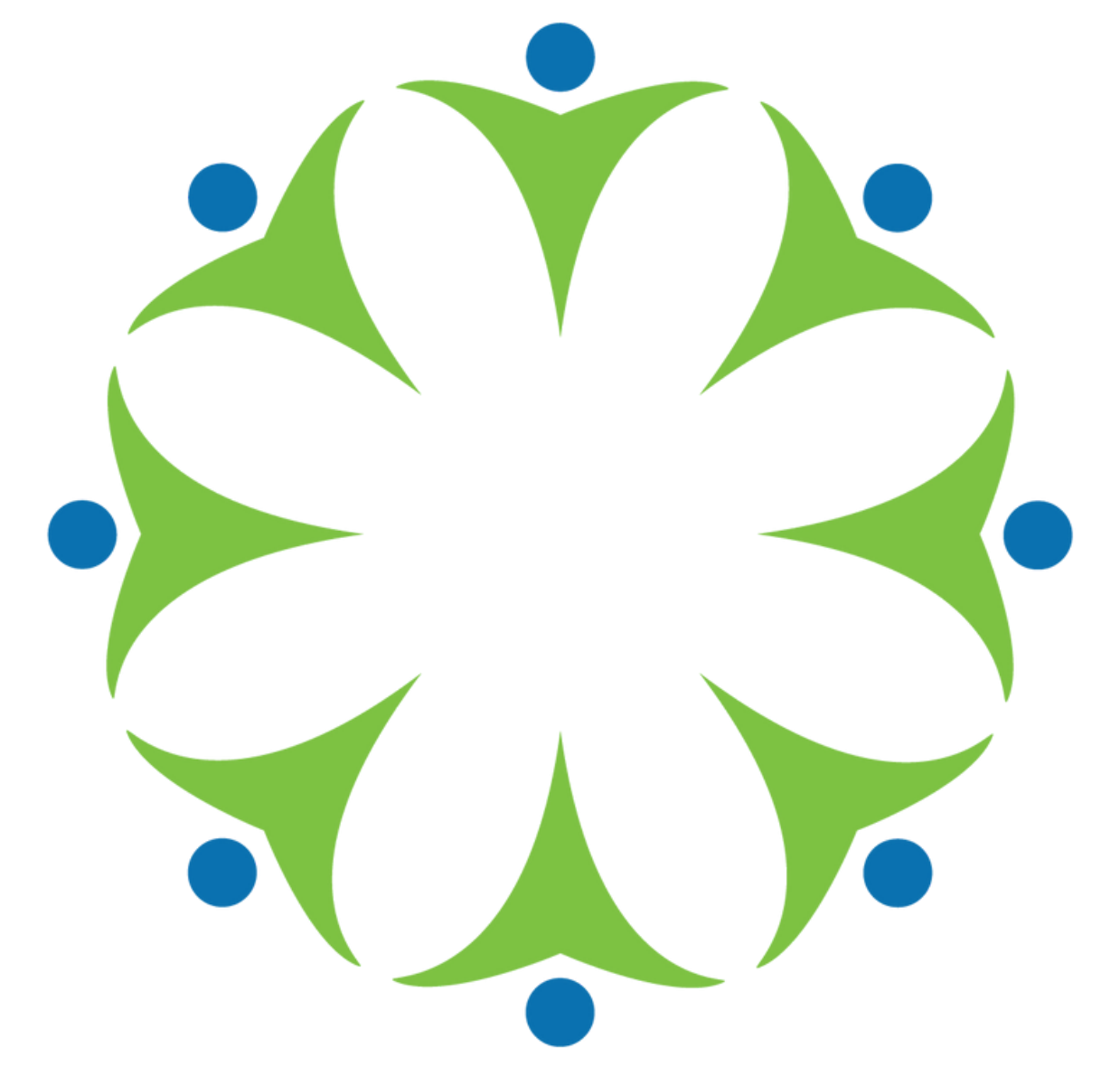


The ENGIE European Academic Challenge: A proactive action plan against widening participation.



In May 2023, 25 University of Leeds students were invited to the two-day ENGIE (a leading global sustainable energy company) European Academic Challenge in the Netherlands as the only University to represent the UK. To ensure inclusivity, we aimed to recruit students who typically have limited access to such opportunities.

Universities UK conducted a study on “Widening Participation in UK Outward Mobility,” revealing that international experiences enhance post-graduation outcomes and emphasised that underrepresented students benefit even more from international mobility. Notably, the study indicated that short-term mobility programs lasting 1-4 weeks are more appealing to students from widening participation backgrounds. This insight reinforced our focus on prioritising underrepresented students.

To maximise engagement, we implemented a marketing strategy employing diverse channels and activities. Building upon this understanding, we proceeded with a proactive action plan and a thoughtful approach to ensure meaningful student engagement and success.

ACTION & APPROACH

Using the collective expertise of different departments, we were able to tap into their knowledge of their students’ communication needs. As we wanted to deliberately target our underrepresented group of students and encourage them to take part in this opportunity, we implemented separate communication plans targeting specific student demographics by working with dedicated Widening Participation teams.

We focused on existing, historically impactful communication channels and responded to the expertise of Widening Participation teams by designing posters to be displayed in impactful areas. By highlighting the exclusivity of the opportunity and the fact that it was a short-term funded opportunity, we generated and sustained student interest.

Transparency and inclusivity were key; by addressing all pertinent details in the opportunity’s landing page, we anticipated questions before they came and left no room for ambiguity.

IMPACT

Despite communications taking place over the Easter holiday period, we met our target of total applications received and we also observed encouraging trends among the applicants. More than half of the applications came from students enrolled in the Plus Programme, indicating the success of our targeted outreach to underrepresented student cohorts.

Of the eligible applications:

- 84% had self-identified as being from underrepresented backgrounds;
- 97% of had never participated in an international experience;
- 17% represented at least one WP category;
- 41% represented two WP categories;
- 42% represented three or more WP categories.

Our outreach efforts successfully reached students with overlapping disadvantages, resulting in a diverse applicant pool that truly represented the underrepresented demographics we aimed to engage. It also underscored the significant opportunity we provided to students who may not have had access to similar opportunities in the past.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the recruitment process, 25 students were offered a place to attend the event. 88% came from WP backgrounds, with most self-identifying as facing overlapping disadvantages. The support provided by the staff at the University of Leeds was commended as it contributed to a seamless, rewarding, and demystified experience. The opportunity to connect and network with professionals from ENGIE and peers from EU universities was highly valued by the students. The event itself offered invaluable insights into the sustainable energy industry and potential future career pathways.

Overall, the ENGIE European Academic Challenge has proven to be a transformative experience for the students involved. By prioritising inclusivity and providing a platform for underrepresented students to engage in international opportunities, we have witnessed the positive impact that such experiences can have on their professional development. We are planning to encourage the group to take part in range of other opportunities in the UK as well as overseas.