

Sustainability inter-disciplinary hackathon for staff and students

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Student voice/student-led projects/
staff-student partnerships



Institutional Context

A London university (Alliance grouping) with c.16,000 students. Disciplines include healthcare, engineering, computer science, art and design and business. Innovation is a core value. The HackCentre runs problem-solving events within all faculties, seeing c. 3,000 students annually. The university is developing its sustainability strategy, encompassing all aspects of university infrastructure, teaching, research, and community.

Audience

Students and staff

Key words

Hackathon; Sustainability Strategy; Community of Practice

Outline of activity

Hackathons are problem-solving workshops where individuals come together in teams to brainstorm solutions, such as a new product or way of thinking, responding to a defined challenge for organisations or businesses. In this online event, students and staff worked together to find creative solutions to improve sustainability at Kingston University (KU).

Students and staff were encouraged to think creatively about tackling environmental issues. The Hackathon was also a means of gaining support and engagement for a Community of Practice in Sustainability, which would promote practice across Learning and Teaching, Research, Community Engagement, and Operations.

Each mixed team of participants was given a real-world challenge to work on from one of six areas: energy, waste, transport, water, food and nutrition, built environment and land. With support from university experts, students and staff developed ways of tackling common environmental problems and presented their findings to all participants at the end of the half-day session.

“We discussed ideas from an environmental and cost effectiveness point of view, and then drafted a plan on how organisations such as Kingston can promote more sustainable forms of transport – from using renewable energy to light up walkways on the campuses, to promoting vehicle-sharing schemes among students and staff.”

Godfrey Nzan (MSc Environmental Management)

Ideas included an online marketplace for furniture and other items no longer needed in halls of residence, more cycle paths on the university’s campuses, promoting the health benefits of cycling, setting up a bicycle buddy system to support students who were not confident cyclists, and organising a culinary event to showcase cuisines from around the world and reduce food waste.

“We discussed sustainability education and proposed ways that a module could be introduced into all university courses to change behaviours around energy use.”

Andrew Saperstone (MA Sustainable Design)

The Hackathon concluded with some clear ideas on how to shape the university's sustainability commitment and policies. The sustainability pilot provided insights into how to integrate more of these events into the university curriculum in future. Students and staff from different disciplines were able to work together and share ideas, which made the potential of a Community of Practice clear.

“It generated a cross-university discussion about sustainability and brought together people with shared interests and varied skills. Some of the ideas might be introduced into the University's sustainability strategy and the event could lead to further work within curriculums, research and community projects through the new Community of Practice.”

Amanda Baker, Project Manager, Hack Centre, Kingston University

Intended project outcomes

Students and Staff:

- + identify creative activities and issues to include within a Sustainability strategy or to develop as projects
- + participate in creative ideation and problem solving processes more generally

Staff:

- + build active learning through sustainability into the curriculum
- + initiate a Sustainability Community of Practice as a means to support and develop university strategy and activity.

Further guidance for project leads

We worked across three hours to set the scene, provide time for facilitated group work (30 minutes), and hear presentations. Scene setting included some initial thoughts about Sustainability in general, the university's strategy in particular and the Design Council's Double Diamond (2019) .

We developed a collaborative workbook based on the Double Diamond which could be accessed and worked on by all members of each group simultaneously. We worked online through Microsoft Teams, using meeting links as breakout rooms. Each room had a student facilitator from the MA Sustainable Design course. The Estates team participated to share and gather ideas for the wider university strategy.

Further guidance for participants

Extend your experience, develop your problem-solving capacity, and add to your cv through a collaborative activity designed to influence university strategy. Working across disciplines generates new personal connections. Apply your knowledge in new ways, and experience first-hand how other disciplines might approach the same problem. Be prepared to participate by sharing your ideas and exploring uncertainties.

Evaluation

Outputs so far include: the establishment of a Sustainability Community of Practice, inputs into the university strategy, a buddy-sharing app in UX development with an Masters student, a staff CPD workshop on Sustainability as a Pedagogic Tool, and three courses have decided to run Hackathons for the first time next year.

Useful resources

Design Council's Double Diamond resources:

www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/what-framework-innovation-design-councils-evolved-double-diamond

How to Run A Hackathon: hackathon.guide/