Course notes

Getting equipped to bring organic and local food into universities and colleges

Soil Association
Universities are a highly significant food market for two reasons – they collectively spend over £60 million on food and drink every year and they have the duty and the privilege of educating tomorrow’s decision-makers today.

“The university sector’s food budget is a potentially powerful instrument because the power of purchase can, and should, be used to enhance the quality of food in higher education, a sector that is lagging way behind schools in providing for healthy eating.

“By promoting a healthier eating environment, where organic, local and organic locally produced nutritious food is routinely available, the higher education sector could help to weave sustainable development concepts into the warp and weft of everyday life – and then universities could rightly claim to be practising what they preach.

“This timely and invaluable guide from the Soil Association will help them to do it.

Kevin Morgan, School of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University
Introduction

Ever increasing numbers of people are choosing to eat more healthily. They want to know where their food comes from and how it has been produced. Universities and colleges are in a unique position to provide good quality, sustainable food to a receptive audience and influence change in both buying and eating habits.

This booklet is designed to help students or staff who are thinking about establishing local, organic and organic local food initiatives at their university or college. It is not intended as a comprehensive guide but seeks to offer an overview of the inspirational activities that many universities and colleges across the UK are undertaking.

As you will see from this booklet, many different types of schemes and initiatives can be implemented, including:

- Sourcing organic, local and organic local ingredients by university catering facilities
- Opening an on-site café or restaurant serving organic, local and healthy food
- Establishing a regular farmer-owned organic box scheme delivery
- Organising a regular farmers’ market
- Establishing food buying groups for students or staff.

This guide highlights the key steps some universities have taken themselves, as well as further sources of information and advice to get you started.
In spring 2006, the University of the West of England’s (UWE) catering and environmental services departments began working in partnership with the Soil Association to deliver the Soil Association’s Food for Life targets (see below right).

Mark Webster, of UWE’s environmental services department, explains. “The partnership began with the idea of changing the way that catering services sourced their food for meals. However, we wanted to make sure that the changes we introduced would be fully understood and supported by all the staff involved – and not just those buying it.

“We adopted the ‘whole university approach’ to the changes, and so the work focused on four key areas: catering requirements and menus; food purchasing, both from suppliers and farmers; catering staff involvement; and engagement and promotion. Initially, we looked at the volumes and purchasing patterns of all our fresh produce. We then asked our existing suppliers if they could source more local and organic food. The Soil Association found local and organic farmers and helped us approach them to see if they could supply UWE through the existing contracted suppliers.

“The Soil Association were key to assisting us with checking provenance and traceability of the local food coming from the existing contracted suppliers. Our meat supplier was not certified to handle organic meat, so we contacted a local organically certified abattoir and butcher who had previously provided organic burgers for our Freshers’ Fair. The traceability of their meat was excellent – even of the non-organic produce – which was important for us. They complied with all the necessary licensing and this along with their proven flexibility and favourable terms
of business, has resulted in them becoming a regular supplier for UWE. Since they can supply directly from the farmer, a link has been removed from the supply chain.”

While looking at the purchasing and supply, Jayne Seymour – UWE’s catering operations manager – began reviewing existing menus.

“The Freshers’ Fair barbecue in October 2006 enabled us to test out student reactions to organic food. It was a huge success: we replaced the usual burgers with organic local ones and for the first time ever we ran out and could have sold the organic burgers twice over. This gave us the confidence to make changes to our menus.”

“Chefs and catering staff are involved in the process and encouraged to provide input on menus. The Soil Association ran a day at an organic farm for our chefs and catering staff to give them an insight into practical farming. There was also the chance to design dishes using organic and local ingredients. This was great for increasing appreciation of food and inspiring our catering team about the work. Not only have we now incorporated local and organic ingredients in our dishes for students and staff, we’ve introduced a local food menu to our hospitality catering service.

“Currently, we use organic local beef mince and burgers, local sausages and dairy products, and organic chicken legs. It’s exciting to be able to make these changes, which we are introducing gradually to get them right and make them lasting. There are more planned!”

Sue Burton explains how the project expanded beyond the catering services. “The Freshers’ Fair in 2006 provided the perfect opportunity to promote the new initiative. The Soil Association had a stand and talked to students about local and organic food, gathering views

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**Food for life targets for food sourcing**

Food for Life Partnership, led by the Soil Association aims to transform school meals and food culture in schools. The approach and targets can be applied to any public sector, or other large, catering operation. The targets are:

- 75% of all foods consumed to be made from fresh and minimally processed ingredients
- 50% by value of meal ingredients to be sourced locally
- 30% by value of the food served to be from organically certified sources.
on the changes to the university’s catering facilities. They also promoted a farmer-owned locally grown organic vegetable box scheme.

“There was a great deal of interest in the box scheme, especially as the majority of the vegetables are grown only 18 miles away. People have begun by ordering directly from the box scheme provider but we eventually hope to be able to co-ordinate a regular order and drop off.

“The menu changes needed promoting. The Soil Association developed promotional posters and bespoke consumer literature on organic local food for us. We are planning to provide point of sale information about the organic, local and organic local food used in dishes.

“We had wanted to run a farmers’ market for some time and, in April 2007, we trialled the first one. Having researched and secured farmers to attend, the market was held on a central site at our Frenchay campus. We promoted the market on campus and through leaflet drops to halls of residence, businesses in the area and the local community. A large banner was hung on the road outside to catch passing trade. It was extremely successful with 12 stalls selling local produce ranging from poultry, vegetables and organic trout, to bread, pies, pasta, cheese and beer. The feedback was extremely positive. We built on what we learnt at the trial market and are now holding them monthly with the exceptions of January and August. We have between 12 and 15 stalls each month.”

“I’m really, really pleased this [farmers’ market] has been set up. Thank you! I hope this becomes a regular occurrence”

Member of staff, UWE, at their first farmers’ market.

“Locally produced food also supports the local community and farmers, as well as being good for you.”

Samantha, student, UWE
University of Plymouth – Pilgrims Café

Pilgrims Café opened in October 2005. It only operates during term time as it is primarily used as a training facility for undergraduate students. Richard Parkman, Plymouth Business School Hospitality Facility Manager, describes the thinking behind the café:

“We decided that the operation would focus on three criteria: local, organic and fair trade products. We wanted to show that a catering business can adopt these core values and still survive in a competitive market place. We try to purchase and sell products that meet one or more of the three criteria, and ask the students to evaluate the dishes and menus against them.

“Once the venue was converted into a modern café, we began finding local and organic suppliers. Having worked in the area for many years, I had a wide network of local contacts.

“We get our local produce from a range of excellent suppliers. We source wine, beer, soft drinks, milk, fish, meat, salads and vegetables all from within Devon from known sources. We have asked our meat and vegetable suppliers to supply us with products reared and grown in the south west.

“Marketing is low key. We get around 50 customers a day, which is enough to create an effective learning environment for the students. However, the Tanner Brothers, Devon’s celebrity chefs, officially opened the café, generating important early awareness. We also placed an advert in Devon Food magazine. Students carry out marketing as part of their course. They use email, intranet, flyers, posters and table top messages. The café has a loyal following from within and outside the university.”

The Pilgrims team’s work is creating interest in the wider community of hospitality academics; it is seen as a highly innovative development in the teaching of degree level hospitality management.
Edinburgh University Students Association
- Café Senses

Café Senses opened in March 2007. It is a Students’ Union (SU) run outlet and is working towards the Soil Association’s Food for Life targets (see page 5 for details).

The SU made a conscious move towards providing healthier local and organic meals in the Café and this is proving very popular with the university’s students. Ian Goodyear, from Edinburgh’s SU, explains how the change came about.

“Originally called the David Hume Café, Café Senses had always been a popular place for people to drink. But we struggled to sell many meals. Wanting to give the healthy option a try, the university’s Vice President of Services approached the Soil Association for advice. The sourcing and purchasing was brought in line with the Food for Life targets. They helped the Café Senses staff find local suppliers. Now, the dairy products come from Clyde Organics, a family run farm in the Clyde Valley; the wholefoods come from Green City Wholefoods, which is a worker based co-operative in Glasgow. And Damhead Organic Foods supply the fruit and vegetables.”

The re-launched café has been a resounding success but it needed more than a new name. Ian explains the marketing. “The Café has been promoted in a variety of ways, including press releases and posters sited around the campus. We have even had people dressed as a red pepper and a green bean handing out flyers for a free lunch! As a result, sales of hot meals has increased by 40% and we have extended the menus to two other SU outlets at the university.

“Now, Edinburgh university catering is interested in adopting similar principles and the Vice President of Services is encouraging other universities to follow our example by lobbying the National Union of Students to work towards similar goals.”

Think carefully about promotion:

An introductory offer for a free lunch for a limited time and on a first come, first served basis, will attract people and create a lively atmosphere, whilst not having to give away all of your dishes for free.

Provide information about the improved quality and provenance of the food.

Word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool.

Hugh Raven, Soil Association Scotland speaks at the launch
In 1999, the Aberdeen Students’ Shared Planet Society set up a fair trade café – and it has been going strong ever since. The café opens on Wednesdays, serving healthy and ethical lunches using organic food, and acting as a base for two food co-operative schemes – dry goods and vegetable bags. Caroline Kemp, acting president of the Shared Planet Society:

“The dry goods food co-operative is supplied by Green City Wholefoods. Members place their orders and then I place a larger order (including supplies required by the café) with Green City Wholefoods. Organic and Fairtrade products are ordered as a priority. Members collect their order from the café.

“The vegetable bag scheme initially had to be limited to 30 people. But as demand was so high, we expanded and we now have 40-50 people, with 10-20 people on the waiting list. Student volunteers pack the vegetables into returnable hemp bags at the café. The scheme operates fortnightly, bags are collected from the café with orders and payment taken a fortnight in advance.

“As much of our food as possible for the café and vegetable bag scheme is locally produced and sourced, always organic, and imported dry goods are certified Fairtrade. The organic vegetables and eggs come from a Soil Association certified farm approximately 20 miles from the university’s main campus. When ordering vegetables, we always specify local first, however some produce is imported when necessary but we never purchase produce that has been flown in. The café uses and sells, locally baked organic bread from the Camphill Community near by. A Society member collects the vegetables, eggs and bread required by the café and box scheme by van every other week. “The café is very successful with about 200 people coming in each Wednesday. It is staffed by volunteers. Takings vary but we make a profit every week, some of which goes to chosen causes.”
The Green Action Co-operative is a not-for-profit group run by student volunteers at the University of Leeds, offering its members organic and local products. Members can also order an organic fruit and vegetable box from a nearby grower. Amanda, from Green Action, explains how the co-op got started:

“In 1996, the Students’ Union executive gave the co-op group a ‘cupboard under the stairs’ and a donation of £800 to buy dry goods; the scheme has been running ever since. We started the organic fruit and vegetable box scheme in late 2005, following a further £400 donation from the Student Union.

“The co-op receives a 3% trade discount from its suppliers, which helps maintain the scheme. Lembas, a wholesaler in Sheffield supply dry goods – the vast majority of which is organic. We recently started buying flour from Yorkshire Organic Millers who mill locally grown wheat.

“The boxes come from Goosemoor Organics who grow their own vegetables, salads and herbs. Out of season they supplement this with other organic local and imported organic produce. People aren’t committed to ordering every week. The flexibility of the supplier makes this possible. We return empty boxes to Goosemoor Organics to be re-used.

“We have promoted the scheme with signs, posters, leaflets, increasing its web presence and holding stalls on campus. People pay £1 to join for a year and can then buy food off the shelf or order from the wholesaler’s catalogue. The membership charge covers the scheme’s running costs and acts as a safeguard in the event of any problems.”

The co-operative has over 400 members, with an average weekly turnover of £800 including fruit and vegetable boxes and standard stock. They typically distribute 35 vegetable boxes, 20 fruit boxes and a few mixed sacks each week.
The HELO project stands for Healthy, Ethical, Local and Organic. The project aims to serve food and drink that meet these criteria in the Garden Court Restaurant on campus. Steve Molloy, head of university catering, explains how the project came about:

“The scheme actually began as part of a regular service review. We held a customer question and answer session to gauge the opinions of students and staff. The main aspirations were to have more healthy, local, ethical and organic produce available, so we opened the HELO area in October 2006.

“Hampshire Fare, who represent and promote local food and drink producers in Hampshire, helped the university identify appropriate suppliers, including Sunnyfields Organics and Rother Valley Organics. Using the HELO criteria, Trading Standards helped catering staff to create a questionnaire to check the authenticity of suppliers within a 50 mile radius. The HELO project has been promoted widely via the university website and through promotional flyers. Information about the project is put into the welcome packs for new students and we have limited time offers, such as a free bowl of organic soup with every meal ordered.

“Although still in the early stages, the scheme has been quite successful. The price of organic and local foods has discouraged some students, but they still use the service once or twice a week.”

The university catering team has introduced the HELO principles to each catering outlet within catering services. All HELO products will be branded with the logo. They are also considering pursuing Soil Association certification.
The University of Bath Vegetable Co-op is run for students and staff. The scheme started in 2003, with a different student volunteer running the scheme each year.

Ruth Hendon explains: “Originally, customers bought a voucher for a fruit bag, a vegetable bag or a mixed box. However, we now use an order form system. The form is kept in the Student Union shop and customers write down their university username, which acts as a unique identifier, and what they wish to order.

“At its most popular point during 2006/07, we had 35 people using the scheme and we were taking £115 a week. Initially, the individuals using the scheme changed each week, but it has settled down to regulars who purchase every week. A typical week’s order is £65, with 10–15 people using the scheme.”

The boxes come from JP Organics, who source produce from the Bath area. They supply the university with three options to sell at a discounted price. Pete, from JP Organics says, “I wanted to offer students who are on a lower income, the opportunity to buy good, organic food at an affordable price. Having one drop off point for several boxes helps me do this.”

Ruth continues, “There is no budget for promotion but moving the collection point from inside the chaplaincy to outside on the main university parade has dramatically increased awareness. We have plans to use free advertising opportunities, posting an advert on the electronic ‘noticeboard’ on the university website or having a display stand in the library foyer.”

A voucher payment scheme can be complicated. Vouchers get lost and it can be difficult to keep track of numbers sold. Box collection can also be overlooked. Avoid problems with a more efficient order based system that records customer contact details.

Find somewhere to store boxes as well as have a collection point.

Regularly discuss how the scheme is running with your supplier to check that it is working for them too.
Catering for all...

“The Soil Association gave University of the West of England a great deal of help and guidance from the outset. Their wealth of experience and knowledge were vital to ensure that the right approach was made to the project, and that the right questions were being asked of the suppliers. The Soil Association’s dedication and support have been invaluable at all times”

Sue Burton, Environmental Services, University of the West of England

“I think any university should adopt a healthy eating policy and source food with the smallest possible environmental impact.”

Eva, student, University of the West of England
Getting equipped

Use the hints and tips suggested on the note pads throughout this booklet to help you set up your local and organic local food initiative.

The planning process
Take the time to do your research and planning, it will pay off in the future.

- Gather your ideas and gain feedback from your potential customers
- Identify key people to be involved in your initiative
- Set up a planning group and evaluate ideas
- Agree your vision and set criteria
- Invite an advisor if neccessary
- Develop a plan and review it regularly
- Keep people engaged and communicate
- Visit others doing similar things.

Questions to consider from outset
- What do you hope to acheive and why?
- What do students and staff on campus want?
- How much time do you have to commit to the project?
- What are the financial implications (both expenditure and profit)?

Suppliers
Once you have determined what kind of scheme to run, set out criteria for what you want from your suppliers. For example:

- They have to grow / produce it themselves
- They have to be organically certified
- All produce, including imported, has to be traceable so you are confident of what you are buying
- Any imported produce should be shipped and not airfreighted.

Take the time to visit any potential wholesalers or suppliers to see how they operate. You can get a much better sense of whether they are going to meet your criteria this way.

Online resources
Soil Association, the UK’s leading organic farming charity [www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org)

To find out more about local food and networks supporting local food visit [www.soilassociation.org/localfood](http://www.soilassociation.org/localfood)

For caterers looking to find organic produce visit [www.soilassociation.org/sourcemarketplace](http://www.soilassociation.org/sourcemarketplace)

For consumer advice and information about organic food visit Why Organic at [www.whyorganic.org](http://www.whyorganic.org)

For consumers or for small-scale food requirements in your area [www.whyorganic.org/involved_organicDirectory.asp](http://www.whyorganic.org/involved_organicDirectory.asp) or [www.bigbarn.co.uk](http://www.bigbarn.co.uk)
If you are interested in getting more organic and local food into your university or college, the Soil Association has 10 years of experience and expertise in the organic and local food sectors. Whether you opt for the ‘whole university/college approach’ or a specific initiative, we can:

- **Provide a support framework** – if you decide to take the ‘whole university/college approach’ (as taken by UWE), we will ensure that you are fully supported throughout all aspects of the process.

- **Help you source the produce you need** – whether you wish to continue working with your existing supplier or are keen to explore new possibilities to procure organic and local food, we will help you find the right supply solution.

- **Ensure clear traceability and provenance of produce** – this is a very important aspect when making organic and local sourcing claims. We can help you with traceability and check provenance of food so that you are equipped to make confident sourcing decisions in the future.

- **Design innovative ways of involving your staff** – using our links with farmers to create inspiring opportunities tailored for your staff, including workshops and farm visits.

- **Signpost to other sources of information and expertise** – we have a large range of publications, case studies and useful contacts which you can access.

- **Provide advice on organic certification requirements** – an understanding of what organic certification entails will help you with your organic purchasing decisions. In addition, should you wish to certify your catering business, we can advise and support you in this process.

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**Help!**

Contact the Soil Association’s food and farming department to discuss how we can help you.

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