Keeping sustainability alive

From March 2020 when COVID-19 restrictions prevented the usual community forum meeting on campus, the Sustainability Team pivoted engagement programs and activities to online delivery. This included taking Green Impact – the University’s flagship sustainability behaviour change and engagement program – to an online format, producing a virtual Sustainability Tour of the Parkville campus, and collecting valuable community feedback on sustainability topics and initiatives.

Green Impact from home

Moving Green Impact to an online format brought a new level of accessibility to the program, allowing staff and students from all locations, faculties and departments to participate with more flexibility. A total of 414 people across 52 teams were signed up to the 2020 program, with 26 teams audited and 227 action team members.

The program supported staff and students to stay engaged with sustainability from home, helping them to positively influence friends and family to make sustainable changes while maintaining social connections with peers and colleagues. This extended the program's impact to wider audiences than ever before. A total of 1,223 colleagues of participants engaged with the program in some way while a total of 712 sustainable actions were recorded. All surveyed participants reported that the program helped them to feel connected to others during COVID-19 restrictions, to better understand how sustainable actions relate to them, and to better understand how their actions impact on issues connected to sustainability.

Virtual Tour

As campus activities transitioned online, new demand for a way for staff and students to connect to campus was identified. Based on the popularity of on-campus tours, sustainability and biodiversity initiatives, the Sustainability Team developed an online platform through which users can explore sustainable initiatives, services, and infrastructure on the Parkville campus remotely. Users can navigate 13 stops across the online map, with experts across the University explaining each stop through an embedded video.

The map provides an opportunity to showcase a broad range of sustainability activities from around the University to new audiences, including international and interstate students, organisations, alumni, prospective students and industry partners. The stops and covers include sustainable operations, research, student led programs and broader community engagement initiatives. The platform has since evolved into a valuable teaching and learning resource and is being used in University developed internal and external modules. There are plans to expand this to other campuses.

Energy savings from building de-operationalisation

With COVID-19 restrictions significantly reducing the number of staff and students frequenting campuses, the University took action to save energy and emissions through de-operationalisation of Parkville buildings with significant ongoing energy demand. Approximately 495 million kWh of energy was saved (a 36% reduction from baseline energy consumption), resulting in financial savings of over $630,000. The energy saved from de-operationalising these eight buildings is equivalent to 5,050 tonnes of carbon or the energy required to power 678 houses for a year.

Listening to our community

During the slowing of on-campus activities due to the pandemic, the University took the opportunity to gather feedback from staff and students on sustainability across the organisation. The Sustainability Team conducted the biennial University-wide Sustainability Survey online between May and June (see case study). More in-depth and interactive consultation with the wider University community, as part of the development of the new Sustainability Plan, occurred online over a 24-week period in late 2020. Across 12 feedback sessions and an anonymous online form, 439 students, staff and alumni shared their views on the priorities they would like to see reflected in the next Plan. Feedback and recommendations from both consultation processes are being used to evaluate the University’s existing sustainability initiatives and to inform the priorities and targets of the University’s new Sustainability Plan.

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