



2013 Finalist's Case Study

James Cook University Student Initiatives Creatively Engaged: how students at JCU are helping transform the campus

Section 1: About the project

Summary

Student sustainability initiatives have seen considerable growth over the last two years at JCU. These initiatives, some staff led, others student driven, form part of a strategic approach to student engagement and organisational change.

Guided by the Life Index, we have considered students as key stakeholders and active citizens able to lead change and contribute positively to the University and the community.

As a result, a wide range of student initiatives are now underway which are changing awareness and behaviour of both staff and students– including weekly [Sustainability Club](#) events; weekly Permaculture society [food market at the Cairns Campus](#); a new secure online carpooling network; [sustainability art exhibition](#); and a collection of highly active [sustainability interns](#). Benefits include students being empowered to identify and act on issues; greater interaction between students, uni operations, community and curriculum; supporting JCU achieve its sustainability vision; and raising the profile of sustainability.

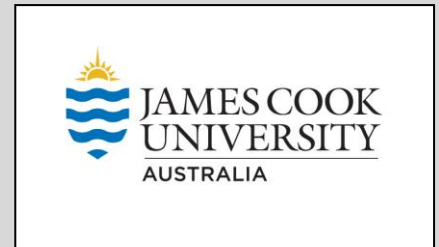
Project partners

The JCU Sustainability Officer, the [TropEco](#) program, the JCU Student Association and the JCU Professional College have collaborated to support student engagement in sustainability and provided vital frameworks, support and mentoring. However it was the students themselves who actively built the networks and relationships between themselves, the community and staff. Closer relationships have been made with community organisations such as permaculture clubs, cycling clubs, farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and local councils. In small single-university towns like Townsville and Cairns this has been particularly important and effective in spreading the word that JCU is actively engaged in sustainability, and there are ways everyone can get involved.

Section 2: The results

The problem

Students wanted a more face to face approach with both staff and each other and a way to effectively engage with their local communities. We used a number of engagement strategies to overcome the traditional, uninspiring approach to engagement by email. Facebook plays a major role – the [TropEco](#) facebook page has nearly 500 likes and is an active for posting events, competitions, news and volunteer opportunities both on and off-campus. The [JCU Sustainability Club](#) and [Permaculture Society](#) have active facebook pages and there's a [Sustainability Symposium](#) page that was used leading up to this year's symposium. The [Sustainability at JCU](#) website and [TropEco](#) websites also play a role in student engagement and communication. TropEco also utilises YouTube to upload relevant sustainability videos and publishes the quarterly [TropEco News](#) using the online program – Issuu (and selective hard-copies for events).



Institutional Profile

- University
- 20,913 students (includes full and part time students in 2012)
- 4988 staff (in 2012)
- Regional – Far North Queensland



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The approach

1. Providing funding for entrepreneurial student activities

In 2013 JCU launched the ongoing [Action For Sustainability Fund](#) (AfsF) (\$175,000 awarded in 2013) – a grant program to support students and staff undertake sustainability initiatives. Of 11 successful applications, 4 were entirely student driven, and another 2 had students as core project team members.

2. Providing an institutional support structure for student initiatives

The JCU Sustainability Officer, the [TropEco](#) program, the JCU Student Association and the JCU Professional College have collaborated to support student engagement in sustainability. This has happened in both formal and informal ways. Informally, through an open door policy to students, as well as funding and time allocated for mentoring and support. Recently we have supported:

- The establishment of a [Sustainability Club](#) (45 members). Student driven, the Club runs [weekly events](#) during semester.
- The [JCU Permaculture Society](#) (138 members) partner with a local organisation the [RealFood Network](#) to host a weekly [food market at the Cairns Campus](#).
- Organisation of a Cycle Safe expert forum by a JCU planning student.
- The [Art of Awareness](#) competition.
- Formally through the [Sustainability Internship program](#) and associated capacity building program (with free training sessions). Interns are currently:
 - Designing and implementing a campus restoration plan
 - Designing and implementing greening of the Student Association
 - Assisting with populating the Life Index database
 - Preparing communications materials for the Sustainability Club
 - Assisting with high-school engagement
 - Reviewing the way JCU communicates its sustainability vision
 - Mapping significant trees and edible plants on campus
 - Participating in working-bees at the campus community garden

3. Development of reward and recognition programs

Students are rewarded through formal pathways: the [Annual TropEco Sustainability Awards](#); Sustainability Internship certificate; JCU Professional College modules (and this will be noted on their academic transcript). Informally, we profile students through the [TropEco Newsletter](#), and invite contributions from students.

4. Including students into formal University governance and decision making processes

The University has established a Sustainability Advisory Committee (SAC) and Action Group (SAG), reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor. Student representatives have been appointed to the [SAC and SAG](#). Students are also included in the AfsF grant selection committee.

5. Running targeted student engagement events and activities.

JCU runs sustainability activities/events targeted at students. The primary event is an annual [Sustainability Symposium and Fair](#), held early in the year to engage new students in sustainability. The student engagement part of the event is devolved to students who design entertainment and encourage student involvement.

Our goals

Students are clearly helping JCU achieve our sustainability goals. For example, students from across the University (including those studying IT, visual arts, ecology, and sustainability) responded enthusiastically to the AfsF. We have now seen the development of a number of student sustainability initiatives including: a secure online carpooling network; a JCU Cairns Permaculture Society Hub; a



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collaborative project between a visual arts student and a local disability services organisation; the development of an arboretum on campus; student bike exchange program; and a new food garden at one of the residential colleges.

Obstacles and solutions

Lasting student engagement	Ensure the students are driving it, doing activities that they are passionate about, while providing the background support and mentoring to ensure they don't lose interest/focus.
Attracting funding for student projects	Demonstrate the value to senior management for student run initiatives and the need to provide seed funding to get them started. A Sustainability grant program is a great place to start.
Linking campus and curriculum	Develop a Sustainability Interns program that allows students to earn additional recognition for participating in projects that both benefit the campus and are linked to course requirements
Giving students a voice	Provide opportunities for students to sit on Sustainability Committees and voice the ideas and concerns of fellow students. Allow students to be involved in organizing events and projects that have an impact on campus.

Performance and results

There are a number of benefits from student led sustainability initiatives. While little quantitative data exists for comparison, we have observed some trends.

Students are identifying issues and acting on them

Through programs like the AfSF and the Internship program, students have increasingly started to identify and then act on issues. For example, two restoration ecology students noticed the creek on the Cairns Campus had weed and erosion issues, and proposed a restoration project. We supported this initiative through a Sustainability Internship and \$5000, and the students have completed a restoration plan, and linked it (as a monitoring site) to the curriculum. The students benefited from being able to implement what they had learned in a work-like context, and JCU benefited from the application of substantial student expertise.

In another example, IT student Daniel Wild won an AfSF grant to establish a car-pooling program. He had the following to say:

For me this project embodies one of those moments when you realize "wow, this is a real life problem and I now have the skills to contribute to the solution" (refer article in the current TropEco news). These are two representative examples of students feeling empowered to take actions for sustainability. Students are showing an active sense of citizenship and willingness to engage in issues beyond their formal programs of study.

There is greater interaction between students, uni operations, community and the curriculum

When students are given formal roles, resources and support, this can lead to greater interaction between students, uni operations, community and the curriculum. For example, the student driven Cairns campus arboretum project is building links between the University Estate Office, the local Indigenous representative body, the Cairns botanical gardens and the formal curriculum (through courses run out of Tropical Biology).



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Section 3: The future

Lessons learned

Effective Relationships are established

A number of initiatives have seen an increase in positive relationships between staff (including senior management), students and community groups. For example, by including students in the SAC and SAG we have recently seen students collaborate with the senior members of the University to prepare a sustainability planning template to include in all Faculty and Divisional operational plans. In another example, the weekly permaculture markets are built on a very positive partnership between students and a local Community Supported Agriculture organisation ([Real Food Box](#)) and engages staff and students in accessing local, fresh and low food-mile produce.

Networks

We have increasingly seen the linking of like-minded people and organisations together for positive change. For example, students in the Sustainability Club demonstrated leadership and identified that to support change within and beyond the university they must connect with the broader Cairns sustainability network and key policy makers. To do this they invited different speakers to present at their weekly events, including the Cairns Regional Council (to speak on waste management in the far North); the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (on marine protected areas); Advance Cairns (on the regions sustainability potential); and Beyond Zero Emissions (on solar).

Collective capacity

Through programs – like the AfSF, and Internships, workshops and seminars, and opportunities for students to volunteer in sustainability events and activities such as the Sustainability Symposium – we hope to support people and groups make positive contributions and build confidence and capacity as leaders. In addition to the importance of relationships and networks, we recognise leaders for sustainability must be able to navigate issues of power, strategy and conflict resolution. To support skill development and capability we run a capacity building program (between the Professional College and the Sustainability Officer/TropEco). This program has recently seen a *Social Change in a Complex World* seminar by visiting Professor James Arvanitakis.

Sharing your project

The student led and other engagement projects mentioned above have been communicated throughout the University community via TropEco News, at meetings on campus and also in roundtable discussions at community meetings of permaculture clubs and other like-minded organisations.

In addition, the success of the student engagement programs and student led initiatives were celebrated and recognized at the [2013 TropEco Awards](#) night, with students winning 3 out of the 5 awards, including the prestigious TropEco Excellence Award.

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

James Cook University strives to be recognised as a sustainable university and is taking a holistic approach to improve its operations, teaching, learning, research and governance in regard to sustainability. To be a finalist in the Green Gown Awards gives recognition that the hard work of our staff and students is paying off. The Green Gown Awards are considered the most prestigious awards for sustainability in our sector and JCU is honoured to be recognised as a finalist.



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Further information

Contacts:

http://www.jcu.edu.au/tropeco/about/people/JCUPRD1_071370.html

Other info:

<http://www-public.jcu.edu.au/sustainability/>

<http://www.jcu.edu.au/tropeco/>

<https://www.facebook.com/tropeco.james.cook.university>