



Sustainability Committees Best Practice Guide

April 2020

Contents

Introduction.....	3
What is a sustainability committee?	4
Challenges	4
Further Information	4
What characteristics does a successful sustainability committee have?.....	5
Institution-wide representation.....	5
Awareness.....	6
Senior Management Engagement.....	7
Strategy	8
Action	9

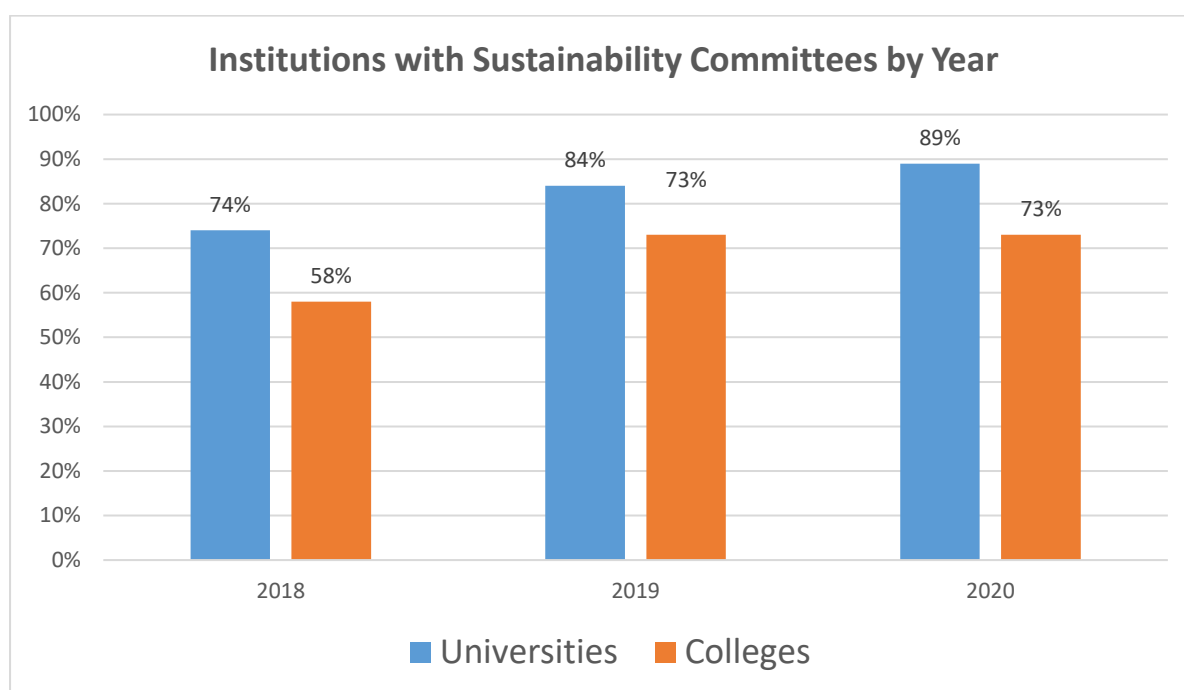
Introduction

From 2017-2020 EAUC-Scotland carried out a Sustainability Committees Project with support from the Scottish Funding Council. This project aimed to determine how to form committees and if institutions that had committees were more successful at bringing about sustainability change.

Through this work we have determined five factors that lead to a successful formation and continuation of a sustainability committee. These factors are:

- Representation
- Awareness
- Senior Management Engagement
- Strategy
- Action

At present, 73% of Scottish colleges and 89% ¹ of Scottish universities have sustainability committees of some kind in operation. Two years ago, only 58% of colleges and 74% of universities had sustainability committees in Scotland. This represents a 15% rise in both universities and colleges; a significant increase which has resulted in an increase in sustainability focused projects and achievements within them.



This guide will go through each of the five factors outlined and provide an explanation and practical advice on how to go about each one.

¹ EAUC-Scotland Institution Engagement Calls and Annual Survey Results

What is a sustainability committee?

As defined in previous reporting, ***Sustainability Committees*** will refer to **a group of representatives from across the institution (including professional services staff, students and academic/lecturing staff) who meet on a regular basis to address and improve environmental and social sustainability matters for their university or college.**

These Committees can be categorised as two main types:

- 1) they may be embedded in the institution's formal Committee structure whereby they report into a Board, Court or similar executive body; or
- 2) they may be an advisory group which addresses sustainability projects.

We have not included groups which indicated no ability to report up to senior decision makers, or to take action on institutional matters, as these would not count as a Sustainability Committee in this context.

Challenges

There are of course many challenges involved in running a sustainability committee, not least the time element and difficulty in involving staff and students from multiple disciplines. Whilst the challenges can be hard to overcome the results of good sustainability committees show that they can be effective at promoting change and engaging both staff and students who would otherwise see sustainability as someone else's role.

Further Information

This guide is intended as a starting point but there is further support available from EAUC-Scotland if required. We recommend joining our JISC Mail lists where you can email the whole sector and ask for support from other institutions and raise any issues you are having. Also, you can contact EAUC-Scotland directly at Scotland@eauc.org.uk with questions and we are very happy to attend sustainability committee meetings or meet with management teams in your institution if you require further support.

What characteristics does a successful sustainability committee have?

Institution-wide representation

The most effective committees have representation across multiple departments. This means that staff will be involved from out with the estates and sustainability teams and that students will also be involved. Representation is arguably the biggest hurdle that institutions face, as often staff from other teams are nominated or sent to the meetings but aren't really engaged and don't consistently attend. It has been highlighted that "Sustainability Champions" who possess strong leadership skills are the best people to be on committees as they can drive change and prompt action. This can be at odds with the idea of representation though, as a team may not have a person like that. Whilst power dynamics can be problematic it is vital to have a good representation, as even less engaged staff will still be able to take some actions away or bring their own concerns. It is important that committees are inclusive and accepting of the fact that some staff know less or are less committed. This is not a failing and can actually strengthen your committee as these people likely represent a large portion of your institution and their concerns or confusion may highlight where you could communicate better.

Key Recommendations:

- Include students and student unions/associations in the development of the committee. According to an [NUS survey](#), 80% of students want their institution to do more on sustainability and can be key drivers of action.
- Get broad representation, you don't need a group solely of experts, encourage new people to join and participate.
- Don't limit involvement by department, successful committees span all departments and include teaching staff

Further Resources

- See the [University of Sheffield](#) for an example of a committee with wide representation and a description of how they operate.

Awareness

A recent EAUC survey showed that 85% of individual respondents² from institutions with a sustainability committee were aware that they had one. Of the small percentage that were unaware of their institutions sustainability committee, the majority were academics. While 85% is a strong figure, this still shows that with several thousand staff in large institutions, there is a significant group of people who do not know about their sustainability committee's existence. Awareness and representation are tied together, if staff from every department are on the committee then it is more likely departments will know it exists. The high proportion of academics reporting they are unaware of their sustainability committee is most likely because it does not feature highly in their research and teaching priorities. Inviting people into the committee as guests can be a great way to increase awareness and show people what the committee does and why it should be prioritised. For example, if you are looking to improve the embedding of sustainability into the curriculum, then bringing in an academic who might have experience in this field to give their views is a good way to gain internal expertise, raise awareness, and ensure it is clear why the committee should be prioritised.

Key Recommendations:

- Publicise the presence of the committee across campus in as many ways as possible. Use physical signs advertising it, social media, email campaigns and email signatures to indicate who is on the committee and what they are achieving. Make use of the staff intranet if you have one.
- Celebrate success and make sure people know why change has occurred and the impact it has had.
- Invite guests, not everyone can give up their time to be on the committee full-time, but most can make a one-off appearance on the subjects they are knowledgeable about.
- Submit your projects for consideration to win a [Green Gown Award](#) and gain wider recognition for your work.

Further Resources

- See the [University of the West of Scotland's latest annual report](#) as an example of how to lay out your sustainability accomplishments.

² EAUC-Scotland Sustainability Committees Survey 2019

Senior Management Engagement

Having senior staff on the committee is a great way to increase the action and impact of a committee. Whilst senior staff like vice principals may have less time, their decision carries more weight and it demonstrates top down leadership. Senior staff can also allocate funding, make decisions and streamline the decision-making process.

The most commonly reported need for institutions with committees is more SMT support with survey respondents asking for increased senior-level buy-in, support, engagement and top-down approaches. Institutions with senior staff on committees also reported that their senior staff are more engaged and committed to sustainability than those whose senior staff are not involved.

Key Recommendations:

- Get as many senior staff onboard as you can, even if they are not knowledgeable on the subject it is important that they see they have staff who are.
- Demonstrate to the senior staff why the committee is necessary and highlight what it can achieve/has achieved.
- Sign up to the [Sustainable Development Goal Accord](#) to show senior commitment and commit to the sustainable development goals.

Further Resources

- See [West Lothian College's recent Sustainability Summit](#) as an example of how senior management can lead the way and support the sustainability agenda.
- Also see the EAUC's [Making the Business Case for Sustainability Guide](#) for examples of how to raise sustainability up the agenda for senior management.

Strategy

Sustainability Strategies and Action Plans are important for the effective planning and implementation of sustainability throughout institutions. They allow for clear goals for environmental, social and financial sustainability to be incorporated into the institutions' overall Strategic and Operational Plans.

Many institution-level Action Plans (such as Carbon Management Plans and Climate Change Action Plans) and Strategies around sustainability are out of date, which presents both a problem for Sustainability Committees as well as offering an opportunity for the committee to get involved in developing the next iteration of these strategic documents. Some committees have been involved in such activity over the last year and have contributed very successfully to create real change.

Key Recommendations:

- Help the institution form new action plans when possible, often they are written by people without sustainability knowledge who might welcome the help.
- Signing up to the [Sustainability Leadership Scorecard](#) which helps demonstrate areas of strength and opportunities for improvement;
- Seeking wider institutional strategies to be reviewed by the sustainability committee e.g. procurement, health and wellbeing, student experience etc.

Action

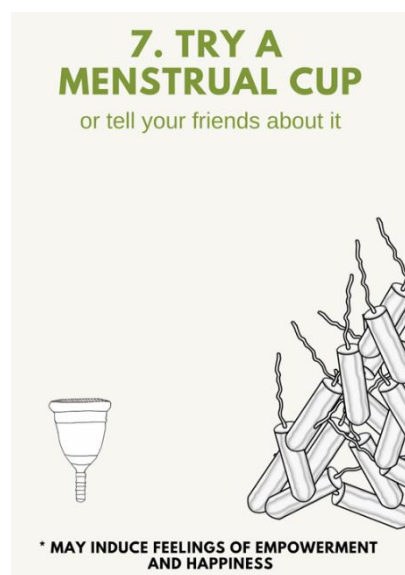
The existence of a dedicated action plan can set the work plan for Sustainability Committees and ensure progress towards goals. However, some elements of the Committee's activity are likely to need to be responsive to priorities raised over the year by staff and students or influenced by changes in policies or national campaigns. The importance of good agenda-setting and minute-taking (including actions to be taken before the next meeting) in ensuring actions are completed should not be underestimated.

Key Recommendations:

- Keep listening to new ideas that are raised and respond accordingly, keep trying new things and don't let the committee go idle
- Make sure everyone leaves the meeting clear on what actions they are to take
- Follow up with staff who are facing challenges and support their efforts
- Don't be afraid to try big projects, small groups of people sometimes feel like they can't create change. Aim high, you'll be surprised what you can do and how many other people come onboard when they hear your idea!

Further Resources

- Have a look at the [SOS Green Impact Programme](#) if you are not sure where to start!
- Check out the [SOS Green Impact Programme for Unions and Associations](#) for ideas your institution's Students' Union or Association could do.
- If you want to raise the profile of sustainability issues with students and staff but have limited opportunities signpost them to local volunteering opportunities, such as those with [The Conservation Volunteers](#) and [Volunteer Scotland](#).



Following Students' Union feedback in planning the delivery of the Scottish Government's Sanitary Product Scheme at the University of Stirling, reusable options were included and over 300 Mooncups were collected by students.