

Feedback on LHS Staff / Student Suggestions competition

Many thanks indeed to all those who entered our Life and Health Sciences Sustainability Competition in December! We received a large number of ideas and suggestions about how we could make the School and the University more sustainable, and it is clear that our students and staff do care a lot about our environmental footprint.

We thought you would be interested in some answers to the questions you raised in your entries, so below is some information relating to all the suggestions made. It has taken us a while to compile, but we hope that you will agree that Aston is making good progress in many areas.

Recycling and Using Recycled Products

In our competition, many people said that we don't have enough recycling bins - for paper or for other products such as plastic or cans. Some people suggested that paper recycling in particular should be available outside key offices and near printers. Within offices, it was suggested that we should get rid of 'old fashioned' bins and replace them with recycling centres, so it is easy to recycle and difficult not to. Continental-style 3-way bins were also suggested.

Colleagues in Estates have actually been working on improving our recycling for a while now. This is more complicated than simply providing new bins. We need to ensure that there are enough cleaners to empty the new bins, and that we have contracts with appropriate recycling services to deal with what we throw in them. The location of the bins also needs to be considered carefully to take into account important issues like fire safety. An agreement for recycling collections has now been made with the City Council, and bins are going to be gradually rolled out across the University. Each location will be looked at individually to assess which bins are needed (i.e. paper only, general waste, etc.). In offices the plan is to remove any individual bins and replace them with recycling centres as suggested. This will be an ongoing process as we will need to closely monitor how well it is working. In the meantime, we can confirm that paper recycling bins are now available in our PC labs in the main building, adjacent to the printers.

It was also suggested that we could do more to recycle plastics in our research and teaching laboratories. The types of plastic which we use in LHS laboratories (such as tip boxes) can't be recycled in standard recycling schemes, but it is often preferable environmentally to encourage suppliers to take back and reuse them. We are setting up a working party to audit our specialist waste and to work with colleagues from Estates and Purchasing to find some solutions.

One entrant enquired whether we were already recycling cooking oil. We do have a waste collector of old oil – they are registered and licensed to collect waste oil from catering premises. The oil is then refined and used in other products, for instance bio diesel.

People suggested that we also provide facilities for recycling batteries (especially in Optometry), phones, and printer cartridges; it was mentioned that some charities accept these items as donations. One good idea was a 'mobile amnesty day'.

Some of these ideas are already in operation. Aston's last Mobile Amnesty Day took place on the 19th January as part of a national campaign. We collected around 25 phones and the proceeds went to Acorns Children's Hospice. There is also a "Guide Dogs for the Blind" bin in the main entrance which accepts mobile phones as well as stamps, old coins, keys and various other items (listed on the box). It is located near to the Sky lifts, and is a waist-high green cardboard box. Victoria Johnsen in Estates & Facilities is also collecting stamps for the RSPB. Send any used, un-used, new, old, foreign, or UK stamps to Victoria and they will be forwarded to the RSPB to support their Save the Albatross appeal.

Estates are currently looking into getting recycling facilities for household batteries on campus, and hope to then extend this to cover more types when possible. As for printer cartridges, LHS recycles our office ones through their suppliers, as do ISA.

A lot of people made the very good point that we should be better at advertising our recycling facilities! This is obviously true and Aston's new recycling containers were selected on the basis that they are eye-catching

Finally, several people suggested that we should always use recycled paper. Using recycled products is as important as recycling itself - it 'closes the recycling loop'. In fact the School of Life and Health Sciences recently switched to 100% recycled paper. It does cost us very slightly more money, but not prohibitively so. We think that we were the first academic School at Aston to make a complete switch but we know the others will soon follow suit!

Reusing

Even recycling uses energy and emits CO₂, so the really green among us suggested ways to cut down on usage of paper and other consumables. It was suggested that we should use our own cups instead of disposable ones in vending machines and cafes, and that we should have water fountains for people to refill bottles rather than buying new ones.

Interestingly, it turns out that colleagues in Catering have already been developing the idea of a kind of "cup for life"; a reusable cup which can be refilled in all Aston's catering outlets. Watch out for its launch in the very near future. For drinking water, you may have noticed that certain taps in the bathrooms around campus are labelled "drinking water" and these are safe to drink from and can be used for refilling bottles. Where there are water coolers in offices, we are exploring replacing them with a more environmentally-friendly plumbed-in type of water cooler.

It was also suggested that we stop selling bottled water completely! We agree that bottled water is environmentally bad news, but people still do insist on buying it! On the bright side, though, Catering are about to start selling "Resource" water, which, although bottled, is 'carbon neutral' because the company offsets its emissions by giving money to preserve rainforest.

It was suggested that we should encourage people to use both sides of paper. This should also be reflected in the cost of printing. On checking with ISA, we have found that printing is double-sided by default in our computer rooms. The pricing also offers an incentive; for example, black-and-white single-sided A4 printing costs 3p per sheet, but double-sided is only 4p per sheet.

Reducing consumption

Actually the first of the environmental '3Rs', reducing usage of consumables was the topic of many suggestions. Among our competition entries there was a strong focus on the ways we could reduce paper usage by using electronic methods, such as electronic meetings with laptops and/or projectors, and online paperwork such as letters and coursework feedback etc.

The idea of buying laptops for use in meetings has been mentioned before, but it's interesting to consider how much paper we would need to save in order to justify the purchase of a new computer, either on cost or environmental grounds. From a purely money-saving point of view, for ease of calculation let us say that a laptop costs £500 and a ream of paper (500 sheets) costs £5. One laptop would have to result in the saving of 50,000 sheets of paper. If the laptop lasts for 5 years this equates to 10,000 sheets of paper a year for 5 years. From an environmental point of view the case is even weaker: we are now buying recycled paper and we endeavour to reduce usage by efficient printing practice, re-use as scrap and recycle it. There are also environmental costs in manufacturing a laptop, shipping it from China and disposing of it about 5 years later. You may need a laptop for other reasons, in which case it is good to use it in meetings too, but we don't advise the purchase of laptops specifically for meetings rooms.

In our offices however, we are increasingly using electronic methods to manage information about students: MAP now manages our enrolment and registration, as well as distribution of exam results, and our student records are kept on SITS. There are some aspects of administration which we still do in paper format, such as providing the majority of student feedback. Lecture and practical handouts are our biggest use of paper, but this cannot easily be avoided.

Another good suggestion was that lecturers should remember to make their Blackboard notes computer-friendly, rather than (or as well as) printer-friendly so students are not obliged to print them off. We will take this excellent suggestion through to the programme areas.

Some entrants feel that a "think before you print" at the end of our email signatures would be effective: this is free and we could all try doing it – just copy and paste the following into your existing email signature. 🌱 **Please consider the environment before printing this e-mail**

A couple of staff-members suggested refusing paper copies of Aston Aspects, the University magazine for staff and associates of the University. There seems to be a strength of feeling about this and Communications inform us that there will indeed be a move to online distribution in pdf format soon. There will be an article about this in Aspects beforehand so that people are aware of the change.

Paper towel dispensers were identified as a major culprit for paper wastage in our loos. Is it ever possible to take just one towel? This has been a topic of much debate, looking at the merits of paper towels vs. hand dryers.

New, energy efficient hand dryers are being installed in some refurbished facilities (look in the new loos near the great hall). Where paper towels are still used, a new contract for supplies has been put in place to try and improve the situation, by having the right towels in the appropriate dispensers!

The winning suggestion from staff in our competition was a description of how we could use blackboard to manage meetings and database paperwork. A working party is currently putting this into action! Watch this space.

The winning suggestion from students was the idea of a 'student swap', either an event or an online forum where students can exchange anything - an excellent way of saving money as well as reusing things. This will be put into action as soon as possible.

Saving Energy

Many people suggested that we should use energy-saving lightbulbs everywhere, and that we should use room-occupancy sensors wherever possible. It was correctly pointed out that saving energy saves money too, which has to be good for the University!

Graham Faulks from Estates & Facilities gave us this answer: "There is a policy for the purchase and issue of lighting from the stores - standard stores now issue energy saving versions of the lights that we replace (similar in the Nelson building). There is an effort to ban Halogen lighting completely, as this does not contribute to overall lighting levels, and is often purely for effect.

When a refurbishment includes lighting then this will be based on "Smart fittings" although not all refurbishments include lighting. This is very often a cost issue. Retrofitting sensor controlled lighting very rarely works as a business case in old buildings for a variety of reasons. However any department could request and fund an upgrade of the existing light fittings as opposed to trying to control the individual circuits".

One entrant suggested that either the student rep or the lecturer takes responsibility for turning the lights off before leaving the room. A good idea in principle! Difficult if the responsible person needs to dash off to another lecture before everyone is ready to leave. But perhaps we could all get a bit better at taking responsibility for this?

It was suggested that when new appliances are bought, they should have the highest possible rating for energy-efficiency. Items such as fridges are procured through a consortium of Universities; the current purchasing agreement for these items does not include energy rating, but Aston now has a Sustainable Purchasing Group which seeks opportunities for improvement in these areas when contracts are renewed.

Several suggestions related to making computers automatically switch off when no-one is using them, or cutting the time before they switch off even shorter. At present, the PCs in our computer labs switch off automatically after 30 minutes of being un-used.

Transport

A few suggestions related to transport, especially the provision of bike-shelters and the possibility of a car-sharing database. It was also suggested that we do as much as possible to inform people about sustainable transport and fuel-efficient driving.

We have now received planning permission for the new bike shelters on campus which were chosen after discussions with the Bicycle Users Group (BUG). These will offer facilities for up to 120 bicycles or motorcycles, and be located around the main building and student guild. Once final funding has been established these will be going up as soon as possible. We do already have a car-sharing database. Information on this (and relevant links) can be found on the transport pages online: <http://www.aston.ac.uk/environment/transport/>

Our aging building....

We all agree that our 1930's building is draughty and difficult to heat. It was suggested that we seal or insulate the windows better, that we turn down the heating by 1 degree, and even that we install solar panels on the roof, perhaps with grant funding.

Here is a response from Graham Faulks in Estates: "In order for solar to be viable, there are several criteria which need to be satisfied. I looked specifically at Solar for pre heating the Domestic Hot Water and it did not really work. It is very easy for any potential savings to be negated by the power required to run the system, especially when long pipe

runs are involved. Account has to be taken of the maximum possible heat gains available in the summer, if these exceed any available loads then the system has to be down rated. This then has a significant impact on the winter performance.

With respect to windows, we are trying to put in place a policy to ensure that all refurbishments include funding for some secondary double glazing. We have been given a significant amount of money to address this issue for some parts of the wings. In terms of actually replacing them this is a huge issue both in terms of cost and planning.

With respect to heating in the main building, we have to try and maintain a balance between what is reasonable and the level of complaints we receive. Graham would support any initiative to reduce heating levels; however this would have to go hand in hand with a policy on the use of portable electric heaters”.

Other Suggestions

We loved the suggestion that every student should plant one tree to symbolise their involvement with the University and to absorb CO₂ and sunlight. We have more than 8000 students, so we could make a wonderful forest but the problem would be finding enough space. However we think that there may be a scheme we could join to plant trees elsewhere, perhaps through a charity, so keep an eye out for more news on this in future.

A couple of suggestions were related to gardening; growing our own veg or having a wildlife garden. We loved these ideas too. Our campus is somewhat of a green oasis in the middle of a city (despite being a large building site too!). The University is working towards a 5-year biodiversity action plan for the campus and the new residences also incorporate some innovative approaches to improving campus sustainability such as green roofs. Follow this link to learn more about the sustainability aspects of campus redevelopment. <http://www.aston.ac.uk/environment/what-were-doing/campus-redevelopment/>