



## Finalist's case study



# The Students' Union at UWE Sustainability Champion - Staff Reusable Plastics



### Profile

- Higher Education Students' Union
- Members: 27,000 students
- 90 staff in the Students' Union
- Urban University, based in Bristol, 5 campus sites.

## About the project

### Summary

Within the Students' Union (SU) sector, whilst striving to achieve the same goals, tension can exist between commercial and non-commercial functions of the organisation. I have striven to bridge this gap in my role as Commercial manager for Licensed Trade. I believe I have become a role model, not only for commercial members of staff, but for all colleagues to embrace a culture of truly working in partnership to achieve our vision, and live our organisational values.

I have successfully created an innovative culture of working that:

- Engages with students as not only customers but, first and foremost, members of the SU at UWE; and
- Meaningfully engages with our elected student leaders and champions continuous change, even if initially at odds with maximising profit.

Through creating the conditions conducive for change and realising the ideas of our students, tangible impact can be seen for our members, the SU and the local community.

### Project partners

Students, University Sustainability team, The Students' Union at UWE Marketing Team, student staff, full time staff, The Students' Union at UWE Green Team, elected Officers at the SU

## The results

### The problem

In the last 5 years, The Students' Union has worked to reduce the number of plastic glasses purchased for bar events. We have successfully reduced the number purchased from approx. 500,000 in 2013/14, down to approx. 40,000 in 2016/17. A 400,000+ cup decrease means that a large saving has been made on resources used and carbon/pollutants created in the manufacture of cups, which translates into a positive impact for the environment.

The problem we had to try to overcome was how to reach our goal of eliminating single use plastic altogether whilst still working within our premises licence condition of not serving glass during events where 600 or more people attend.



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## The approach

I researched reusable plastic use at festivals and other student-friendly events. Frenchay – designed and produced a reusable plastic pint and half pint glass for event nights, glass used during regular service. Although the reusable cups are made from thicker plastic, their use means that fewer plastics will have to be produced along the production line, creating fewer pollutants into the natural environment. In addition, our reusable cups only have to be transported to our union once, saving emissions and fuel resources compared to reusable cups.

Also, we used money from Freshers' budget usually spent on free plastic water bottles for 900 Bower students on reusable water bottles.

## Our goals

Single-use plastic use in the bars has been reduced over the last few years – no plastic used at Glenside and Bower, Frenchay reduced from 500,000 in 2013/14 to 40,000 in 2016/17. Our goal is to eliminate single-use plastic use in the bars in 2017/18.

## Obstacles and solutions

Cost of replacing glasses when broken/removed from the venue	Worked with suppliers to negotiate discounts where possible, and also used drinks brand representatives to supply branded glassware free of charge
Increased cost of reusable plastic bottles compared to single use plastic bottles at Bower campus	Redistributed part of Welcome budget to invest in 300 reusable water bottles rather than 900 single use water bottles. Long-term benefit of reducing cost of purchasing glasses that outweighs the short-term increased cost.
Increased cost of reusable plastic over single use	The reusable plastic cups cost around 10 times what the single-use cups cost. We have spent our annual budget already this year, and are now working to ensure the reusable cups last the year. Instead of a deposit scheme (that we felt would throw up various issues) we brief all staff (particularly security) to ensure no customers leave the venue with drinks.
Getting buy in from staff, and increased workload as a result of washing reusable plastic cups	We introduced and explained the concept at the student staff training day, as part of a session around the sustainability work the Students' Union does.



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## Performance and results

We have so far used no single-use plastic in the 2017/18 academic year, and have done approximately 25% of our annual wet sales to the end of September. Based on last year's plastic use, we can therefore safely estimate that we have saved around 10,000 single-use plastics so far this year.

## The future

### Lessons learned

Feedback from our student staff was hugely important during the project, as I was able to discuss what would and wouldn't work based on their own experiences both as customers and staff, with many of them having seen both sides. This also helped to create the buy in from the staff that we need to make these sort of projects successful.

Confirming the details of the project earlier would have made it possible to include information in the Freshers' mailing, which would have helped with promoting our general messages around sustainability.

I also explored a possible deposit scheme that we did not implement due to staff feedback. I would have been beneficial to have trialed this deposit scheme during one or two of our events towards the end of the last academic year.

### Top 3 learnings from implementing your project

Ensure that information about major sustainability projects is included in next year's Freshers' mailing.

Ensure that student feedback is sought as part of the planning process in future projects.

Allow time to explore all potential avenues for future projects, and time to review before busy periods.

### Sharing your project

The Students' Union Marketing team have been sharing information about the project through various social media channels, and will also be posting out regularly throughout Big Green Week.

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

"The Students' Union are very proud of Paul Dingley to be a finalist for such a prestigious accolade, showcasing the true commitment of our staff team to support our student members and elected officers to embed sustainability into all we do as a Students' Union.

Paul has made a real impact at The Students' Union at UWE, within his permanent and casual staff team, and for his customers. Through Paul's tireless work to create operational change, he is contributing to a shift in social norms and the educational subliminal curriculum we provide for your students."

Tim Benford, CEO, The Students' Union at UWE

### Further information

Website: <https://www.thestudentsunion.co.uk/>

Twitter: @TheSUatUWE

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheSUatUWE/>

LinkedIn: <https://linkedin.com/company/uwe-students'-union>