

Change Makers Project ADPA 5002

For my change makers project, I chose to focus on the unused potential of the green area at the back of the Carmarthen campus. I feel as though this space has fantastic potential to boost both the mental and physical well-being of both the students and staff as well as boost the university's profile. This project aims to not only beautify the university but also encourage students to spend more time connecting and enjoying both nature and the environment where they live and study without damaging the current landscape but rather by enhancing it. My hope is that this project will highlight the benefit that being in and surrounded by nature can bring to our mental health and wellbeing.

A meta-analysis of 952 studies conducted by Nejade, Grace and Bowman (2022) found that 92% of people who engaged with the outdoors and nature found that their health had improved. Physical and cognitive improvements were found in 83% and 75% of the studies respectively, while mental health improvements were found in 98% of the studies. According to Mind (2021) participating in outdoor activities such as gardening can boost a person's self-esteem as well as reducing feelings of stress, anger and even loneliness. The Mental Health Foundation (2023) "found that 44% of people said being close to nature makes them less anxious or worried". In a study conducted by Kuo and Sullivan (2001, cited in Schertz and Berman, 2019) they found that adults who were placed in housing with access to green spaces had improved concentration and attention levels. Dadvand et al. (2015, cited in Schertz and Berman, 2019) found that green spaces around schools improved the cognitive development of the children. Stevenson et al (2018 cited in Schertz and Berman, 2019) discovered that being exposed to nature improved working memory and cognitive functions.

White et al. (2019), conducted a study which discovered that the people who spent a minimum of two hours in an outdoor environment reported improvement of their physical and mental health compared to those who did not. In an article written by Zarr and Chan (2023) they discuss a study that took place during 2015 which showed that people who spent at least 90 minutes walking in nature showed "decreased activity in a region of the brain associated with depression" compared to those who spent time walking in more urban areas. In the same article written for Pew by Zarr and Chan (2023), two survey studies are also discussed. The first survey was conducted in Israel during Covid-19 and out of the 776 participants those who were able to view nature or live near nature reported having more positive feelings. This survey was replicated in America in which out of the 558 people who participated they found those who had access to nature reported having better mental health during Covid-19. All these studies show that having access to a green space would improve an aspect of a student's health whether it be their physical or mental wellbeing.

When creating the survey, to ensure my results reflected my audience accurately I shared my survey through the accommodation manager. This worked well as 100% of the participants were living in the on-campus accommodation despite 18.52% not being university students, but rather students studying in Coleg Sir Gâr. Fifty-four participants responded and out of these only 7.4% answered that they always or usually make use of the green space, this is a very small number compared to the 14.8% and 77.77% who stated that they sometimes or never make use of the space respectively. However, when asked if they utilise a garden or green space at home 61.11% stated that they do make use of the space, and around 66% indicated that they use the green spaces at home often. And finally, I questioned the participants on whether they felt that providing a home for wildlife and nature is important and 98.15% answered that they believed it was important.

So based off my own survey and the research I did into other studies I feel as though there is enough of a basis for developing the green spaces around each accommodation building working outwards further into the unused green spaces surrounding the university. My idea to develop the areas are to install flower banks around each of the accommodation buildings, focusing around the ground floor windows to increase the nature available to students while they work or relax in their rooms. This could improve their concentration when doing such work and improve their attention when attending online lectures or meetings (Kuo, Barns and Jordan, 2019). I feel that giving the students immediate access to flowers and a colourful view from their window would also spark more inspiration for the more artistic students to further develop their personal artwork skills and style. Introducing more floral wildlife will also encourage the local bee population to grow and thrive here, which will hopefully prevent bees' dwindling numbers. However, floral wildlife will not only benefit bees it will also encourage more butterflies, caterpillars and moths to thrive in the university's natural environment. Then depending on how well the flower banks establish themselves, and if they are well received, the next phase would be to locate an area or multiple areas to install some allotments and herb gardens and to spread more flowers around the green areas. To construct these allotments and herb gardens I hope to make use of the ample scrap wood available to the University through the workshop on campus, we can also reach out to the Coleg Sir Gâr campus at the back of the university to donate their scrap wood. I also want to investigate the possibility of using the food waste as compost to fertilise the plants and student gardens. With this initiative we may also be able to reach out to local businesses who might be able to donate old items both big and small to be recycled or upcycled to be used in the garden or allotments. Some local businesses or residents may also be interested in donating their food waste to the compost for the university plants.

My hope is for this to be mainly a student led endeavour and my plan to achieve this is to create a Nature Union akin to the Students Union. Having the Nature Union would take pressure off the already stretched-thin porters and grounds staff. In consideration of the use of university grounds I would need to liaise with the porters, grounds staff, caretakers, the university's board of directors and I would like to communicate with the

Medieval Society so as to avoid encroachment on the space they regularly occupy. I could also communicate with the National Botanic Garden of Wales, due to their close proximity to university, to see if they would be interested in supporting this plan as it would benefit both parties. If this initiative is brought to The National Botanic Garden of Wales' attention it may be of interest to them as it aligns perfectly with the mission statement on their website. The mission statement includes the desire to educate people about bio-diversity and plants, to promote conservation in Wales as well as 'Advocate for and champion environmental conservation and sustainable practices' (BotanicGarden.Wales, no date).

This initiative could also be extended to include the local schools and community members. By hosting school visits, the children of these schools could contribute to the project by making bird feeders, they could also build bug hotels. Including the community and schools of the area would hopefully build long-lasting bridges that future projects and courses can use to build on students' skills. For example, the acting and set design students could possibly go into the schools to do a production on biodiversity and teach children about the environment and why we need to conserve and repair it. Another expansion of this project could be having some art sessions open for the public to sketch and draw the plants and wildlife. This could take place during school time for the primary school children, and we can have a place on the university campus to display the children's artwork. Displaying the children's artwork would also be a way to bring more foot traffic into the campus via the school children bringing family members to see their pictures.

Currently it feels as though the university is removed from the community and inaccessible to the public, the development of these areas stated above will make the university feel as if it is one with the community. This initiative will also boost the university's profile and public image (Public Health England, 2020) as well as an increase in foot traffic which in turn would have financial benefits through the sales of meals and refreshments.

To ensure this initiative is financially stable and does not put a strain on the University's budget the first duty of the Nature Union would be to plan and commence a few fundraisers such as a sponsored walk, an exhibition or a local fundraising event. This project could also qualify for available grants from organisations such as National Resources Wales (2021) with their green recovery projects and the Heritage Fund (2023) which funds local communities and projects. These fund-raising events would also help raise awareness of the initiative and help get the local community interested in contributing to the project. Any fundraisers would also help students develop their event organising skills, money handling skills and organisation skills.

This project will also bridge the gap between the Coleg Sir Gâr and the University of Wales Trinity St David students as the Nature Union will be open to students of both campuses. It would also allow students to mix with people outside their course of study, giving them the chance to build relationships and network with various people with a wide range of skill sets.

To conclude this essay, I believe that there is enough evidence to support my plan to develop the unused green area into a place of enhanced natural beauty, with benefits to mental and physical health. The benefits would also extend to promoting more social engagement between courses, social groups and lifestyles, along with the myriad of ways this initiative can be further developed in the future, and how easy it would be to sustain this environment and give the public and the students a lovely environment to enjoy together for a long time to come. It may also help the community socialise post Covid as well as those who suffer from social anxiety or simply struggle to go outside - both in the campus accommodation and in the local community. From the verbal feedback I have received from staff I can conclude that this initiative will be well supported by both academic and grounds staff. It is also my intention that by including outside organisations in this initiative, this will raise the profile and esteem of the university.

And finally on a more personal note I feel as though this initiative will be greatly rewarding and have huge benefits to all those who work on it and for this reason and the reasons noted above, I hope this initiative can become a reality on this campus and possibly can be carried out on other educational campuses throughout Wales.

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