NUS | Students’ Green Fund

Progress report, year one (Aug 2013-Jul 2014): Executive Summary

Students’ Green Fund (SGF) is providing £5m of HEFCE funding to develop transformative, student-led sustainability projects with real impact and legacy. Through the fund, NUS has helped 26 English students’ unions to develop and deliver 25 ambitious projects that have already led to a step change in student engagement in sustainability. The full report is available at www.nus.org.uk/sgf.

1. Background

The SGF was launched in March 2013 with a supported application process that saw 167 expressions of interest from 130 students’ unions to the value of £31m. This converted into 120 full applications, which resulted in 25 projects being selected for funding. Over the first year, NUS has provided the portfolio of projects with project management, communications and evaluation guidance and support, and has nationally showcased the portfolio.

2. Objectives of the Fund

i) Step change in student engagement in sustainability issues; ii) Students become meaningful agents for change on sustainability; iii) Sustainability remains an institutional priority in the sector; iv) Put English HE on the map for its sustainability efforts.

3. The portfolio of projects

The 25 SGF projects offer a diverse portfolio of activity, combining different sustainability issues, approaches and audiences.

The funded projects are running at the following students’ unions:

To deliver the projects, 33 full-time and 30 part-time staff positions have been created at the local level, supported by 188 student staff. In some cases, the projects have devolved full responsibility to student volunteers through running their own micro-funding schemes, or through the founding of social enterprises.

Education for Sustainable Development has been a focus for many of the projects, baselining and expanding coverage within the formal curriculum, and engaging academics through project activities. A great example of this is the Bristol ESD project.

Linked to this, developing skills and graduate attributes has been a key output for many of the projects. All the projects have provided new practical opportunities for students to gain relevant sustainability skills, and pre and post-intervention surveys have quantified this.

"It has enabled me to get involved in a community that I am new to, learn about sustainability beyond an environmental perspective and learn skills that I never expected to learn as part of my course.” Gloucestershire participant

The development of partnerships and relationships with key stakeholders has been fundamental to the
success of the projects in the first year. Here the ‘parent’ university or college has often played a crucial role, with key contacts providing active support for project delivery, enabling new relationships to be built with previously unconnected parts of the institution. Over 80 partnerships with external organisations have generated a wealth of new opportunities based on their expertise and reputation.

4. Impact

To date 44,839 students and 3,399 staff have been engaged through the projects. Through its dedicated microsite, SGF has had over 12,012 sessions, with 30,167 individual page views.

In external media, SGF work has been showcased in a huge variety of diverse outlets ranging from Resurgence & Ecologist, with a readership of 30,000; food magazine Jellied Eel, with a readership of 50,000 and Blue and Green Tomorrow. SGF has also appeared online on high profile outlets such as the Guardian Online and the Mail Online (with readerships of 8 million and over 6 million respectively). The Newcastle project was the subject of an ITN News ‘and finally’ report. The Exeter project won the 2014 International Sustainable Campus Network Excellence Award for Student Leadership.

Throughout the fund, projects are measuring carbon savings associated with their activities, with early indications at the end of the first year suggesting significant progress towards meeting their targets of 8000 tCO2 across the two years. A full report on carbon savings from across the fund will be provided at the end of year two.

5. Analysis

Whilst each project is unique in its approach, common characteristics can be drawn out in order to understand some of the key ways in which SGF projects are likely to bring about lasting change. A full analysis of the approaches to change is presented in the year one report.

In their different ways, all the SGF projects are innovative and locally groundbreaking. As a portfolio of projects, the activity leans towards the transformational end of a spectrum of change: going beyond previous models and approaches, and reconfiguring relationships between students and staff, unions and schools, and with the wider community.

In some places, SGF projects are developing innovations that are new for the first time anywhere. These innovations include new technologies, new curricula, new businesses, and new settings for learning; notably many of these innovations will be self-funding and outlast the term of the SGF, such as the Hive enterprise at Roehampton.

At their most innovative, SGF projects have transformed meanings and relationships: what it is to be a student, a union, to acquire life skills, to be employable. In so doing SGF projects can be seen as changing the practice of universities to bring it closer in line with what students value: based on ethics and environment, wellbeing, a sustainable economy with sustainable employment, and more inclusive and productive communities.

6. SGF in year two

This is a report on the progress in the first year of the two-year projects and Fund. Although all 25 projects are fully up and running, many of the key interventions, events and activities will be taking place in year two. Some are still blueprints and aspirations; others will be amended and refined in the process of development and delivery. The monitoring and evaluation programme taking place alongside each project will also provide valuable detail on the impact of each project. Through our evaluation, the projects will provide insight for other institutions to draw from as they develop their own work to embed and extend sustainability in their institutions and communities. For a live update on news from the SGF projects please see www.nus.org.uk/sgf.

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