

Sustainability Sharing Series

Working with your Students Union on Sustainability

Students Unions and Associations offer a unique opportunity to engage directly with students, with the Union / Association providing a voice for the students, often with direct access to senior leaders. Developing a strong partnership can help sustainability staff reach a wider audience, offer opportunities to work together on campaigns to drive change on an institutional level, and provide mutual benefits including sourcing funding or sharing resources.



Collaboration benefits

Working with your Students Union or Students Association can be mutually beneficial.

By working together you can:

- Engage and communicate with the student body, utilising the relationship that already exists between the Union or Associations and students — resulting in increased reach and awareness
- Strengthen strategic plans and action plans by including the student voice as an actor in implementation as represented by the Union or Association — this can lead to more inclusive and holistic approaches
- Generate new and innovative ideas as students bring different experiences — gain alternative approaches to consider from a more global and inter-generational perspective
- Push for higher institutional sustainability targets — Student Unions or Associations can potentially set targets, such as carbon emissions or single-use plastic reduction, that are higher than the institution as a whole, providing institutions the impetus to set higher aspirations
- Challenge the senior and executive leadership to do more — students can demand sustainability actions or commitments that push through change and improve oversight

Opportunities

How to work with your Students Union or Association

Use the Students Union / Association's interests to guide partnership opportunities, engaging with them on their campaigns, which can include providing additional resources and funding. This also means thinking beyond environmental sustainability and focussing on social or economic aspects of sustainability, such as health and wellbeing, social justice or local food.

Recommendations include:

- Review the Union's or Association's engagement or strategic plan to see what is and isn't included — identify what you can focus on together
- Identify what is already of interest to the students and use that to guide your campaigns
- Offer resource or funding support, as often the challenge for Student Unions / Associations is capacity
- Create opportunities for various students to engage — for example involve arts students to make the posters, media or marketing ones to share them, and don't just work with the sustainability students
- Encourage Student Union / Association representation on steering groups / sustainability committees

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Challenges

Student Unions / Associations in Colleges

Student engagement can be difficult for colleges, particularly as there tends to be less engagement outside of college hours compared to universities. Student Unions or Associations at colleges have to work differently to engage students, shifting away from an 'out of hours' focus or through a student-society based approach, and try implementing activities or initiatives during class time or in lunch breaks. This can include events such as lunch time tree planting or climate change talks during lecture hours, so groups not in class at that time can attend (or work with teaching staff to engage during lectures themselves). Be creative and try different things to see what works.

Funding

Funding is important and a necessary means of support. This can be sourced directly from the university of college or from other organisations. Applying for funding and delivering funded projects is also a great partnership opportunity, as Student Unions and Associations can apply for funding otherwise unavailable to universities or college.

Staffing

Often there is not a lot of Student Union / Association staff capacity but a lot of goodwill, human capital and support which is an asset. There are also many institutions without dedicated sustainability staff or who have limited capacity or remit. Don't expect one part time student officer to achieve things on their own — they need support as otherwise they are set up to fail. Consider a split-funded position between the institution and the Student Union / Association, making sure to highlight benefits to both. Address the need and inform senior management — put a case to them, try a pilot, and push management to commit to a long-term change.

Build a business case for Sustainability and Student Unions / Associations

- Get senior allies to support funding using different routes such as academic staff, finance staff or Vice Chancellors — these aren't always the sustainability champions, they can also be interested in student engagement or other related activities
- Highlight the cost savings and positive student impact of implementing sustainability initiatives
- Think about embedding sustainability staff into Student Unions as staffing costs tend to be lower and they are often in a better position to take faster action or make changes
- Use the data institutions or Student Unions already have, such as annual surveys, to find out about what the students want. This can help you prove to senior management that students are engaged with sustainability issues



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Get collaborating today

1. Connect with your Student Union or Association's leaders, president or other elected officers — make contact to start building your relationship and to find out what the students want
2. Focus on one or two initiatives and work out what can be done together — this helps to identify priorities and prevent trying to spread resources too thinly
3. Set clear expectations — be realistic about what sort of expectations of engagement and project results you have, and how involved the students and Students Union / Association will need to be
4. Put plans into action — make sure to monitor progress, tracking what went well, what to improve, and any potential costs savings (this can help build a case for future funding collaborative projects)
5. Continue to have regular meetings with the Student Union / Association staff or student officers passionate about sustainability and sustainability staff at the institution — keep growing the partnership for the future



Interesting Resources and Organisations

- [NUS Sustainability Research](#) — research highlighting the importance of sustainability to students
- [NUS Sustainability](#) — includes funding opportunities, programmes and campaigns
- [NUS Responsible Futures](#) — Embedding sustainability into curriculum through student union and institution partnerships
- [Green Impact @ NUS](#) — Award programme to promote behaviour change related to sustainability
- [Climate Challenge Fund \(CCF\)](#) — Keep Scotland Beautiful manages the CCF funding on behalf of Scottish Government, and Student Unions / Associations are eligible to apply

Green Gown Awards Case Study Examples

- [Students Union at University of Greenwich](#) — Winner of 2016 Student Engagement Award (The Hub)
- [Students Union at UWE](#) — Winner of 2018 Student Engagement Award (Bring your own bowl)
- [University of Stirling Students Union](#) — Finalist 2015 Student Engagement (Green + Blue Space)

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