Eco College Overview (updated 16.11.26)

An A Rocha UK survey for Theological Education Institutions

Introduction to Eco College

Eco College sits alongside Eco Church as an A Rocha UK award programme and is designed to help Theological Education Institutions (TEIs) embed care for creation across all aspects of their work. The Eco College survey provides a framework for colleges and their communities to take action for creation. Eco College is an award scheme, so you can use your survey to apply for an Eco College award as a recognition and celebration of all you are doing to care for creation.

Throughout the Eco College survey, the word 'college' is used as shorthand for all types of TEI and this encompasses all facets of the physical environment as well as the people: leadership, staff and students.

Why an award for theological colleges?

The Eco College award complements Eco Church by providing a framework for theological colleges to assess their progress and develop a plan to engage more deeply with care for creation. The survey helps colleges not only to influence and engage students but also to support institutions as they seek to demonstrate leadership in this area.

The Eco College award mirrors many of the elements and principles of Eco Church, namely:

- There are five survey categories encompassing all aspects of college life.
- It is a free online self-assessment tool.
- The survey is the same for all three award levels – it's your responses that indicate whether you have reached a Bronze, Silver, or Gold Award!
- You can complete the survey and apply for an award via the online platform.
- To apply for an award, the required level must be reached in each of the five categories.
- You can complete the survey to reflect all that is being done and use the questions in the survey as inspiration for future action and activities.

Who is Eco College for?

Eco College is for Theological Education Institutions of *all* denominations *anywhere* in the UK as long as they subscribe to the Christian faith as outlined in the statement of belief – Churches Together in England. Note, they *do not* need to be a member of Churches Together in England.

The survey accommodates colleges in different settings from large residential colleges with land and a number of buildings to online or ‘virtual’ colleges. There are pathway options in three of the five categories to accommodate these different situations.

Applying for an award

Eco College is an award scheme, so you can use your survey to apply for an Eco College award as a recognition and celebration of all you are doing to care for creation. **Please register, complete the survey and apply for an award via the online Eco Church platform.**

You'll need to **achieve at least the same award level across all five categories to apply for an award,** so all five must be bronze or higher to apply for a Bronze Award, all five must be silver or higher to apply for a Silver Award, and all five must be gold to apply for a Gold Award. If you have not quite reached the threshold for an award in a certain area of college life, we hope this can serve as inspiration for where to focus your actions and activities next! You must ensure *every question in the survey has an answer* in order to be able to apply for an Eco College award.

Applying for a Gold Award involves some extra steps beyond the Eco College survey. This is so that we can learn more about your achievements and understand how Eco College is fully embedded within your teaching and learning community. More details about what is required to go for gold will follow.

Getting started

Commitment statement

Undertaking an Eco College survey requires a commitment from a college. A college's commitment to engage with creation and take action to help protect it is the first step towards an Eco College award. An important part of making a commitment is declaring this clearly as part of the identity of the college. Here are some examples of statements of commitment that might be adopted and shared on a website:

> *The college has mapped out a progression plan of how environmental understanding will develop for a student as they move through a course of study.*
>
> *Our college recognises the global context of the environmental crisis and the difference in our lived experience between the global north and the global south, rich and poor, including in our own communities, and seeks to learn from one another. We consider the interrelationships between environmental issues, poverty, and global and racial justice.*

A team approach

In order to make progress with the Eco College award, forming a team will be crucial. Ideally, the Eco College team will comprise tutors, operations staff, students and senior management. A trustee could also be valuable.

In the Eco Church survey, there is reference to Eco Champions in recognition that there are often one or two individuals who spearhead Eco Church within their church. Similarly, the college may identify Eco Champions who will be Eco College advocates to help spur the college on as they embed creation care within the life of the college.

Support and resources

The Eco College survey questions are largely based on those of the Eco Church survey with some adjustments to reflect the specific settings of learning institutions. Therefore, we highly recommend that the Eco Church resources are used to provide further guidance and explanation as you complete the survey and as an ongoing reference library. The Theological Colleges Environment Network also provides relevant resources and support.

Completing the survey

Much of the survey uses the terminology 'our college'. This refers to the whole college community – leadership, staff and students – and may also be reflected in its infrastructure, policy, curriculum, college-led worship, or events.

Ownership

The Eco College survey is a self-assessment tool for colleges of different Christian denominations and settings. We encourage you to engage with the survey in the most useful way for your college. Therefore, even if the wording of a specific question doesn't fit your exact circumstances or practice, it is okay to interpret and answer it within your local context, as long as you do so with honesty and integrity, and in alignment with the overall spirit of the question.

Pathway options

There are pathway options for three of the Eco College survey categories: Buildings and Energy, Land and Nature, and Lifestyle and Formation. In each case, choose the pathway that, on balance, best suits your setting. For most colleges this is straightforward, but in a few cases it might be worth exploring both pathways before settling on which one is the best to complete for your situation. For example, in the Lifestyle and Formation category, if you have residential students very occasionally or hold ad hoc residential weekends, you may find 'Pathway 2: colleges without residential students' is the best fit.

Survey responses

Routinely and occasionally

In the Eco College survey, the options 'Routinely / Occasionally / Never' are required in response to some of the survey questions. These options are about the *practice or habit* rather than the *frequency* of when something happens. We suggest you consider if the activity is part of your routine and embedded into college life ('routinely') or just occurs now and then, when 'occasionally' might be the best response.

Not applicable

Occasionally a question may not be relevant to your setting, and therefore a ‘Not applicable’ option has been provided. Please note, this is not an opt-out, but is to be used when the practice is genuinely not part of your practice or applicable in your setting.

Additional comments

Many of the questions in the Eco College survey offer options for you to indicate where you have taken action. As you have taken several actions from the list, you will accumulate points to progress towards your next award. If the action you have taken is not listed, opt for ‘other’ and use the ‘Comments’ box at the end of the category to explain your answer.

We would also recommend that you use the ‘Comments’ box to take further notes about your responses, including where you have answered ‘NA’. For example, expand on your answers or explain the rationale behind a particular response – this not only provides more explanation for your application assessors but is also a useful reference for you as you progress through the awards.

Terminology

Ecotheology and creation care

Ecotheology and creation care are distinct terms, and both are used in the Eco College survey. 'Ecotheology' is used as an overview term to embrace Christian theological reflection and responses to the natural world and the climate and nature crises. This is a well-established area of theology with a number of similar terms used. In choosing 'ecotheology', we are not aligning ourselves with any one particular school of thought.

Reference to ‘creation’ and ‘creation care’ points to our interdependence on, and responsibility for, our God-given common home. Reference to the climate and nature crises signifies our recognition that urgent action is required. In addition, the term ‘environmental issues’ is used to refer to the wide spectrum of problems we face locally and globally.

Climate resilience

The topic of climate resilience is expanded on in our Climate Resilience resource. In a college setting, it may encompass teaching on disaster management and community resilience to equip students to lead churches and communities as the climate and nature crises deepen.

Environmental and/or climate justice

Creation care encompasses our faith perspective as well as many issues related to climate, biodiversity, justice, mission and broader social issues. Throughout the survey there are references to the many *issues* that we are concerned about when caring for creation, but on the whole the phrase 'environmental and/or climate justice issues' is used to catch all these disparate but interconnected topics.

The Eco College survey categories

There are five categories of question in the Eco College survey. Each category is divided into themes; these can be seen when looking at the PDF versions of the survey questions, but do not show on the platform. Here are a few more notes about the survey categories.

Worship, Teaching and Curriculum

God created the earth and calls us to care for it. Doing so is part of our worship and witness as we respond to a creation that is groaning (cf. Romans 8:22).

Theological Educational Institutions participating in Eco College come from a breadth of traditions. The Eco College survey embraces the language and practice of different Christian traditions, therefore please interpret these questions within *your* context. If a question includes an activity that is not relevant in your setting, please select 'NA' and explain your reasoning in the Additional Comments box.

For more resources about the Worship, Teaching and Curriculum category, please refer to the Eco Church resources.

Buildings and Energy

We know that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions are leading to climate change and more extreme weather conditions. While carbon dioxide emissions can come from natural causes, many are from human activities such as burning fossil fuels. The people who are most affected by climate change and more volatile weather are the world's poorest who have done the least to cause the crises. Climate change, pollution and emissions also affect nature and wildlife.

The UK government set a target of a 77% reduction from 1990 emissions by 2035 and aims to reach net zero carbon by 2050. Most church denominations have set more ambitious dates for achieving net zero carbon emissions and this survey category focuses on this area – reducing carbon emissions and establishing policies to achieve this. Recording data is an important part of setting targets and monitoring progress and consequently this section encourages you to have plans in place to do this.

Although many aspects of this category might be 'behind the scenes', remember to encourage the college to get involved, whether for simple things like remembering to turn lights off or informing them about the college's waste and recycling processes. Larger projects, such as installing solar panels (PVs), are good opportunities to involve and engage the whole college in understanding the rationale.

Many of the steps outlined in this category point towards good building maintenance for the long term, as our buildings endure a changing climate with more extremes, and as we seek to maintain them as welcoming and functional spaces.

Choosing a pathway

There are two pathways through this category of the survey:

> Pathway 1: Colleges that own and operate out of their own building(s)
>
> Pathway 2: Colleges which do not own or manage any buildings (e.g. those that use a rented space or meet online)

When considering which pathway to choose, remember to include all the buildings you own, manage or use. If you have more than one building, then you will need to reflect your overall situation as 'a blend'. For example, if you have a church with no double glazing and a hall that is entirely double glazed, respond 'partly' when asked about double glazing.

Carbon footprint

The calculation of the carbon emissions you produce, as a college or individual, is known as your 'carbon footprint'. It is necessary to understand your carbon footprint in order to set targets towards net zero. We suggest using the Climate Stewards 360°carbon tool each year. More complex colleges, with multiple buildings, may employ a consultant or use alternative tools to carry out an energy audit. In either case it will form an important baseline measure the first time you complete it. An annual review and reassessment will enable you to make comparisons and monitor progress on your carbon reduction.

There are more involved questions in the Buildings & Energy and Lifestyle & Formation categories about the biggest contributors to our carbon footprint: transport, food production and waste, domestic energy consumption, and consumption of goods and services. Read more about the biggest contributors to carbon emission in the UK's contribution to climate change.

For more resources for the Buildings and Energy category, please refer to the Eco Church resources.

Land and Nature

When colleges manage land for nature or get involved with land in the local community, they reinforce the Christian mission by caring for creation and serving the community – increasing access to nature for human wellbeing, building climate resilience, doing something positive for biodiversity, and pointing people towards God our Creator.

In the face of accelerating climate change and species loss, we need more than ever to take action to protect and care for nature today. We all have a part to play in how the land around our colleges, in our communities and nationally can make a difference and help protect and restore nature all around us. The purpose of this category is to guide you through practical actions to care for God's Earth. Be it land owned by the college, even if only around the college buildings themselves, or land in the local community, colleges need to manage land for nature. Caring for land reinforces our Christian mission, not only by protecting nature but also serving the community.

There are two pathways through this category:

Pathway 1: Colleges that own or manage land

Pathway 2: Colleges that do not own or manage any land

Although two pathways exist, there will be variation within the circumstances of colleges. For example, some colleges may have gardens or extensive land encompassing streams, rivers, woodland, parkland, meadow, etc (Pathway 1). Others may have no land at all, or only own a car park (Pathway 2). Choose the pathway that best suits your setting.

Target 25

A Rocha UK's Target 25 project highlights vulnerable species across the UK and aims to help a range of declining species, taxonomic groups and threatened habitats such as hedgehogs, butterflies and hedgerows. We recommend that colleges adopt some Target 25 species or habitats to build their knowledge about nature and focus their local action. Colleges can help places and species that are struggling with the effects of climate change, habitat loss and pollution. Learn more from the UK's 2023 State of Nature report and see how the land around our colleges can make a difference and help protect and restore nature.

Creating a 'plan for nature' or Land Management Plan (LMP)

We encourage all colleges to create a plan for nature or LMP, but it is an essential requirement for a gold Eco College award. A plan will help you prioritise and organise biodiversity management on your land and manage your outside space to ensure wildlife flourishes. A plan helps to identify which areas are to be managed in a particular way for the best results and clarify who does the work, when and how frequently it is to be done, and how it can be monitored.

Even for colleges without any land of their own, a land management plan encourages you to explore land that you have influence over and encourages staff and students to engage with land and nature.

Follow the Eco Church guidelines for creating a land management plan for Pathway 1 or 2.

For more resources about the Land and Nature category, please refer to the Eco Church resources.

Community and Global Engagement

The climate and nature crises are profoundly unjust – their most devastating impacts are on the poor and vulnerable who have done the least to cause the crises. We are called to love our neighbour, so it is our responsibility to demonstrate our love for people and nature by advocating for a more just world (cf. Micah 6:8). This survey category is about what your college is doing collectively as a body in terms of advocacy and action. Messages are more powerful when voices are joined with others, and we speak collaboratively.

For more resources about the Community and Global category, please refer to the Eco Church resources.

Lifestyle and Formation

However long a student is engaged with a college, whether on a short course or as part of clergy training, the Eco College survey encourages them to deepen their understanding of ecotheology and explore how to respond to our creator in their lifestyle. Formation is the holistic process of shaping a student's whole person, character, and spiritual life for ministry, going far beyond just academic or intellectual learning. Through engagement with the Eco College survey, we hope that students will come to understand that a Christian lifestyle is a greener lifestyle *and* is good for our spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing. Students will deepen their understanding of ecotheology, gain an awareness of how to integrate action for climate and nature into their ministry, and explore how to respond to our Creator through their personal lifestyle.

> *'Studying at a Christian college is life-changing. A student is deepened theologically and spiritually. They discover fresh perspectives and take up lifestyle habits that continue after college. These will shape their leadership in the future.'* – Revd Margot R Hodson, Director of Theology and Education at the John Ray Initiative

There are two pathways through this category:

Pathway 1: Colleges with residential students (for a term or more)

Pathway 2: Colleges without residential students (or very occasional residential students)

Where students live in a residential setting, the college is effectively the student's household during that time, and the opportunity for influence is far-reaching. Where a college has residential students for at least a term, they will opt for Pathway 1. If a college has no residential students or only occasional in-person events, they will opt for Pathway 2 – acknowledging that the college has less 'control' over elements of formation but still striving to influence students/staff and their households.

For more resources about the Lifestyle and Formation category, please refer to the Eco Church resources.