

SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects

2025/26 Project Report

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SOS UK

SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects is a collaborative project run in partnership between the British Academy and Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS UK).

SOS UK is an environmental education charity working to reshape the education with climate education and climate action at its heart. Through our programmes, projects, and support we aim to:

1. Change the way we teach, what we learn, and how that's assessed so climate and nature is a priority
2. Make sure the places where we learn show us what's possible, helping us to help nature and the climate
3. Ensure students from every background can play their role in protecting and building a better world



Summary

SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects adopts the British Academy's acronym **SHAPE**, referring to Social Sciences, Humanities & the Arts for People, the Economy, and Environment.

Running since 2020, the project supports and empowers students in social sciences, humanities and arts to actively contribute to real-world sustainability challenges set out by their institute in interdisciplinary, collaborative teams.

Launching its 5th year in March 2025, SHAPE Impact Projects 2025/26 participating institutions included: Aston University, Cardiff University, Glasgow School of Art, the University of Bedfordshire, and the University of Salford.

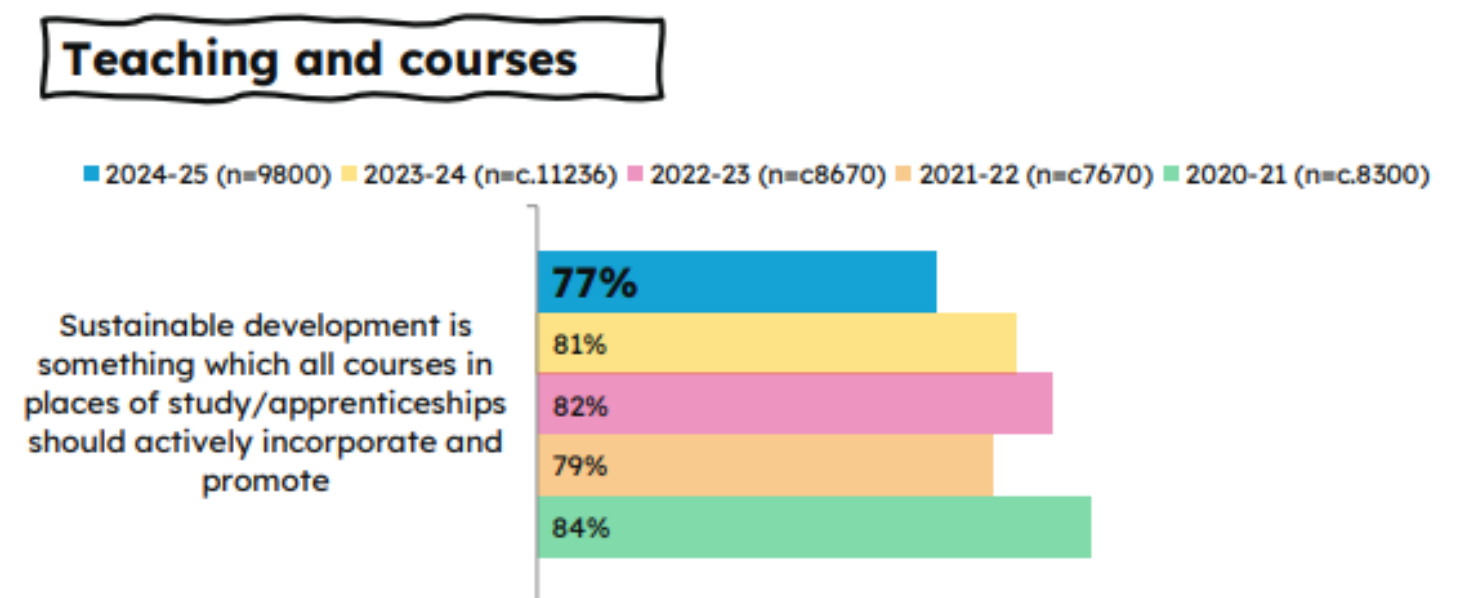


Background & Rationale

SHAPE disciplines are crucial for tackling complex sustainability challenges. These disciplines provide insight into how societies experience the climate crisis and how policy can impactfully respond.

SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects provides students from SHAPE disciplines the opportunity to see the relevance of their discipline in shaping a sustainable and just future, understanding the value of their knowledge and skills in solving real world social and environmental challenges through applied learning.

Research by SOS UK shows that around 77% of university students would like to see sustainable development actively incorporated and promoted through all degrees, particularly through applied learning. Students also report collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and experiential project work as being very beneficial to their skills development. These results are statistically significant across disciplines, being expressed by students in both STEM and SHAPE disciplines.



Source: SOS UK Sustainability Skills Survey 2024-25

Overview

Staff support

March 2025 – September 2025

SOS UK delivered workshops on topics such as challenge setting and student recruitment.

Institutional leads recruited other support staff, set their sustainability challenges, and recruited their SHAPE Impact Projects student groups

Student support and project work

September 2025 – January 2026

SOS UK launched SHAPE Impact Projects 2025/26 to students

SOS UK supported students on project work by delivering cohort and institution specific workshops on topics such as M&E, green skills and presentation skills

Students connected with British Academy Early Career Researchers (ECR) who advised on projects

Conference

26th – 27th February 2026

Student groups presented their project work to attendees who provided feedback

Informal and formal networking opportunities offered to students, staff and Early Career Academics

Workshops and keynote speeches by Professor Nick Pidgeon, ArtHole, and the British Academy

Overview



Five institutions registered to take part in SHAPE Impact Projects 2025/26



Nearly **forty-eight students** working together within their interdisciplinary groups



Nine staff from these institutions working to support their students



Representation from students across a **range of disciplines** including:

- Product Design
- Socially Engaged Photography
- Law
- Geography
- Architecture
- Psychology
- Economics
- Business Management



Ten student groups formed, each tackling its own sustainability challenge

Conference

The 5th annual BA SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects conference saw nearly 60 students and staff convene in person and online across 26th – 27th February 2026 at Cardiff & Vale College.

The conference included:

- A keynote speech from British Academy fellow Professor Nick Pidgeon
- Presentations from all six SHAPE projects on their work, findings and next steps and feedback on presentations from attendees for peer learning
- Session led by Early Career Researcher Dr. Sacha Hasan exploring inclusive learning environments
- Creative workshop on zine making led by local art group ArtHole
- Session led by British Academy exploring the role of the British Academy, how research and policy are used to create positive societal change, and the utility of SHAPE discipline skills and experience within their work





"Being part of SHAPE Impact Projects taught me so much about myself, the way I work, and what meaningful change actually looks like.

One of the biggest things I have learnt is how powerful it is to slow down, listen deeply, and really understand the people at the centre of an issue. It reminded me that good service improvement isn't just about systems it's about humanity, dignity, and equity. I've also learnt how to use my strengths more confidently."

Student participant at the SHAPE conference

Student Projects

Universities taking part in SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects recruited interdisciplinary student groups with participation from students in courses spanning Fashion Design, Law, Social Science, Product Design, and Economics at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Summaries of the 2025/25 SHAPE student projects are presented across the following slides.

University	Project Title
Aston University	<u>Waste (Sustainability)</u>
	<u>Waste (Justice)</u>
	<u>Waste (Wellbeing)</u>
University of Bedfordshire	<u>Home and Away: Educational Action for P.E.A.C.E in the Communities</u>
	<u>Developing a Visual Campaign to Celebrate the University of Bedfordshire's Success in the People & Planet Green League</u>
Cardiff University	<u>Belonging (Cynefin)</u>
	<u>Swap Shop</u>
Glasgow School of Art	<u>GSA Salvage</u>
University of Salford	<u>Re:SAL</u>
	<u>Reuse Revolution</u>
	<u>Seeds of Change</u>

Aston University: Waste (Sustainability)

Overview

Through the lens of the Birmingham bin strikes, this project aims to:

- Understand the growing problem of food waste pile ups and their substantial, unsustainable effect on the environment
- Explore how sustainable social practices can be better implemented in Birmingham to enhance environmental sustainability and counteract the negative impact caused by food waste

Actions

- Desk based research into the problem of food waste
- Site visit to SUEZ Recycling Centre and conversations with SUEZ workers

Outcomes

Publication of findings from the site visit/conversations with SUEZ workers and potential resolutions in an online sandpit (publication date TBC)



Aston University: Waste (Justice)

Overview

- Birmingham has one of the lowest reported recycling rates in the UK
- The bin strikes highlight structural problems with the waste sector in Birmingham, including pay cuts and uncertain job security

Actions

- Conducted desk-based research into the employment law and the specific issues being experienced by the Birmingham waste workers, resulting in the ongoing bin strike
- Site visit to SUEZ Recycling Centre and conversations with SUEZ workers

Outcomes

Recommendations for Birmingham City Council:

- Reform the Waste Recycling & Collection Officer role (withdrawn in January 2025) to ensure workers safety and avoid pay cuts
- Reform the Employment Act 2025, for example:
 - Grant the ability to outsources workers to be able to participate in a lawful strike with legal protections



Aston University: Waste (Wellbeing)

Overview

- Workers employed at waste management sites are at an increased risk of musculoskeletal disorders
- Low pay and hazardous exposure contributes to waste management worker dissatisfaction in their roles

Actions

- Conducted desk-based research into the wellbeing impacts on waste management workers
- Site visit to SUEZ Recycling Centre and conversations with SUEZ workers

Outcomes

- Recommendations for Birmingham City Council:
- Quarterly interviews for staff with a psychologist
 - Introduce regular breaks for waste-management workers
 - Ensure proper PPE for waste-management workers
 - Implement targeted training programmes



University of Bedfordshire: Home and Away:

Educational Action for P.E.A.C.E in the Communities

Overview

Exploring how universities respond to wellbeing, identity, displacement, and belonging; with focus areas:

- The Srebrenica Genocide
- Al-Walaja (Palestine)
- Perinatal Depression in Student Mothers
- Migrant and International Students
- Autism Inclusive University Charter

Actions

A combination of desk-based research and the utilisation of the lived experiences of team members to understand the issues presented and possible routes of action.

Outcomes

Multiple outcomes across each focus area including the creation of podcasts, a website, a mini documentary, and a University Autism Charter. All outcomes being utilised to support engagement with the university to improve their own practices.



University of Bedfordshire: Developing a Visual Campaign to Celebrate the University's Success in the People & Planet Green League

Overview

- The University of Bedfordshire achieved '1st Class University' status in the People & Planet University League 2025/26
- The average student isn't aware of the positive sustainability work happening at the university



Actions

- Desk based research into the imagery used around sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals
- Storyboarding and developing animation skills to create final videos/animations centered around the chosen theme of 'transition'



Outcomes

The creation of two visual campaigns to be used across the University of Bedfordshire's app and digital screens around campus to promote the People & Planet league table ranking and importance of sustainability

Cardiff University: Belonging (Cynefin)

Overview

- Student belonging at university aligns with several aims of Wales' 'The Well-being of Future Generations' act
- Belonging isn't explicitly referenced in any Cardiff University policies

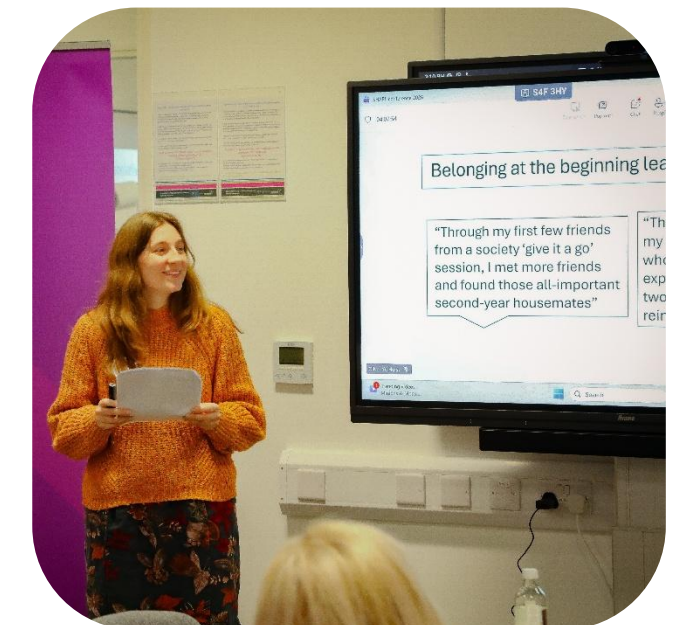
Actions

- Reviewing Cardiff University's relevant policies to identify where belonging currently exists
- Utilised the team's lived experiences of belonging at Cardiff University
- Created a Cynefin Map to highlight where opportunities to create belonging existed on campus currently

Outcomes

Three policy recommendations for Cardiff University:

- Progress from EDI policy to EDIB policy, in line with the international policy landscape
- Offer ongoing re-engagement opportunities to help everyone catch the 'belonging boat'
- Develop a minimum 'belonging in buildings' standard for university buildings



Cardiff University: Swap Shop

Overview

Research shows a decrease in the use-life of clothing and an increase in production / consumer spending (leading to an increase in textile landfill)

Actions

- Conversations with Cardiff Students' Union, relevant societies, and previous swap shop event organisers
- Student survey on fast fashion, with results including:
 - 96% of respondents said they are likely to attend a swap shop event
 - 92% of respondents have shopped second-hand
 - 64% of respondents have resold items

Outcomes

Created a strong evidence base and outline for Cardiff University Swap Shop created, to be developed further by Cardiff Students' Union



Glasgow School of Art: GSA Salvage

Overview

This project aims to build on the existing GSA systems to promote sustainability, reduce material waste, encourage the reuse of old materials, and create a stronger link with the local Garnehill community

Actions

- Conducted research (survey, interviews, collaborative conversations) with students, staff, and external stakeholders
- Understood the current reuse provisions at GSA and the barriers to overcome in implementing a more central approach
- Designing a reuse space to meet student needs, using an existing empty plot on the GSA campus

Outcomes

- Plans to launch the GSA Salvage Hub later in the academic year
- GSA Salvage Instagram account to follow progress and connect with collaborators / students





University of Salford: Re:SAL

Overview

- The UK produced 191.2 million tonnes of total waste within 2020, with 85% of this being from England (Gov.uk, 2020)
- Universities are large contributors to the build-up of waste and can play a crucial role in supporting a circular economy (Stephan et al. 2020)
- 91% of students agree their place of study should actively incorporate and promote sustainable development (UNESCO, 2018)



Actions

Utilising desk-based research into waste, sustainability, and similar platforms to better understand the issue, the systems which already exist on campus, and the ideal process for Re:SAL

Outcomes

- Designed the 'Re:SAL' app platform and user process for the free sharing of unneeded items on campus by students
- Created a communication plan to support the launch of the app





University of Salford: Reuse Revolution

Overview

- Accessible materials reuse station housed in the University of Salford's New Adelphi building
- Beyond a prototype storage space, the Resource Hub reclaims the built environment and highlights the importance of student-led creativity on campus for kick-starting sustainable everyday studio cultures



Actions

- Research tours identifying what is already working well (e.g. reducing 3D printing waste) and how to improve via interviews, surveys, and mapping waste streams
- Repurposed reclaimed materials to create the pilot Resource Hub

Outcomes

- Published university website and Medium articles and Instagram page
- Advocacy for a larger Resource Hub, sustainable practice workshops, and hiring students for long-term project continuity





University of Salford: Seeds of Change

Overview

This project aims to:

- Reimagine an underused campus space as an interactive green area
- Connect sustainability with everyday student experience as part of the university's sustainability goals
- Test how participatory design can shape public space

Actions

- Engaged students and staff to understand community wants for the space
- Explored the challenges of the proposed space (e.g. potential vandalism) to shape the design
- Conversations with external stakeholders to support design, budget, and use of space

Outcomes

- Project exhibited at Open Eye Gallery (Climate Lab)
- Project design and budget confirmed, ready for next steps (including final installation)



Student reflections

Through the year, students were supported to reflect on their experiences and skills development through reflective logs, surveys and in their final presentations.

Student reported development in areas relating strongly to education for sustainable development, including:

- Research skills
- Project management
- Understanding of holistic sustainability and climate justice
- Critical thinking
- Integrated problem solving
- Resilience and adaptability
- Co-creation and collaboration
- Taking real world action



Student reflections



“I have learnt to develop my leadership skills, strategic skills, assertiveness, confidence, communication and teamwork skills.”

“I really loved networking and the chance to meet other like-minded students and possibly collaborate with them.”

“Being involved in the SHAPE Impact Project has given me a sense of fulfilment knowing that I have contributed to growth and change in the society.”

“My understanding of sustainability has grown, allowing me to understand it in a holistic way. I have realised that environmental sustainability requires socially sustainable practices to drive cleaner, greener future for all.”

“Being involved has inspired me to get into policy!”

Staff reflections

“The conference was a space for inclusivity. Everyone felt welcome, seen, and acknowledged in a supportive atmosphere.”

“I was really proud of the work our students did, and how autonomously they worked.”

“Great to see how many other institutions seem to take this work so seriously.”

“I loved being a mentor for the students, they were engaged, interested, and passionate about the subject matter.”

“I learned a lot about how other universities connect with their students, this was very impactful and opened my eyes quite a lot.”



Looking ahead

The 2025/26 delivery of SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects highlighted the valuable skills and perspectives found across the wide range of SHAPE disciplines. Students reported and demonstrated personal and professional development, and created a strong sense of community, necessary in the interdisciplinary working needed to tackle sustainability and social justice issues.

Through the delivery of SHAPE Impact Projects 2025/26 SOS UK noted a number of learnings and recommendations for future years, including:

- More in person events to encourage relationship building and support learning
- Allocating more time to groups during the SHAPE Conference to ask and answer questions
- Providing greater links with the British Academy's Early Career Researcher Network
- Increased support for student groups in understanding the links between their challenge and policy

These learnings and recommendations shaped the decision to run the next cohort of SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects 2026/27 regionally in North-West England, allowing many of these point to be addressed.

The scheme continues to grow in terms of impact and depth over the years of developing and delivering it. It plays a powerful role in students' learning journeys whilst at universities, giving them a chance to begin or deepen their understanding of sustainability through real life challenges.

It's a joy to see the creative and innovative solutions that the students come up with and how they apply their academic expertise to addressing, at times such similar problems, yet their suggested outputs vary so much - this is what SHAPE Impact projects are all about!

Meg Briar (Director of Development and Delivery, SOS UK)



As we complete another successful round of SHAPE Sustainability Impact Projects, and the students and staff involved go back to their institutions with energy and enthusiasm for the role they can play in sustainable development, the message could never be stronger for why we must support and strengthen our SHAPE disciplines in higher education.

This year's projects have really dug deep into the way sustainability issues are affecting communities and how we can find place-sensitive, people-focused solutions by drawing on SHAPE research and insights. It's great to see researchers and students working together, applying their knowledge and skills in novel but practical ways to matters that they care passionately about and making a real difference

Adam Wright (Head of Public Policy, The British Academy)



All photography by Ralph Adebayo Taiwo, MA Socially Engaged Photography, University of Salford.
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