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Bridging the gap: a case study of a partnership approach to skills development through student engagement in Bristol's Green Capital year

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ABSTRACT

HEIs are well placed to engage with local communities, and can connect students with organisations through several pathways, such as volunteering opportunities, placements, internships, or projects. The University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE), the University of Bristol and their respective Students' Unions have been working in partnership with the city and local communities, using HEFCE Catalyst funding to promote student involvement in sustainability activity during Bristol's year as European Green Capital. The Green Capital Student Capital project has created a broad programme of citywide impact through mobilising the enthusiasm of the city's student body. It delivered a wide-ranging programme of engagement in city sustainability and in so doing developed skills, knowledge and attributes in the student body that support the development of graduate attributes and a more sustainable lifestyle. The project demonstrates how institutions can collaborate across cities and communities to have internal and external impacts for sustainability.

Abbreviations:

ASHE: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings; BGCP: Bristol Green Capital Partnership; CBI: Confederation of British Industry; HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England; HEIs: Higher Education Institutions; NUS: National Union of Students; ONS: Office for National Statistics; SME: Small and Medium sized Enterprises; UK: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; UoB: University of Bristol; UWE: The University of the West of England, Bristol.

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Introduction

Bristol has a record of being innovative and radical, with a vision of becoming an inclusive, sustainable city (Bristol 2015 Company, 2016). The award of the European Green Capital

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status for 2015 (European Commission, [n.d.](#)) was seen not as a reward, but as an opportunity to commit the city to further action. Students can often be problematised, in terms of economic distortions to house prices and the night time economy, and in terms of their role as generators of nuisance. Councils and others external to universities seldom seek to engage them strategically, as they are seen as transient residents. This project set out to demonstrate that whilst the individual students do change, there is always about 10% of the population who are students, with energy and time available for whom Universities and Students' Unions have unparalleled access (Willmore, 2016). Far from being a problem, students should be seen as a unique asset. One of the many transformative aims of Green Capital: Student Capital was to support a positive shift in the public image of students.

Bristol has a university student population of approximately 50,000, some 10% of the population of the entire city. This project sought to transform the engagement of students with the city, supported by a grant from HEFCE's Strategic Catalyst Fund (HEFCE, [n.d.](#)). The aim of the project was to mobilise the student community to tackle the challenging sustainability issues facing the city, using a range of methods for doing so which could be transferrable to other contexts. Bristol's Green Capital status provided a unique opportunity to develop and catalyse the project and sustain a long-term commitment to city sustainability through student engagement activities.

The two public Universities in Bristol – University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, Bristol partnered with their two Students' Unions to develop a project to deliver 100,000 h of student engagement across the public, private, civic, and voluntary sectors in the 2015 Green Capital year. The partnership was large-scale, involving the whole of both institutions at the strategic level, and their Unions. It worked with the City Council and Mayor, Bristol 2015 Company (see <https://www.bristol2015.co.uk/>) and Bristol Green Capital Partnership (BGCP, 2017). The BGCP is a network grouping of over 800 organisations across the city: public, private, civic, and community (<http://bristolgreencapital.org/>). They are large and small, linked by a commitment to trying to make the city more sustainable. That partnership provided the project with unrivalled access to a group of organisations that had already identified themselves as committed to improving the sustainability of the city in some way.

Through this pledge to deliver 100,000 h of student action for sustainability in 2015, the project sought to change attitudes in students and the city. Delivery involved a range of volunteering, internships, placements, and projects. It worked with over 200 organisations, on large- and small-scale projects; some were collective, some individual. Having built the networks to deliver these, the project also pledged to maintain that level beyond 2015, through the development of sustainable networks, and in particular through the creation of Skills Bridge (see <http://skillsbridge.ac.uk/>), a digital platform for sharing opportunities and presenting case studies of achievement to inspire others to volunteer or to ask for student involvement.

Green Capital Student Capital is a large-scale engagement project designed to provide opportunities for students, residents and enterprises in Bristol to engage in shared sustainability activities in support of the city's year as the European Green Capital. The pedagogical rationale underpinning the project is the development of an engaged approach to education for sustainable development. This embraces facilitation of conversation between students and city residents and enterprises, promotion of participation opportunities and the fostering of a sense of shared community between students from two universities and

between students and residents or enterprises across the city. Participation was and is expected to promote questions about behaviour leading to positive change, build understanding of shared issues, connect local issues and problems with global issues and to develop or enhance values supportive of a more sustainable future. Through city – student interactions we anticipate the initiation of a process to develop within individuals and across participating groups a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the city.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the Green Capital: Student Capital project was to mobilise student energy and enthusiasm to support Bristol's European Green Capital aim of creating a sustainable and inclusive city. In so doing the project supports students to develop change agent skills through engaging in the transformation of their city. Through the acquisition of these skills, allied to new knowledge and the development of sustainability attributes, the project sought to support students to become more sustainable citizens throughout their professional and private life course.

The biggest sustainability impact of any university is its graduates, who typically will have 60 years of life post-graduation (estimate derived from ONS Life Tables (ONS, [n.d.](#))). The project took as a starting point the requirement of supporting students to develop their personal understanding of sustainability through providing opportunities that mobilised the creativity of students to transform the city. The project deliberately sought to enable students to experience the transformative power of being engaged in city change activities at various scales from the local neighbourhood group to citywide actions. Through these activities which embodied the practice of sustainability, the project expected students to realise that sustainability is not just about theory, but rather it is about how we live our lives, how we engage with others and how we create new opportunities for ourselves and others. Further, the project enabled students to develop skills critical to their future employability. The CBI Education and Skills Survey (2016) of UK employers reported that “demand for people with leadership and management skills is also expected to grow rapidly” (p14). Experience of working on defined tasks such as those delivered by this project enables students to develop management, and in some cases leadership, skills.

The project recognised that through its actions it could demonstrate that students are a significant positive resource for cities and not the ‘noisy neighbours’ that they are sometimes characterised as being (see The Guardian, 15 May 2007; or Bournemouth Echo, 3 May 2016; for examples of negative stereotyping). Whilst not denying that this might sometime be the case it is much more common for students to engage in a wide range of voluntary efforts in their place of study. This is true internationally, for example success has been achieved elsewhere in using students for community-benefit (e.g. in South Memphis (Lambert-Pennington, Reardon, & Robinson, 2011) and Oberlin (Orr & Cohen, 2013). Mtawa, Fongwa, and Wangenge-Ouma (2016) discuss community engagement by universities in the context of knowledge exchange. It is the notion of scholarship of application (applying theory to practice and vice versa) which offers useful context for the current project. These examples indicate that students are willing and able participants in a range of voluntary efforts in their place of study. Students benefit from a framework to connect and structure the elements of their voluntary contributions with their academic studies so that one reinforces the other thus enhancing the opportunity for learning gain.

Green Capital: Student Capital set out to provide a framework in which students could engage in city-based sustainability activities, that supported the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about the city in which they study and moreover to provide the opportunity for the student effort to be recognised by the project and for that activity to be a meaningful contribution for the city on its sustainability journey.

To achieve its overall aim the Green Capital: Student Capital project set five main objectives:

- (1) To increase student engagement in business, community and voluntary sector organisations through fostering student and organisation connections.
- (2) To foster an awareness in the wider community of the potential scale of impact of students as positive change agents,
- (3) To undertake dissemination activities to examine the role of HE in Green Capital initiatives, aimed at ensuring wider impacts.
- (4) To conduct a robust evaluation of the project activities to understand the impact and value of student engagement.
- (5) To demonstrate the potential for universities and their Students' Unions to work together across institutions to contribute to city scale change.

Implementing the Partnership Approach The ambition and scale of the project was made clear in its headline commitment to provide 100,000 h of student sustainability engagement in the city. The project sought to deliver sustainability impacts at three scales: the city, the organisation, and the individual, and designed its methods and interventions to deliver change in each domain. The critical task confronting the project at its inception was how to mobilise students to engage in the project. A multi-pronged approach was developed comprising a clear statement of the offer to and expectation of a student if they engaged, regular communications by students for students, amplification of the message by platforming on existing university and SU formal and informal mechanisms and rewards and public recognition for individual or collective student effort. The project was deliberately conceived and executed as an open, inclusive, and exploratory endeavour and the project's overarching aims and objectives created an umbrella in which an initiative could flourish independently but could still see itself as part of a greater whole. Students are often faced with conflicting calls to engage in social, economic or environmental initiatives and the project sought to establish in students' minds that the opportunities are equally important, in that they each contribute in their own way to the sustainability agenda. In turn, the project team hoped students would see how their chosen activities contributed to the collegiate good, and work through synergy, not competition. The subject of the engagements ranged across the multiple domains of sustainability, some were more focused on economic issues such as business planning, whilst others set out to help community and voluntary groups meet social purposes. Other focused upon environmental initiatives such as conservation or clean up campaigns. Schools were the focus of many projects that benefited from student initiative, energy and enthusiasm. Examples of the activities undertaken in Green Capital: Student Capital include raising money, assisting community groups, helping in work days, designing and delivering workshops, greening SMEs, managing wildlife corridors, and working with NGOs to develop new business plans. The variety of opportunities enabled students to select activities which either used their discipline

specific knowledge and skills or were more general in the skills required. In both cases, students gained employability-relevant experience and evidence of their commitment to self- and community development (see Bournier & Millican, 2011 for discussions of the context for employability benefits of community engagement by students).

The Green Capital: Student Capital project has from the start followed a methodology of partnership and cooperation between the universities. This novel approach involved new learning about inter-institutional practices and working within the city. It has demonstrated that students can be significant agents for change in the community *when relationships are properly brokered and supported*, at both a macro- and micro-scale. It has shown that a structured approach to student engagement in sustainability beyond the academy can transform students' understanding of what a sustainable life is and their role in the community, and foster the skills and experience they need for those lives. It has demonstrated that the student community is a resource for any city serious about tackling sustainability, and furthermore it has shown how student participation in engagement activities of this sort enables graduate attributes to be developed and refined by participants.

The project has established a firm foundation for ongoing sustainability action across the city. An essential aspect of this has been a focus on the visibility of student engagement to the community. Through its ambitious engagement targets and support for an exceptionally broad range of different activities, the project has had a cumulative effect on Bristol's sustainability consciousness – focussing the public spotlight on sustainability engagement and demonstrating just what is possible through collective action. In this way, students' activities are not only a force for good in Bristol and the wider region, but through their visibility serve also as inspirational examples for members of the community.

The project has been successful in large part due to its experimentalist governance approach to promoting and increasing engagement. The project is hosted between the two universities, both as equal partners, and both eager to try out new approaches and innovative methods for tapping into the potential of the student community. Through enshrining this flexibility at the core of the project, it has been possible to focus on establishing what really counts in terms of engagement, and to be responsive to what it is that both students and organisations want to do.

Discussion

The project has demonstrated a method of partnership that is successful but not bureaucratic. It has established that large HE institutions can work together to a set of common aims without having to structure their respective activities in the same way (Clayton et al., 2016). Both universities and their Unions have faced the challenge of conducting the Green Capital: Student Capital project within their own respective institutional structures. The project has shown that so long as the activities within different institutions work within a common framework of principles and intended outcomes, things don't always have to be done the same way (Clayton et al., 2016). These outcomes need to be clear to external partners, and enable comparability within the project, but with sensitivity to the fact that there is great richness in experimentalist approaches around how to implement agreed aims. The importance of scale to successful and continuing partnerships has been identified. Whilst individual elements may have a life cycle, if there is a strong core relationship this does not affect the overall success of the project. Thus, the two universities, their Students' Unions and the

BGCP have built and sustained a strong relationship (Clayton et al., 2016). Within this, individual projects may come and go, initiatives may start and not succeed – but the overall momentum can continue. This reduces the risks and brokerage costs of creating and sustaining each individual relationship. The project has demonstrated that building momentum and fostering dialogue are critical features of success for student engagement projects with community and related groups. The scale of this project makes it easier to build that momentum quickly, and for each individual project to draw upon that momentum and dialogue from the start rather than having to build its own (Clayton et al., 2016).

The institutions have developed a broader city profile, particularly in areas where the universities have historically been less well known. Cities recognise that universities contribute to the local economy (e.g. Oxford Economics, 2017) as large local employers (between them the universities employ nearly 10,000 people), or through international research reputation. The method deployed in Green Capital: Student Capital harnesses student potential not just as actors in the local economy, but as a positive resource for city transformative projects.

The project deployed a number of different approaches to engage and mobilise students. The project deliberately targeted students across the full range of the universities' activities, identifying and deploying opportunities in curricular and extra-curricular engagement (Clayton et al., 2016). The main routes through which students were engaged were:

- Volunteering – working closely with the volunteering teams and students' unions at each institution for maximum reach and to take advantage of pre-existing systems and networks.
- Placements and internships – working with the relevant administrative support teams at each institution it was possible to identify a wide range of suitable courses in which placements and internships could be redirected or enhanced to provide a sustainability opportunity for an SME or community group. In order to enhance the reach and impact of the internship offer and to provide support for organisations who could not otherwise meet the cost of internships a set of Green Capital internships were created especially for the 2014/15 and 2015/16 academic years (see Gough et al., 2016 for details). One of the internships supported a Green Student Press Officer to record case studies of Green Capital activities.
- Projects – working with academic staff it was possible to use the Green Capital year as a focal point for student projects across the academic faculties of the two universities. Importantly this did not focus solely on the obvious sustainability related provision within the curricula but deliberately sought out opportunities across the academic disciplines of each institution. This created a very involved learning experience conducting valuable work with strong relevance to both local and global issues (Longhurst et al., 2016).

A simple conclusion from the success of this multi-pronged approach is that the everyday activities of HE institutions create numerous opportunities for different types of engagement. The project has shown the importance of institutional knowledge, particularly about the rhythm of the academic year for different disciplines, in identifying and unlocking new opportunities for student engagement with enterprises and community organisations.

An important feature of the approach is its emphasis upon overall impact. Traditionally efforts to engage students in community activity have tended to be based on individual projects, which can be resource intensive to sustain, and when they naturally run their course and peter out this can be perceived as failure. This isn't the case, of course, as all projects have a particular life cycle: some might persist for years, whilst some might bloom and fade in a single year or even a matter of months, and yet most will have had a measure of positive impact. By focussing on the larger-scale picture, it has been possible to empower and support activities through their life cycle – the identification of opportunities, the development of relationships, growth, sustaining them and then ultimately their natural end – without this being seen as failure. The aim being to ensure that at any one time many different engagements were underway cumulatively leading to fulfilment of the target of 100,000 h of student engagement activity. The impact of the project can be viewed at three different scales, the individual, the organisational and the citywide scale as shown in [Table 1](#).

Implicit in the aims and approach of the Green Capital: Student Capital project has been the intention to enhance student learning about sustainability and about the city of Bristol. The project was deliberately conceived to support the acquisition of graduate attributes and provide opportunities for students to acquire additional skills and knowledge that will be helpful in their future professional and private lives. In particular the project provided opportunities to explore and enhance capabilities and competencies in terms of independent action, team working, cultural awareness, self-motivation, communication and frame these within an ethical approach to engaged learning.

Table 1. Scales of impact.

Scale	Impact
City	The cumulative impact of the project at the city scale led to it being reported as one of the European Green Capital 2015 highlights and an invitation to contribute to the Bristol method, an online repository of 'how to plan and execute a Green Capital year' (Clayton et al., 2016).
Organisation	<p>The Green Capital Student Capital project activity contributed over £1 million in economic value to the city.</p> <p>The project engaged with over 220 organisations in the city. These ranged from small NGOs operating at the neighbourhood scale, to charities, SMEs, public bodies, schools and trade networks. In all cases student change makers helped the organisation on their sustainability journey.</p> <p>The project also sought to influence and develop a widespread sustainability culture in the two higher education institutions (HEIs) and their Students' Unions. One indicator of the success of this initiative is the Green Team in the SU@UWE which has grown to become the largest society in this very successful and active Union.</p> <p>Through collaboration with the Bristol Green Capital partnership and Bristol 2015 Company (2015) the project regularly communicated with over 800 organisations raising awareness and creating opportunities for students.</p>
Individual	<p>The core aim of the project has been to engage students in a personal transformative experience in the city. Over 8000 students (approximately 1 in 6 of all students) took part contributing to the total of some 130,000 h of student engagement.</p> <p>The Change Maker Award was given to over 700 students in recognition of significant and substantial contributions to the project. The Awards were made at public ceremonies hosted by the Green Capital Partnership.</p> <p>Students developed, tested and enhanced their Graduate Attributes.</p> <p>These actions also touched hundreds of university staff who supervised, supported or simply encouraged student efforts.</p> <p>The individual members of the 220 plus organisations hosting student activity were assisted in reaching sustainability goals they had set for themselves or the organisation and feedback and evaluation evidence suggest that they developed a positive perspective on the role of students in the city.</p>

Student recognition and reward

To enable the community and students to celebrate their achievements, the two Universities have developed a new award, the Change Maker Award. This award has two levels, Change Maker, and Change Maker Gold. Public award ceremonies recognise the contribution of students and these are attended by many of the organisations students have worked with, and by civic leaders (Clayton et al., 2016). Over 700 awards have been made to date. They award holders have to have carried out sufficient hours of community engagement, but also need to have promoted the benefits of engagement to others (see Gough et al., 2016; or Longhurst et al., 2016; for details).

The Change Maker award captures data on a wide range of student sustainability activity and other inputs whilst also providing formal recognition of an individual student's contribution. On reflecting on their own Change Maker award, one student said, '[students] will be able to put on their CVs that they have been awarded "Change Maker" accreditation and may have made useful links in terms of future career prospects. It will have improved confidence, given additional skills, broadened their contacts and increased a sense of worth and wellbeing amongst students. They will also feel more a part of the city in which they live and have a sense of belonging and an appreciation for the citizens of Bristol.' Trought (2012) noted that 'students' ability to develop relevant employability skills that will differentiate them from the competition' will help them to secure graduate positions (p. 4).

The project has proven transformational for individuals, over 97% of students felt their involvement had a positive impact on the organisation and themselves, they enjoyed it, felt the activity was worthwhile and generated in them a feeling of being useful to the community or enterprise. Over 8000 students have taken part in the project, roughly 1 in 6 of all students, providing over 125,000 h of sustainability activity, equivalent to over 74 years of work. Using ONS data this represents a financial contribution of £1,194,085¹ to the city's green economy (see Clayton et al., 2016 for details). It is changing student understandings of what it means to live in a city, and changing our city itself, by, for example, influencing a business's decision to come to Bristol or helping a local NGO develop a new business plan. Furthermore, it has affected attitudes – creating transformation both for the individual and for the group, as one participant organisation commented: *'It has been fantastic to work with the University as well: lots of people in this area don't go to university or have any connections. It has really changed our perceptions'*.

The partnership is committed to sustaining the brokering elements of the project through the Skills Bridge platform (<http://skillsbridge.ac.uk/>). This provides a single 'front of house' for local organisations to engage with universities. People do not necessarily know what universities or their students might do, or how to navigate through the labyrinthine institutional structures. Skills Bridge provides a point of access and includes case studies, both to help students identify what they might like to do, and most importantly to encourage local groups to spot the sorts of things students might do for them. The BGCP has adopted Skills Bridge as their preferred student – community engagement tool.

External evaluation

Norris and Weiss (2017) highlight the changing nature of criteria used to assess the impact of community engagement work by universities; from student outcome focused to 'increasingly

taking a more comprehensive approach to capturing an array of activities and assessing how they relate to a variety of outcomes' (p. 11). Francis, Kilonzo, Nyamukondiwa, and Institute for Rural Development, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa (2016) have also done work on the criteria by which the impact of universities on community development should be assessed (albeit in a developing world context). Reference to active long-term university-run programmes or projects in communities and whether university programmes address the needs of the community are deemed to be important (Francis et al., 2016). To assess and evaluate the impact of the Green Capital: Student Capital project, the partnership worked with the NUS to train a team of students from both universities to lead an evaluation process. There were two aims for the evaluation:

- To verify the quantitative outputs of the Green Capital: Student Capital project;
- To make a qualitative assessment of the outcomes of the project.

In keeping with the spirit of the Green Capital: Student Capital project, this evaluation was entirely student-led. The partnership entrusted the evaluation of their project to those who may be their harshest critics, but also those who stood to benefit the most from the project's impact. Following intensive student evaluator training, the evaluation was comprised of two key phases. The first was a documentary evidence review and the second was a series of group interviews (National Union of Students [NUS], 2016).

One of the student evaluators pointed to the range of activities undertaken and the way in which these activities enhanced the quality of the student experience.

The most impactful part of the Green Capital, Student Capital project was the sheer number of students which have actively participated in activities, on such a wide and varied scale, be it volunteering, placements etc. – and how these activities overall enhance the student experience. (NUS, 2016)

Student evaluators were able to verify that the project outputs had been achieved and that significant positive outcomes had resulted from the project's engagement with students and the wider community. The evaluators reflected on:

- The strong collaborative working which had been achieved,
- Levels of engagement achieved which far exceeded the outlined targets,
- A genuine focus on legacy and long-term impact,
- And a dedication to ensuring the meaningfulness of the project (NUS, 2016).

The lead evaluator summed up the project in the following quote:

Each distinct component of the Green Capital: Student Capital project has had a positive outcome for students and for the wider community. Not only have the objectives set out for the project all been met but the true meaningfulness of the student engagement has been proven. The impact of this project will continue to have positive effects on the individual students who have been involved, the working relationship between both universities and both students' unions, the way in which the universities engage with the city and the wider community, and the way in which the universities of future Green Capitals engage with their own communities. (NUS, 2016)

Transferability of the concept

Partnership working between a university and its students' union should already be a well-established business process. Most cities in which more than one university is located will have a wide range of connections between the institutions and between their students' unions. These existing multiple connections can be activated where a common purpose can be identified. In the case of Bristol, the Green Capital award created an opportunity to showcase the contribution of students to achieving the aim of a sustainable city. Whilst the UK is unlikely to have any further European Green Capital awards there are numerous city awards in the fields of culture and sport where cross city partnership activity with students can be conceived and executed.

Conclusions

The project has demonstrated the benefits of large-scale engagement, and has identified key factors in building such a successful approach. The project has enabled students to partner with community groups, SMEs, charities and public bodies and in so doing to acquire or enhance their skills, encounter potentially unfamiliar settings and to place their theoretical knowledge in a practical context. In so doing, students have developed and refined their graduate attributes whilst encountering experiences that enable them to become more sustainable citizens throughout their professional and private life course.

Whilst the approach was city-based and used Bristol's status as European Green Capital as a catalyst for the transformation, the work has implications for the potential to engage students on a large scale in other cities and regions, and potentially in any area which has a suitable identity and university community.

The Green Capital: Student Capital project was an ambitious but successful attempt to engage students at scale in pro sustainability engaged learning across the year in which Bristol was the European Green Capital. The learning benefits for participants in the project will play out over time but undoubtedly will lead participants to better understand the city sustainability challenges and the contribution they have made to support organisations and individuals in the city. In turn this reinforces their academic studies through the opportunities provided by practice orientation and engaged learning. The evidence for this is quite compelling and drawn from the detailed feedback from participants. All participants reported that their engagement in the project was worthwhile whilst 98% identified it as having a positive impact on their understanding of the issues facing the city, their role in supporting the city on its sustainability journey and upon their wider learning.

Note

1. The economic contribution was calculated based on assumptions of an average 37 h working week and 46-week working year, using the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) 2014 figure for median UK hourly income (excluding overtime) of £11.61 for volunteering and project work hours, and the institutions' standard wage for placements and internships of £6.75 per hour.

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