



Green Gown
Awards 2016



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Finalist's case study

University of Cambridge Sustainability Champion Nan Taplin, Senior Secretary



UNIVERSITY OF
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About the project

Summary

As a proactive Environment and Energy Coordinator at the University of Cambridge, Nan Taplin has encapsulated the true spirit of a sustainability champion. Nan has acted as the glue holding together one of the University's most successful 'green teams', leading their success through the bronze, silver and gold Green Impact awards. Her efforts have earned her many plaudits for her dedication and enthusiasm, including the University's Environmental Hero Award. One Green Impact auditor recently stated "I have never met someone so passionate about the environment in my life!". Perhaps more astonishing however, is that all of Nan's environmental achievements have been completed on top of her role as a busy Senior Secretary in the Department of Italian and Modern Greek. Nan truly demonstrates how one person can successfully embed 'green' thinking into the culture of a workplace by enthusing and motivating staff, and using an inclusive, collaborative approach.

Profile

- Higher Education
- 18,000 students
- 10,000 staff
- Urban

The results

The problem

As recently as February 2013, the faculty of Modern & Medieval Languages as a department was not taking any action on environmental or sustainability issues. With the department based in a listed 1950s building, there was little scope for major energy improvements, so the opportunity for increasing environmental performance was limited, while the nature of the faculty's research meant that there were few direct links to environmental or sustainability issues.

The approach

Nan Taplin, a departmental secretary in Modern & Medieval Languages, initially volunteered to act as the department's representative for Switch Off Week in 2013. She has since become one of the University's most enthusiastic and successful Environment & Energy Coordinators. Initially, Nan simply helped to put environmental issues on the department's radar through a number of simple initiatives such as placing posters around the department, holding events such as a wacky jumper day and serving colleagues with green lemonade and cakes (while wearing a green wig!). Once departmental awareness was increased, she began generating enthusiasm among wider staff and bringing them onboard, for instance by setting up a green 'pledge tree' and holding a 'green bake sale'. Switch off audits helped to spread ownership of colleagues' own performance and the impact of their actions on the department's environmental footprint.





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Subsequently, Nan worked to secure buy-in and change practices. To secure a more official level of departmental commitment, she set up a committee including a range of staff and students, to widen involvement. The committee reported to the Faculty Board, giving greater prominence to environmental actions and issues. This also allowed for buy-in to be secured and practices and procedures to be changed. For instance, responsibilities were assigned for a switch off plan to ensure equipment and lighting energy consumption was reduced. A policy on heaters and fans led to all such equipment being removed except under special circumstances. All paper was switched to recycled types. Water coolers were switched from bottled to mains-fed. Recycling improvements were rolled out. Timers were fitted to electronic equipment.

Our goals

For the University of Cambridge as a whole, the University's Environmental Sustainability Vision, Policy and Strategy states an overarching aim to 'facilitate opportunities where staff and students can develop and share their knowledge, skills and experience to engage with and contribute effectively to achieving the University's environmental sustainability aspirations'. Nan has engaged fully with this aim, and according to the University's Environment & Energy section has been one of the most long-serving, consistent and enthusiastic proponents of the University's environmental sustainability aspirations.

The department of Modern & Mediaeval Languages (MML), although falling under the broader University's policy commitments, had no commitments to environmental issues of its own before Nan's involvement. With an active committee, and significant improvements in awareness and procedures, the department's values and ethos have shifted measurably. For instance, the following paragraph has been agreed and included in the job description of all vacancies in the department, outlining its importance to new and current staff through a 'Key Responsibility' stating that: "The Faculty is committed to reducing its environmental impact and save energy and natural resources. Colleagues are encouraged to support the work of the Faculty's Green Team in meeting these aims and in working towards the NUS' Green Impact awards."

Performance and results

As part of her work as an active volunteer Environment and Energy Coordinator (EEC) and Green Impact team member, Nan:

- Created a Green Impact team comprising of representatives from key areas of the Faculty (Student, Library, IT, Senior Academic, HR, Faculty admin).
- Implemented around 70 changes, both large and small, to obtain Green Impact bronze award in 2014, silver in 2015 and gold in 2016.
- Sent regular bulletins (39 over the last 3 years) with information, exhortations for changes in behaviour, updates on environmental progress. The digests are each sent to the 99 staff, 800 undergraduates and 230 postgrads in the department, therefore amounting to around 40,000 communications! The digests are also distributed to other staff across the University's Sidgwick Site, via environmental contacts in the faculties of Philosophy and Divinity, as well as the department of Politics and International Studies.
- Sent termly reports to the Faculty Board and annual report to Chair of Faculty outlining environmental improvements.
- Helped deliver several 'switch-off' weeks and 'spotlight on' months, plus WEEE recycling events
- Created policies to embed 'green' thinking into the culture of the Faculty.
- Designed and arranged for the creation of a new sustainability webpage.
- Established a 'rolling agenda' so the Green Impact team has a programme of environment-related objectives which continues throughout the year.
- Although no records of attendance and engagement are available, Nan has also led on numerous departmental events and initiatives which, over the years, have engaged many staff within the department



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and the site. For instance, an e-waste recycling event on the Sidgwick Site which she has been instrumental in promoting and championing led to 20 tonnes of e-waste being recycled this February alone.

- Nan has also contributed to the University's sustainability newsletter, including her recent article 'top tips for environmental action in your department', which was read by 237 people and received very positive feedback.

The future

Lessons learned

According to Nan, the top 5 lessons she has learned in her time as an Environment & Energy Coordinator are:

1. Build a team around you

One-man-bands can only do so much; the key to everything is working in at team. Try to gather a team with representatives from the key areas of your operation. For example in MML, we have built up a team including members from the IT department, the Library, the Facilities team, a senior academic and an undergraduate student, as well as four administrators with different areas of responsibility in the Faculty. A team of nine might seem quite large, but actually with everyone being so busy it has been good to have enough people to share the work.

2. Use central support

At the University of Cambridge, the Environment & Energy Section is a huge source of information and support, so I would advise others to make use of them or their equivalents! I didn't cotton on to this at the beginning, but I have now become a shameless plagiariser of their 'Greenlines' bulletins and an avid searcher of information to share from the E&E website. Don't try to re-invent the wheel – contact E&E, they may well have a solution to your problem!

3. Tap into networks!

Similarly, other Environment & Energy Coordinators (EECs), or their equivalents, can be a great source of ideas and inspiration. I advise other EECs to save relevant distribution list in your 'contacts' so you can keep in touch with others around the University who share your enthusiasm for sustainability and environmental responsibility. Networking events are another useful way to get to know people and share ideas. Being an EEC can sometimes feel like a lonely task but your fellow EECs are bright stars in the (sometimes dark) firmament.

4. Don't get disheartened on the 'thankless task' days.

Not everyone is going to share your passion, many are busy and have different priorities, and there will always be someone who gets fed up of hearing you speak about turning off lights, recycling and sustainable travel, but I am a firm believer that the vast majority of people want to do the right thing for the planet and are on board with your objectives. Just because they don't shout about it or respond to every email you send it doesn't mean that they are not, quietly and in their own way, supporting what you are trying to achieve!

5. Celebrate your successes

Finally, always remember to celebrate your successes. Tell people about the improvements which you have all made together. Thank them for their commitment. Gather their support for the next change you are going to make, and the next one, and the one after that. Little by little, day by day, month by month you will make a difference – slowly but surely, change will happen. We can sometimes be disheartened as countries and governments across the world take what might seem like far too little action to protect the environment – but together we can at least do our bit closer to home.

Sharing your project

Key to the continuing success of MML's efforts has been Nan's constant work to communicate progress to staff and students. As well as the environmental committee's KPIs and objectives which drive constant improvement



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of the department's performance, Nan has ensured that environmental bulletins have been sent out on a regular basis over the last three years, helping to keep environmental issues on everyone's agenda as well as sparking dialogue between staff on topical issues. With Nan's own department performing significantly better, she has since begun to bring other departments on the Sidgwick Site (where MML is located) onboard. She has already been instrumental in sparking the Faculties of Philosophy and Divinity into action on environmental issues, and continues to provide support and advice to them in their efforts.

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

Being shortlisted as 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

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