much. Everything is in place for the next generation of students to lift this off the ground, however.

During my time at Keele I further volunteered at: Keele's lights out event, the Green Move Out (collecting leftover kitchen equipment from leaving students for future students), Green Week 2014 & 2016, as well as the Sustainability Fashion Show 2014. Together with the food co-op, these volunteering opportunities accumulate to more than **200 hours of volunteering**, which equates to a *platinum* volunteering award.

This year the SU has awarded me with a **lifetime membership** in recognition of my *outstanding contributions*.

The impacts and benefits of my work

Some of the broader impacts and benefits of my work are summarized below:

- encouraging peers to reduce meat consumption - through communal vegan meals, campaigning through Vegetarian & Vegan Society and lobbying as Environmental Rep
- increasing consumption of organic produce for 190 individual customers of KFC
- increasing awareness for second hand clothing through clothing swaps
- increasing awareness for environmental issues through film screenings
- securing the hosting of the WSEN Global Summit 2016 for Keele
- preparing everything to upscale the Keele Food Coop to a full-sized food coop
- a total of 4.4 tonnes of organic veg and 2 tonnes of organic fruit were bought through the Keele Food Coop
- two catering outlets on campus now offer plant-based cheese as an alternative to dairy cheese.

My impact on the student and staff experience is highlighted by the following quote from my Course Director:

“Ulrich has been an exceptional driving force for student-led sustainability activity at Keele. He has shown outstanding motivation and maturity in successfully setting up a range of impressive initiatives, and through this has shown countless other students what it is possible to achieve. Ulrich is also an exceptional role model through genuinely living what he believes, through his choices regards travel, food, and purchasing. In many ways Ulrich has become my own ‘sustainability conscience’ and for that I thank him.”

Further information

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