

Prof Dr Jonathan Parker, Prof
Dr Sara Ashencaen Crabtree,
Joseph Dixon

Bournemouth University, UK

What a waste! Reflections on student recycling behaviours

Context

- In the 2019-2020 academic year, there were approximately 361,000 students occupying university-maintained property in the UK and over 175,000 in private-sector halls. Students, at the beginning of their independent lives with the most formative years for pro-environmental behaviours upcoming are vital to generating a more sustainable society in the future.
- Study of student recycling in halls of residence

Background

- “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing” (Greta Thunberg at the United Nations [UN], 2019).



- Climate Crisis
- United Nations
SDGs
- COP26
- Recycling rates
remain low – 45.2%
UK, similar across
EU
- Little research on
students as future
leaders

1) influence of others, 2) education and information, 3) physical structures, and 4) attitudes and motivations

Influence of others

influencers

- Parents
- Student peers at university/in halls of residence

impacts

- Influence works both ways – to recycle/not to recycle
- Attachment to influencer is important

Education and information



- Higher levels of education important to increased recycling
- Not enough on own

Physical structures

- Environment and convenience important
- Availability, adequacy, proximity of ways of recycling important



Attitudes and motivations

- Information
- Incentives
- Management of process
- To feel part of a community, and feel every member of this community is participating;
- To have knowledge, or be increasing knowledge;
- Accessible, convenient recycling facilities; and
- To have, or be developing positive environmental attitudes.

The study

- Purposive sample of 12 students
- Semi structured interviews – recorded and transcribed
- Thematic analysis
- One university hall of residence in UK
- Ethics permission through Bournemouth University – some of sample known to the interviewer

Student Perceptions of Recycling Strategies



Limited by perceived lack of ability to behave sustainably

Costs

- *When I think of something sustainable, I think of it as being like oh my gosh it's £10 whereas if I got something that wasn't sustainable it would only be like £2. I just think of it [sustainability] as being so highly-priced.*

Convenience

- *'some things we do recycle and some things we don't, and it basically depends on what is easier to clean'*

Physical limitations

- Size, location, and labelling and colouring of bins available; inconsistencies
- Kitchen bins too small
- Bins far away
- *'in the kitchen, we have two bins. We've got food waste and then recycling, and people are really confused. Sometimes they put things into the recycling because it's not food but it's also not recycling. So, either the bins need to be better labelled or maybe there needs to be a third bin.'*



Limited by a lack of confidence

- Need additional information
- Clear recycling labels and coding system
- Lack of role models and support from hall staff

Self-limitation - confidence

- pro-environmental beliefs but did not always result in recycling: *'I will buy loose onions and stuff because for me it's just more financially friendly just because it goes to waste if I buy a big multipack [in plastic]'*. - **cost is important.**
- **Peer influence also important** - both ways

Limitations to recycling...

- a perceived lack of ability to achieve sustainable ideals
- financial costs
- perceived convenience associated with not recycling
- by the limited size, location and labelling of bins
- by the infrequency, inconsistency and basic level of information supplied
- the lack of engaged role models to establish recycling behaviours

What can be done?

1. Recycling strategies should aim to provide a consistent and adequate provision of bins across the estate with clear labelling and colouring
2. Strategies should be established to empower students to make full use of their existing knowledge, supported by information campaigns to counter ideas that sustainability and recycling are costly and inconvenient
3. Students need to engage with recycling strategies. Whilst not a solution to the current climate crisis, increasing recycling represents an important step in the process
4. Strong and positive role models are needed

Any questions?