

Finalist's case study

University of Exeter Students' Guild Student Engagement Students Green Unit

Section 1 About the project

Summary

The Students' Green Unit is a two year project funded by HEFCE through NUS (Student Green Fund) and delivered by Students' Guild. It bridges the gap between student action and academic research leading to lasting change in the environmental and ethical sustainability of the University. We embedded student leadership in the governance of our sustainability agendas and brought students together with staff to implement practical solutions.

Project partners

HEFCE and NUS

Section 2 The results

The problem

There was a lack of student engagement, awareness and action with regards to sustainability issues and behaviours in the University.

The approach

Increase awareness to students by funding and supporting student led sustainability projects and linking them with academics for mentoring and advice.

Our goals

1. To bring academic and professional services staff together with students in practically addressing the grand sustainability challenges of the day.
2. To bridge world class researches and local, national and international change projects.
3. To be a demonstrator project for translating research into student-led action.
4. To demonstrably and positively change students' attitudes, behaviours and motivations in relation to sustainability.
5. To provide students with applied skills and experiences in sustainability, supporting future employment and employability.



Profile: Students' Guild

- HE Student Union
- Represents 18,537 (16,448 FTE) students across the campuses- Streatham, St Lukes and Penryn
- 65 FTE staff
- 160 students staff
- Over 200 societies
- Urban

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AWARDING SUSTAINABILITY EXCELLENCE FOR 10 YEARS

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Obstacles and solutions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total unknown in University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active communication to students through high profile launch, lecture hits; ideas workshops, focus groups, campaigns, stakeholder management, social media, Twitter, website, newsletters, student led activities and annual showcase. Hosted stakeholder meet and greet lunch.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No history of achievements/activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive participation in student campaigns- Go Green Week, Volunteering Week, Climate Week and led on Fairtrade Fortnight for the Guild. Carried out baseline survey to 3000 students and submitted result to NUS Organised governance through a Project Review Group—consisting of Sabbatical officers, academics, local community representative, NUS, Guild Chief Exec, SGU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students and academic timetables: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We knew we started late because we had no presence in the Fresher's Fair. Hence, it was after the launch in late October 2013 when we had the capacity to go full steam ahead with our activities. We also had some problems with a couple of our student leaders who became too busy with their coursework and exams during the last term 2013/2014. This is something that we avoided this academic year by starting almost two months earlier (early September 2014) and laying on various student activities during Welcome/Freshers Week and we booked a stand at the Freshers Fair for SGU and a couple of our projects booked in trade stands (ExBags and Think Outside the Bottle). We also know that the summer term is a difficult one for activities so we will focus on the Autumn and Spring terms.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Securing changes among staff and students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We used incentives, competition, shock tactics, statistics and regular infographics to effect change. Putting up energy meters in various halls of residence was received well and showed changes in usage. Showing students how to eat healthily by preparing simple but nutritious meals was also popular. Involving various people in biodiversity activities made people aware of the environment around them. However, one of the biggest impacts because of its shock depiction of food has garnered a lot of interest. Students and staff were truly appalled at the amount of food wastage in the University—a sharp contrast to the rising need of food banks in Exeter. This particular event landed as a front page cover of Exepose—our student media/newspaper. One of the learning points during this project is for any change we'd like to implement, people must feel they are part of the change and not imposed on them. Students are more accepting of change when they know they can make a difference but staff need more prodding as some of them are set in their ways. It is a fine balance indeed.



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Performance and results

Delivered:

- Established a model that can transfer to other student unions and institutions.
- Training programme focussed on sustainability behaviour change with a view to scaling up and delivering UK wide.
- The project reached 2000 staff and students through our projects; creating community bridges by supporting student led community projects; increasing employability by providing students direct work experience through paid internships. Student projects leads also gain direct transferrable employability skills as a result of leading projects.

Funded and supported the following projects

- One planet sustainability challenge (conference)
- Food waste behaviour study (research/survey)
- Intelligent lighting (student and campaign)
- Sustainability Skills share (seminars)
- Style Cycle (clothes recycling)
- UniSave (saving water in Halls)
- ExBags (no to plastic bags)
- Food waste Pile up (food waste in halls campaign)
- E-Bart explained (e-submission of essays)
- Exemas Veg (growing food for homeless)
- Face2Face (Highlighting Climate Change Scientists in Exeter)-
- Think Outside the Box (Reusable water bottles)
- EcoExeter (Repackaging University's Management Plan)
- SlowFood (cooking skills and local produce)
- EnergyWise (energy consumption)
- Going Wildwards 1 & 2 (biodiversity activities in campus)

Carbon savings of **30 tons of CO₂** in its first year.

Achievements:

We achieved a step change in student engagement in sustainability issues both in terms of their personal lives and their ambitions and expectations in their academic and professional lives

We had a lot of interface with first year students and will continue to do so in the next academic year. This is crucial to the project as working with them will enable the behavioural changes time to embed in their day to day lives.

We enabled students to become meaningful agents for change on sustainability issues at Exeter and in their communities

- All SGU funded projects are student led and this allowed them to identify environmental issues and address them the way they saw fit. This created a strong sense of ownership and increased desire to follow things through. Monitoring and evaluation also determined the success of the projects. We allowed them time to reflect on learnings—what worked well, what did not work well and shared

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lessons learned. This gave the students confidence that their activities mattered and were seen to make a difference.

We ensured sustainability remained an institutional priority in terms of operations, education, research and support for employment

- We were especially keen to involve the academics with our projects. The SGU team have secured meetings with the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Services, the Chief Operating Officer, Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group and Head of Academic Enhancement to introduce and discuss what we wanted to achieve with this project. We worked very closely with the Sustainability team and Campus Services. They have been actively promoting the SGU through common activities, networking opportunities and knowledge transfer.

We created sustainability leaders of the future, effecting change in their communities and work environments at a local and global level.

- Judging from the calibre of students who engaged directly with the SGU team, there was a strong determination and passion for the environment and sustainability. It was important to inculcate a good sense of practicality and realism with every project and every student we came across. We strove to work in partnership. The issues will not be solved by one person alone but by the successful and sustainable work of many.

Presented at the University's Vice Chancellor Executive Group

Presented at the University of Exeter Council visit to the Students' Guild

Won: International Sustainable Campus Network Excellence Award 2014, Cambridge, Mass USA

Hosted: Students' Green Unit Annual Showcase 2014

Section 3 The future

Lessons learned

Working with others within the institution is a double edged sword. We had to be very mindful of our stakeholders and sometimes people's expectations do not match up with realities of running a student led project. We made effective communication a part and parcel of day to day operations. We also found that academics prefer personal communication to get their involvement with student projects. Finally, in order to ensure the future of the project in terms of legacy, I understood that there will be changes in funders and management control eg, instead of reporting to NUS, I might be reporting to the University.

Sharing our project

Yes. When I received the ISCN award at Harvard in June I presented to the conference delegates which were an international audience. Their interest was piqued and they wondered if there could be something similar in their institutions. We also presented at an EAUC conference in Nottingham in one of their workshops and participated at an EAUC webinar In September 2014. We also collaborated with the University's Arts and Culture Department with one of our student-led projects (Face2Face). The project was covered by Devon Radio and the Western Morning News. We plan to set up the exhibition in Penryn after the Exeter show in November. Additional publicity came from the University communications department—posted on the University's main website, NUS Student Green Fund website, Students' Guild website, Facebook and twitter. We also engaged with our student media group so we can feature in their news/activities articles.

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

Being a finalist offers additional credibility and profile to the Students Green Unit. This is important for our legacy plans as future funders will always view sector awards positively.

Further information

<https://www.facebook.com/studentsgreenunit>

<http://www.exeterguild.org/greenunit/>

<https://twitter.com/ExeterSGU>

<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/>