

Recycling in halls of residence at UK Universities – the good, the bad and the messy!

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Introduction

Since 2006 the Student Switch Off team at the National Union of Students have visited halls of residence across the UK and seen a lot of waste and recycling facilities! This document reflects on what we have found to make a good and bad recycling system.

A lot of attention is generally given to the physical structure of waste and recycling bins and while this is very important, often not enough attention is given to the communications around the facilities and the procedures for collection of the waste/recycling. We divide our discussion into four parts as follows that hopefully cover the recycling system as a whole:

- Procedures for collection
- Physical characteristics of bins
- Signage and communications
- Feedback and audits

Procedures for collection

- There are considerable differences between universities in the responsibility for emptying kitchen recycling/waste bins in halls of residence and this has a significant impact on the way in which the facilities are used.
- At many universities, students are responsible for emptying both waste and recycling bins in their hall kitchens. At some universities students are responsible for emptying just their waste bins (e.g. Winchester) while at others the cleaning teams rather than students empty both bins (e.g. Surrey).
- The choice of which strategy to use is often related to cost but in our opinion the best approach for increasing recycling rates is asking students to empty their waste bins themselves and the cleaning staff emptying the recycling bins. This provides a direct incentive for students to recycle more – as they have fewer trips to the main bin stores if they recycle more. One negative consequence of this

approach can be that students are more likely to contaminate the recycling as they are too keen to avoid using the waste bin.

- Where cleaning staff empty waste and recycling bins, the frequency of emptying the bins coupled with the size of bins is key – we have seen examples where the recycling or waste bin is too small and the bins are emptied every other day which means one bin gets full and the waste/recycling ends up being put in the opposite bin (so either contaminating the recycling or meaning that recycling is going in the waste bin).
- Where students empty both bins themselves, it's essential that they are provided with a rota for emptying the bins so there is clarity in who is responsible for taking them out within the flat each week. Otherwise waste/recycling typically builds up and when one bin gets full, the other bin is typically used which either leads to contamination of the recycling bin or recyclable materials being put in the waste bin.
- It's also essential that cleaning staff receive adequate training in how the kitchen waste and recycling facilities should be managed. We have heard numerous examples of students separating waste/recycling in their kitchens only to see cleaning staff combining the two waste streams when they emptied the bins. This can be particularly dispiriting to students and lead them to give-up on using the facilities correctly themselves.

Physical characteristics of the bins

- The physical characteristics of the bins make a significant difference to how well recycling facilities are used. The primary factors related to the physical bins are their size, the clarity of separation and the signage.
- The size relates to the point above about bins getting full too quickly and waste/recycling being put in the incorrect bin. The size of the bin obviously needs to

be considered in conjunction with the frequency of collection/emptying and who has responsibility for that (students or cleaning staff).

- An example of a poor facility is provided below where the orange recycling bin is both small and positioned underneath the waste bin so that as the waste bag fills up, it sags and blocks the recycling bin.



An example of a poor recycling facility with a waste bag blocking the recycling bin

- Clarity of separation and signage are related – the best facilities have clear images on the bins themselves of what can/can't be recycled and don't split the recycling into too many different streams as this can confuse things and increase the chance of contamination. The most common situation is two streams – waste and mixed recycling (example photo



A common dual purpose recycling/waste bin

below). A handful of universities have food waste as well in kitchens.

- Consistency of recycling facilities and signage across the university estate is essential to maximise the chance that positive recycling habits become habitual. We have seen examples where the waste/recycling streams and associated colour and signage schemes are different in halls from the academic buildings which isn't helpful in terms of visual cues being used to prompt particular behaviours or for people being clear on what can/can't be recycled.
- One of our favourite recycling bins is from the Uni of Surrey where they have a big heavy duty reusable plastic bag (image below) which has detailed information printed on it of what can/can't be recycled. The bags are malleable, wipe-clean and easy to carry. The porters empty these bags every day and there is no need for a plastic liner so they save on cost/resources for the thin clear plastic liners that often go in recycling bins. It also takes away the fuff of lifting off the lid of the recycling bin, putting in the clear plastic recycling liner and replacing the lid thereby removing another barrier to using the facilities correctly. There is still a bin with black liner for the waste facilities.



An example of a recycling bag with excellent signage from the University of Surrey

Signage and communications

- Signage is key to ensuring that it is as clear as possible what should go in each bin.
- It's essential that all the signage is in place at the start of the academic year so students have clarity when they first start using the facilities and get into good habits early on.
- In many cases universities include information on recycling facilities in induction talks or in informal talks from residential assistants/mentors. This is really useful in maximising the clarity at the start of the year so students get into good habits.
- Ideally signage should be on the side and top of the bin to maximise the chance that the information is viewed at the point at which a student uses the facilities (e.g. from Southampton Solent below).



An example of good signage – on the side and top of the bin with an image of what should go in each bin

- As well as the signage on the individual bins, it's essential to have signage on the kitchen noticeboard and for this to be clear and concise (e.g. below from Winchester – nice and simple).



An example of clear signage on the kitchen noticeboard from the University of Winchester

- Some universities with a high proportion of international students in particular halls have had the recycling posters translated (e.g. into Mandarin or Cantonese) which helps for those less familiar with UK recycling facilities.
- Given the geographic diversity of students at UK universities (from across the UK and across the world), it's essential that knowledge of what can/can't be recycled isn't taken for granted as different recycling systems exist across the UK and between different countries. We encourage the avoidance of general terms such as 'household waste', and 'mixed recycling' except where those terms are coupled with specific detail of what they cover.



An example of unclear signage. Students who are likely to live in different parts of the country or world outside of term time so the understanding of the term 'household waste' will vary considerably depending on the facilities in different areas. Similarly 'mixed recycling' is not defined in this example so it is likely that people would put things in the wrong bin.

- Where students are expected to empty their kitchen recycling bins into big recycling bins outside the halls, it's essential that there are clear directions to those bins and that they are ideally situated next to the big general waste bins. We have heard instances of the big bins being located separately from each other and students thinking that there was nowhere to put the recycling from the kitchen when they found the big waste bin with no big recycling bin next to it.

Feedback and audits

A number of universities provide feedback to students on their use of recycling facilities over the year via recycling audits. In many cases they do this via the cleaning staff or the Student Switch Off where a scoring system is devised and each kitchen is given a mark based on how well they have used the waste/recycling facilities. A feedback form is typically left behind with

small rewards for kitchens using their facilities well (e.g. below). This is a great way to provide local-level feedback and we often find that the feedback cards are pinned up on the kitchen noticeboards by the students to remind them (and their flatmates) on how they could improve their use of the recycling facilities.

It's ideal for residential assistants, mentors or general students to have a responsibility for encouraging their peers to recycle as much as possible. This can often be supported by competitions where recycling audit data or hall/block-level waste and recycling is weighed and additional prizes provided to incentivise action.

Summary

As detailed in the sections above we have found that a good recycling system relies on a combination of factors including, but not limited to, the size of the bins, frequency of collection, signage, communication, and feedback on how well the facilities are being used. We welcome feedback and additions to this report based on other experiences of encouraging recycling across the UK.

You may also like to check out the NUS survey research on student attitudes to waste and recycling - available on our website [here](#).

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Example of a recycling feedback 'recycleometer' card from Student Switch Off

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