SRS Proposed Living Lab project brief –

Enhancing Sustainability Engagement through Gamification:

Sector-Wide Insights and Strategic Content Development for the University of Edinburgh's Sustainability Rewards App

Description of the paper

This paper provides a brief overview of a potential project that could usefully inform the SRS Department's work.

This is a template for a potential **MSc dissertation** Living Lab project that a member of staff would like to propose and should therefore equate to no more than **600** hours work. The question and research is intended to inform and/or make recommendations to the SRS Department's work areas. It should also align with one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals (see below for more context).

Key SRS contact for this project

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The Vision for Change

The vision for change is to embed sustainability into the daily lives of students and staff by leveraging gamification to drive meaningful behaviour change. Through a strategic review of best practices and targeted content development, the project aims to maximise engagement with high-impact sustainability actions. By enhancing the Sustainability Rewards App and its communications, the university will create a culture where sustainable choices are easy, rewarding, and widely adopted, accelerating progress towards net-zero goals.

Draft research question

How can gamification be effectively leveraged to drive engagement with high-impact sustainability behaviours in a university setting, and how should content and communications be designed to maximise its impact?

Background

Insights gathered from staff and student focus groups, surveys, and networks have highlighted the need for a dynamic, engaging, and data-driven approach to sustainability behaviour change.

In response, we piloted the first version of the **Sustainability Rewards App** last year, designed to help students and staff track, enhance, and celebrate their sustainable actions. Available on web browsers and mobile app stores, the platform provides practical guidance on sustainability themes such as energy saving, waste reduction, and eco-friendly shopping. With a user-friendly interface and self-paced engagement model, it introduces a fun competitive element, allowing individuals, schools, societies, and clubs to earn rewards for their commitment to sustainability—much like Duolingo, but for sustainable living.

Now in its second phase of development and rollout, the app is evolving to better align with the most impactful behaviours and engagement strategies. With a **hard launch scheduled for September 2025**, this project will play a crucial role in refining app content, ensuring its effectiveness, and shaping a compelling communications plan—particularly for Welcome Week—to maximise adoption and long-term impact.

https://sustainability.ed.ac.uk/take-action/sustainability-rewards

Objectives

1. Evaluate and Recommend High-Impact Sustainability Behaviours for the App

- Assess which sustainability behaviours have the greatest potential for carbon reduction and user engagement.
- Recommend content updates and bespoke action sets tailored to different staff and student groups.

2. Enhance the App's Content and User Experience

- Align the app's action sets with data-driven insights on the most effective behaviour changes
- Ensure recommendations support diverse engagement levels, from beginners to sustainability champions.

3. Develop a Communications Strategy to Maximise App Adoption

- Contribute to a targeted promotional plan, with a focus on engaging new students and staff during Welcome Week.
- Provide recommendations on messaging, incentives, and integration with wider university sustainability initiatives.

Data set provision

Data needed for this project	Data sets available from and contact information
Current app analytics	Lauren to provide
Current app content	Available for current users; Lauren can grant dashboard access for student researcher
University's carbon footprint breakdown	Available on our website, can help student research to interpret
Student & Staff engagement survey	Conducted through central Communications and Marketing, can be provided by SRS

Secondary Output

A **communications pack** aimed at student groups will serve as a secondary output, equipping societies, clubs, and networks with engaging, student-focused promotional materials to encourage app adoption and participation. To move away from a corporate narrative, some content could be **co-generated with students**, incorporating their perspectives and experiences to make messaging more relatable and authentic. The pack could include (choose 2-3):

- **Social Media Content** – A mix of pre-written posts and student-generated content for Instagram, Facebook, etc. This could include short testimonials from students using the app, challenge highlights, and interactive polls or quizzes.

- **Blog Post/News Story** – A student-led piece for the university website or student newsletters, featuring real experiences, tips, and insights on using the app.

- **Email/Newsletter Template** – A draft email societies can personalise, encouraging their members to join the app and engage in sustainability challenges.

- **Event Announcement Copy** – A short, engaging script that student group leaders can use to introduce the app at meetings, welcome week, or events.

- **Digital Poster/Flyer** – A visually engaging, student-friendly design for sharing in WhatsApp groups, Microsoft Teams channels, or on campus noticeboards.

- **Short Video Content** – If feasible, a student-created video or Instagram Reels/TikTok clips showcasing real users and their experiences with the app.

This pack will provide student groups with **authentic, peer-led messaging** to boost engagement with the Sustainability Rewards App in a way that feels natural, fun, and community-driven.

Output format	Insert not applicable or Yes (with further detail)
Presentation to a number of stakeholders	Yes – presentation of findings/recommendations to SRS department
Mixed media resource for reuse	Yes – see secondary output
Report with operational recommendations	n/a
Resources for staff/student behaviour change	Yes
Resources for staff/student training	n/a
Other, please specify	
OR To be decided with student	

Transformational change with the SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals showcase 17 things humanity must do to ensure peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. This project contributes to the following SDGs.

The information in this table was obtained with permission from the UN sustainable goals website, https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/

The Sustainable Development Goals for 2030		Yes (x), sub-SDG (s)	The Sustainable Development Goals for 2030		Yes(x), sub-SDG (s)
1 NO POVERTY	**Economic growth must be inclusive to provide sustainable jobs and promote equality.**		**2 ZERO HUNGER**	**The food and agriculture sector offers key solutions for development, and is central for hunger and poverty eradication.**	
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	**Ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development.**		**4 QUALITY EDUCATION**	**Obtaining a quality educations is the foundation o improving people's lives and sustainable development.**	X
5 GENDER EQUALITY	**Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.**		**6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION**	**Clean, accessible water for all is an essential part of the world we want to live in.**	
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	**Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity.**		**8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**	**Sustainable economic growth will require societies to create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs.**	
9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	**Investments in infrastructure are crucial to achieving sustainable development.**		**10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES**	**To reduce inequalities, policies should be universal in principle paying attention to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised populations.**	
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	**There needs to be a future in which cities provide opportunities for all, with access to basic services, energy, housing, transport & more.**		**12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION**	**It's about doing more and better with less and decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation.**	
13 CLIMATE ACTION	**Climate change is a global challenge that affects everyone, everywhere.**	X	**14 LIFE BELOW WATER**	**Careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future.**	
15 LIFE ON LAND	**Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss.**		**16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS**	**Access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels.**	X
17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS	**Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.**				

The University of Edinburgh Strategy 2030

Strategy 2030 can be found here:
https://www.ed.ac.uk/about/strategy-2030

The Social and Civic Responsibility Delivery Plan.

To deliver Social and Civic Responsibility at the University of Edinburgh, we have chosen three strategic objectives and one cross-cutting theme. This project's alignment with those is outlined in the table below.

The Social and Civic Responsibility Delivery Plan can be found here:
https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/social_and_civic_responsibility_delivery_plan_2020.pdf

Use the table below to mark which Social and Civic Responsibility 2030 objectives this project is relevant for how this project works towards those objectives.

Social and Civic Responsibility Delivery Plan – Objectives and one cross-cutting theme	Briefly describe the project's link to the objectives, how it is relevant and how this project works towards those objectives.

We will become a zero carbon and zero waste university - Increasing opportunities and raising aspirations by making education and employment an achievable goal for more people in Scotland and globally.	The platform actively addresses these issues, providing engagement opportunities and learning experiences for our community. We believe the app can be enhanced to be more effective in progressing this objective, which is how the project relates.
We will widen participation in higher education and support inclusion - Increasing opportunities and raising aspirations by making education and employment an achievable goal for more people in Scotland and globally.	
We will work together with local communities - to contribute to improve the lives of people across the Edinburgh City Region and beyond.	
Cross cutting theme: In our operations, research and teaching we will engage critically with, and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals - including the promotion, protection and respect for human rights.	