



University of Edinburgh Highly commended – Student initiatives and campaigns

**“OurEd: an online social responsibility
and sustainability community”**

Summary

To further student engagement with Social Responsibility and Sustainability (SRS) we have developed an online resource called www.OurEd.ed.ac.uk to inspire present and prospective University of Edinburgh students to get involved.

It is a play on the University web portal MyEd.

OurEd maintains a holistic approach to SRS by bringing together all of the University's related SRS activities in one place, high-lighting the extraordinary range of students and societies already actively engaged.

Project partners

The OurEd project was undertaken by Michele Wisdahl and Rhys Howell working from the office of the Vice Principal - External Engagement who used funding from Santander Universities Foundation and the University. The team was greatly assisted by the University Web Development Programme and by Joe Farthing, then Communications Facilitator with Transition Edinburgh University.

We worked closely with the Edinburgh University Student's Association (EUSA), student societies and both academic and support staff from across all the University's schools and departments, particularly the Sustainability Office, Estates & Buildings, the Careers Service, Accommodation Service and the International Office to deliver the site.

The problem

- SRS refers to complex interrelated global issues that often feel far removed from the campus.
- Engaging the public, especially students, in these issues is a challenge. Each individual student arrives at University with different cultural backgrounds and experiences and subsequently has different values, beliefs and levels of engagement with SRS issues.
- Furthermore, students are at University for a short period of time, with many pressures on their time. The challenge was to create an effective and engaging long-term student SRS campaign focusing on ideas of shared values, which is of real benefit to students.

The approach

OurEd focuses on promoting community, shared values and environmental citizenship, rather than specific pro-environmental behaviours, as there is more potential there for long-term change.

The idea of “community” reaches beyond categories of social or demographic groups to consider how people engage and interact in local environments. Through this focus, the content is highly focused on the student community, and highlights what students are currently doing in relation to four themes which run through the website: Health, Development, Environment and Social Justice.

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Our goals

Part of the preparation for the OurEd website was to conduct a focus group with student participants to determine how the website could best engage with students. A wide range of students who were already involved in SRS activities were then interviewed. From these processes we managed to identify three main goals for the OurEd website.

- To give students practical guidance for involvement in SRS on campus and in the community
- To make SRS relevant and engaging for students – rather than simply showcasing material
- To communicate SRS in a positive, engaging fashion without preaching or dictating.

Obstacles and solutions

Obstacle/challenge	Solution
Disparate sources for information on all the many SRS activities / campaigns / events throughout the University	Establishing links with the student association, student societies and community groups through interviews – leading to OurEd as a focus
How to attract students to OurEd and compete with other student-focused websites	Asked what students want and developing the website to be as engaging as possible
Keeping students coming back to the website	Updating the website on a regular basis, promoting the website throughout campus and continuing to ask students what they would like to see on it
Low awareness of a new website service	Harnessing social media (Facebook and Twitter) to build awareness of the website and traffic to it

Performance and results

OurEd has been popular among students who like the style of the site. In particular student societies are very supportive of OurEd and the platform it presents them to communicate their activities to students across the University.

Through using Facebook and Twitter, an online community of interested students has been created, helping raise awareness of OurEd. Many students are getting involved in activities and volunteering opportunities which were promoted on the website. OurEd has been recognised as an innovative way to engage with students, and is currently the only student focused SRS website.

Three of the team involved have moved on from their paid internship roles – Michele to a PhD in Anthropology at St Andrews, Rhys to a Research Assistant role in Scottish Carbon Capture and Storage and Joe to Communications Specialist on our Sustainability Engagement project.

Lessons learned

The content on OurEd needs to be continually updated to keep high numbers of students visiting the website. If the content is out of date then we have measured a fall in visitors to the site. Opportunities for students to engage with SRS issues and get involved need to be lively and hook-y.

Asking for feedback from students is also crucial to the success of the website, so that OurEd continues to address the needs of students in the University. As well as using social media to promote OurEd it is also important to supplement this via other social media and events.

Recognising the need to have a completely student focused process not only established another channel of communication with the student community, but improved the level of engagement students have with social responsibility and sustainability.

Further information

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