

Success Stories

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GREEN IMPACT: The numbers speak for themselves

By Christopher Slaney

A recent survey in the UK asked students if they would accept a pay cut of £1,000 a year to work for a company with a strong ethical and environmental record. Eighty per cent of students questioned replied “Yes”.

This is just one surprising fact to emerge from a visit to the London headquarters of the National Union of Students (NUS), one of this year’s winners of the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development. The NUS, one of the world’s largest student organizations, won the award for its “Green Impact” programme. Green Impact is a wide-ranging project to promote sustainability in the 600 colleges and universities where NUS members study, their living spaces, cafeterias, and more. The ten-year-old programme has completed over 250,000 greening actions.

These actions can be either immediate or long-term, big or small. The chemistry laboratories at University College London examined the way their inventory was managed. There was the possibility that one section of the department was ordering chemicals while another was paying to dispose of quantities of the same chemical. Using a free online database, they produced a catalogue of 20,000 bottles, noting contents and location. The estimated savings are £90,000 a year.



Green Impact Gold Award © University College London



Tempting students to walk or cycle to class with free breakfasts. A Green Impact initiative at University of Sheffield © Kiran Malhi-Bearn

A Green Impact team at the University of Sheffield encouraged students to walk or cycle to class by rewarding them with a free breakfast.

The benefits of these efforts go beyond environmental improvements. Students are being exposed to ideas about sustainability and acquiring skills that will stay with them after they've collected their degrees. NUS membership stands at seven million, and as their Communities Programme Manager Charlotte Bonner is keen to point out, "These are seven million people who will go on to shape society."

The start of Green Impact can be traced to student concerns about the ethical practices of companies supplying goods and services on campus. The union, believing that educational institutions should be for the public good, supported efforts to change the way those institutions are managed to reflect student concerns about the environment, sustainability and social justice.

Ten years later, research carried out by the union reveals that over 60 per cent of all students say their universities should take sustainability more seriously and want to see additional emphasis on sustainability in their courses.

The union provides the Green Impact framework and guidelines, and supports the creation of small teams. Around 1,000 people each year receive the necessary Green Impact training but it's the universities and colleges providing the funding. The NUS has data to

show that for every pound an institution invests in the programme, they get three pounds back in savings and efficiencies. The less money schools spend on energy, the more they can allocate to services for students.

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Richard Jackson, Director of Sustainability, UCL

A closer look shows most of the effort needed for Green Impact depends on college management and staff to be motivated and enthusiastic about sustainability. And there's no shortage of enthusiastic leaders. Richard Jackson is Director of Sustainability at University College London, a campus spread over 230 buildings in the Bloomsbury neighbourhood and beyond.

"We make energy savings from Green Impact," Richard explains, "but it also gives us better data as to where we can direct our interventions. For example, a few years ago we identified that in the Chemistry Department they were using a lot of water, so we put water saving measures in place."

Richard points out the role of the students' union is important in getting the university staff, and their own unions, involved in Green Impact. "I think if this was solely an



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institutional tool it wouldn't necessarily have the draw that it's got."



Not only green but sweet. At King's College London, students who remembered to power down their computers during the Easter Switch Off found a thank-you note and chocolate eggs on their desks. © Stella Toonen

Student involvement picks up at the year-end to help audit the outcomes and measure progress towards sustainability. Auditing is crucial, not only to measure the effectiveness of the green projects undertaken, but because the entire programme is competitive. In the universities the teams compete against each other to achieve yearly rankings.

"One of the great rewards is to find people who want to work together."

Zanda Pipira, Sustainability Assistant, LMU

Auditing is not only as a good way to get students engaged in the various projects, but it also brings them into contact with faculty and staff they might otherwise never meet.

"This is one of the great rewards, to find people who want to work together," says Zanda Pipira, Sustainability Assistant at London Metropolitan University. "People in university

do understand that we need to get the educational aspect of sustainability on board. The different activities in the programme reflect who we should be."

Not all Green Impact ideas are big, bold and aiming for dramatic results and savings. It's often hundreds of small projects, run over several years that add up to major improvements in sustainability. After hours at King's College London, security guards patrol the buildings looking for lights burning in empty offices. During a Green Impact "Easter Switch Off" people who remembered to power down their computer were rewarded with a thank-you note and chocolate eggs. Perhaps for this reason Green Impact team members at King's are called "Champions".

In London Metropolitan University, environmental notice boards have attracted plenty of postings and the creation of a roof garden has had a positive social impact. Zanda Pipira noticed that people came to the roof, "not only to tick the box in the Green Impact syllabus, but as a good way to get out of the office and meet new people."

The award from UNESCO is the biggest international recognition the NUS has ever received for its work. Charlotte Bonner says it's very timely, "A good moment to reflect on the last ten years."

Robbiie Young, NUS Vice President for Society and Citizenship, says the award is a source of pride. "We won the UNESCO award and to me that speaks huge volumes about the NUS and UNESCO because both of our values go against the grain. So in a world that's looking so insular, where sustainability is being dropped off the political agenda, NUS has won an award internationally for sustainability and for looking out internationally and globally to make sure the world's a better place."

The award comes with a cheque for \$50,000 which the NUS plans to reinvest, mainly in the form of micro-grants – incentives to get even more universities and colleges involved in Green Impact.

Student movements have a history bringing about social change and many identify global warning and environmental degradation among the biggest challenges facing society.

“There’s a huge political appetite for sustainability and the activism around it.”

**Robbie Young, NUS Vice President
for Society and Citizenship**

With Green Impact, the National Union of Students is showing how universities and colleges can both teach and practice

sustainability, bringing about real change by multiplying thousands of small actions year after year.

“If you look at how many people have been involved in Green Impact over the last ten years, I think it’s over one hundred thousand, that just goes to show there’s a huge political appetite for sustainability and the activism around it.” Says Robbie Young.

And the best part? Today’s students will soon be moving on to become those agents for change in their communities. Time to enroll the next seven million.



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UNESCO Education Sector

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