

# Research in Action – Living Labs approach

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



## Audience

Students, Academic Staff and Professional services staff

## Outline of activity

Research in Action is a university wide initiative designed to help students gain authentic knowledge and research skills and gain experiences that will enhance their employability. Using the Living Labs or co-production approach, the project provides an opportunity for stakeholders, including students, academic and professional staff and external stakeholders, to work together on collaborative research projects tackling real-world sustainability problems based around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

## Intended project outcomes

Through participating in the project, students will have the opportunity to

- + undertake a project with potential to make real changes at the university or within their local community
- + enhance their communication and networking skills through collaborative working beyond their discipline
- + apply their knowledge and research skills to develop practical solutions to real problems
- + develop transferable skills such as project management, resilience and problem solving.

## Further guidance for project leads

The project is coordinated by a permanent staff member in the Social Impact Team (SIT) to help match students, academics and professional/operational staff and facilitate collaboration. This role is key to understanding how social and environmental sustainability projects fit with expertise and the timescales and scheduling of projects in the academic calendar. This collaboration also supports academics in identifying additional data and resources that could inform their teaching and other innovative learning opportunities.

The projects can be offered in a variety of formats, including through dissertations or intra-curricula activities, as illustrated below:

- + An illustrative example of an intra-curricula project is within a Marketing postgraduate module which involves around 100 students undertaking group research projects based around areas such as plastic waste, gender bias in corporate social responsibility professions and students' carbon footprints. In this model it was important to discuss project briefs with the module convenor well in advance of the module delivery. As part of the project students were expected to undertake market research, produce a report and present their findings and recommendations to stakeholders.
- + A final year Mathematics student created a tool in Excel to calculate carbon absorption of trees for their final year dissertation. The project required inter-disciplinary collaboration with academics from Mathematics and Geography, as well as with senior professional services staff from SIT, the Carbon and Energy Team, and Grounds and Gardens to ensure their tool was accurate and useful. This project went on to win a national Green Gown Award for its impact.

We found pockets of 'Living Lab' approaches taking place across the university. Whilst excellent practice was identified, implementing a formal process ensured that all students were made aware of the opportunities available to them and teaching staff could support themselves and each other by sharing resources and ideas.

Providing opportunities for operational, professional and academic staff to collaborate helped break down silos and diversify thinking about projects. Encouraging collaborative projects bridges the gap between teaching, research and operations which allows staff and students to feel part of the wider university community.

The success of this approach has led to the development of an interdisciplinary workbased-learning module where groups of students will work with local organisations on their sustainability challenges. The benefits to the students, organisations and university are widespread and we look forward to this module being launched in the 2022/23 academic year.

## Further guidance for participants

Students are asked to provide their formal report/dissertation and are also offered the opportunity to present their project and recommendations to the relevant university working group(s). This provides students with the opportunity to present their work to a different type of audience and feedback to the stakeholders charged with implementing their recommendations into policy and practice.

Students are asked to provide a short executive summary of the project, further developing their communication skills and supporting dissemination of information across the university and relevant organisations, increasing the awareness of the project and the wider initiative.

## Useful resources

The EAUC have the following resources that were useful in developing projects and contributed to:

[www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/news/launch\\_of\\_eauc\\_living\\_lab\\_programme](http://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/news/launch_of_eauc_living_lab_programme)

[www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/better\\_student\\_outcomes\\_through\\_sustainability\\_](http://www.sustainabilityexchange.ac.uk/better_student_outcomes_through_sustainability_)