BOTANICAL UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE 2026 IMPACT REPORT



100 YEARS 1926 2026

UNIVERSITY OF READING

BOTANICAL UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

In memory of

Dr Jonathan Mitchley

“JM” or “Dr M”

A BUC Founder, An Incredible Teacher, and a Champion of Botany.











Botanical University Challenge

Impact Report for BUC 2026

Remembering Dr Jonathan Mitchley

The BUC organising team was deeply saddened by the passing of Dr Jonathan Mitchley in September 2026. Jonathan co-founded the Botanical University Challenge in 2016 alongside Prof John Warren and Prof Paul Ashton, driven by a shared determination to champion botany and support the next generation of plant scientists. BUC remained incredibly close to Jonathan's heart, and bringing the Challenge to his home institution, the University of Reading, for its tenth anniversary in August 2026 was a particularly special moment.

Above all, Jonathan cared enormously about the students who took part: their enthusiasm, curiosity and love of plants were at the heart of why BUC meant so much to him. We feel immensely fortunate that Jonathan was at the helm for BUC 2026 and able to see the community he helped create come together in Reading. His warmth, enthusiasm and irrepressible passion for botany will be greatly missed, but his influence will remain at the heart of BUC for many years to come.

What is BUC?

Botanical University Challenge (BUC) is a celebration of plants, botany and the wonderful community of people who are passionate about them. Bringing together university students from across the UK and Ireland, BUC combines a friendly quiz competition with the Student Botany Festival: a programme of practical workshops, talks, careers activities and plenty of opportunities to meet, learn from and be inspired by fellow plant enthusiasts.

At its heart, BUC is about much more than botanical knowledge. It is about helping students find their people, develop their skills, share their enthusiasm for plants, and become part of a supportive community that can nurture them throughout their career in botany and plant science.

Why was BUC set up?

BUC was founded in 2016 by Professor John Warren (Aberystwyth), Professor Paul Ashton (Edge Hill) and Dr Jonathan Mitchley (Reading), in response to declining opportunities for students to develop botanical and plant identification skills within UK higher education. Alongside this loss of botanical training was another challenge: students with a passion for plants could find themselves isolated, with limited opportunities to meet like-minded peers or connect with the wider botanical community. This lack of community could leave students feeling disconnected from the subject and less likely to see plant science as a future career. BUC was created to change that — bringing young botanists together to learn, compete, make connections and, importantly, have fun.

Since its inception, BUC has grown from a friendly, one-day quiz between just five teams at Kew Gardens to 32 teams battling it out in 2026. Over the past ten years, more than 800 students have taken part, with a record 160 students taking part in 2026, and 98 of them coming together for the live finals and two-day Student Botany Festival — packed with opportunities to learn, connect, build friendships and celebrate a shared love of plants.

The Aims of BUC

At its heart, BUC has three core aims:

1. **Fostering Community**: BUC creates a sense of belonging among young botanists, connecting them with like-minded peers and reducing feelings of isolation, which helps to inspire and support their pursuit of careers in botany.
2. **Nurturing Botanical Knowledge**: Through its quizzes and events, BUC reinforces students' understanding of plants and their ecological roles. Workshops, talks, and tours further broaden their botanical knowledge.
3. **Inspiring Future Botanists**: With plants playing a vital role in addressing global challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss, BUC aims to mentor and support the next generation of botanists, helping to build a worldwide network of experts through fun, valuable educational experiences.

BUC 2026 at a Glance

In 2026, a record 160 students in 32 teams participated in the online heats, with 98 students attending the finals and Student Botany Festival in Reading from 19th – 21st August. A full list of participating institutions is at the end of this report and key highlights of the programme included:

- **University of Cambridge** won a nail-biting final against the University of Aberdeen.
- **The Vegetable Orchestra** returned for the entertainment after the BUC Welcome Dinner.
- **4 bespoke tours** on ethnobotany, bryophytes, plant identification and education.
- **14 botanical, horticultural and environmental organisations** participated in the Careers Fair, offering students networking opportunities and career advice.
- **The first BUC BSBI Plant Identification Challenge** with students actively recording *over 200 species of plants on campus in under an hour*.
- **3 keynote speakers**: on paleobotany, the power of observation, and phylogenetics.
- **The first Experts at the Table session,** where 12 experts from different botanical fields were quizzed by small groups of students in 15-minute windows – a very popular addition to our programme!
- **5 workshops** on: herbaria mounting, vegetative keys, botanical illustration, grass identification, and science communication.

Participation in BUC was free of charge to students and included accommodation and catering for two nights at the University of Reading. The combined effort and support of 42 organisations and individuals made this possible.



Student Feedback from BUC 2026

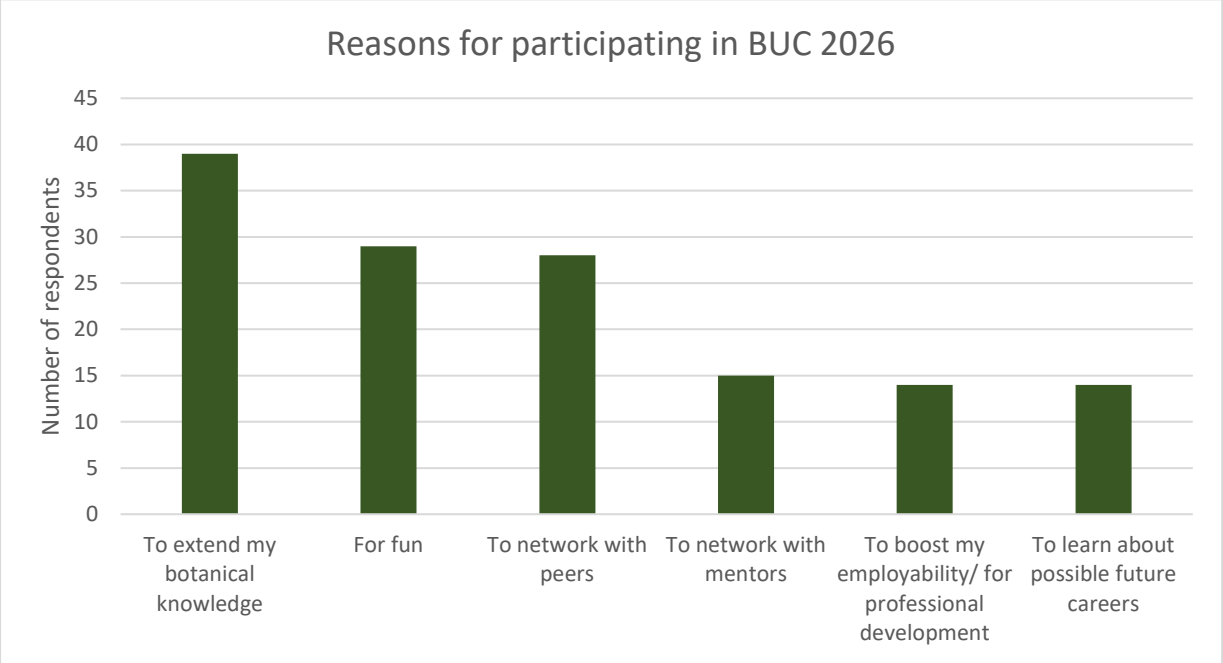
Out of the 98 student attendees, 75 completed the feedback survey by 28th September 2026, a 76.5% response rate.

Why attendees come to BUC

BUC attracts students for a combination of botanical learning, enjoyment, connection with their peers and professional development. The most frequently selected reason for participating in BUC 2026 was to extend botanical knowledge, selected by 39 respondents (52%). This reinforces the importance of learning as a central motivation for attending.

However, the reasons students gave also show that BUC's appeal extends beyond formal learning. 29 respondents (39%) participated for fun, while 28 (37%) wanted to network with their peers. Together, these responses suggest that the social experience of BUC is an important part of its attraction: students come not only to develop their botanical knowledge, but also to enjoy spending time with and learning alongside other people who share their interests.

Career and professional development were also evident motivations. 15 respondents (20%) wanted to network with mentors, while 14 (18%) selected boosting their employability/professional development and 14 (18%) wanted to learn about possible future careers. Although selected less frequently than botanical learning, fun and peer networking, these findings demonstrate a clear appetite for opportunities that help students make connections between their interest in botany and their future working lives.



Attendance of other botanical training events

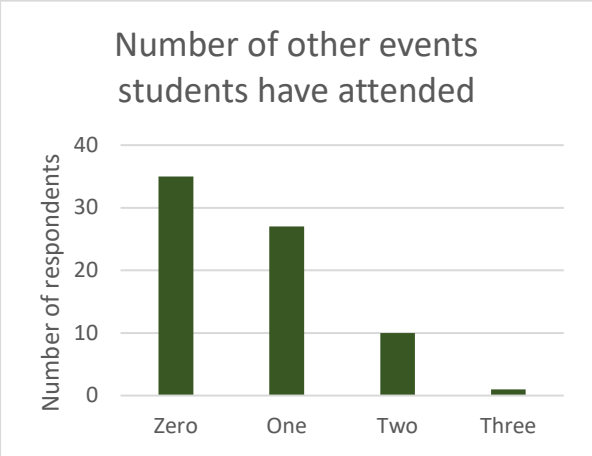
To assess whether BUC is attracting a different demographic compared to existing botanical training opportunities, students were asked if they had participated in other botanical skills training events.

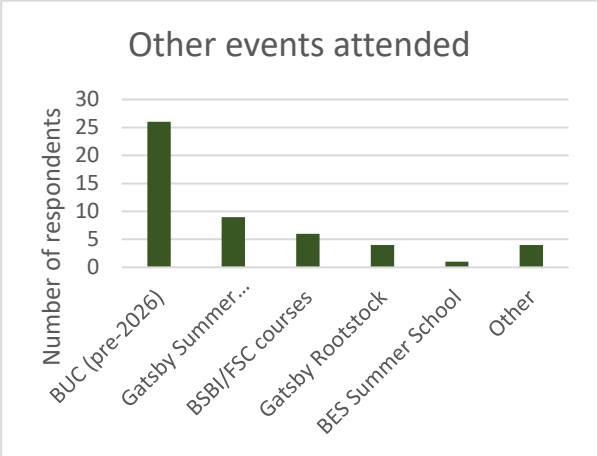
In 2026, 47% of respondents (35) reported having attended no other botanical training events, indicating that for a substantial number of participants BUC is providing access to a part of the botanical training landscape they have not previously experienced.

At the same time, there was a strong cohort of returning participants: 26 respondents (37%) had attended a previous Botanical University Challenge, which shows that BUC is succeeding not only in engaging students with limited previous exposure to botanical training, but also in maintaining an ongoing relationship with participants as they progress through their studies and early careers.

Among other training opportunities, the Gatsby Summer School was the most commonly attended (9 respondents), followed by BSBI/FSC courses (6), Gatsby Rootstock (4) and the BES Summer School (1). Four respondents also reported attending other forms of botanical training.

Overall, the findings suggest that BUC occupies an important position within the wider botanical training landscape. It continues to reach students with little or no previous exposure to other botanical training opportunities, while the number of returning BUC participants indicates that students also see value in participating more than once. Combined with participants' qualitative feedback—which emphasised BUC's breadth, peer community, relaxed environment and career focus—the results suggest that BUC offers an experience that complements rather than simply duplicates other botanical training opportunities.







What 3 Words

To explore how students perceive BUC and the Student Botany Festival, participants were asked to describe what the experience means to them in up to three words. The student responses cluster around four key themes:

1. **Connection** – Community and relationships were a prominent feature of the responses, with students using words and phrases including ‘community’, ‘connection’, ‘friends’, ‘networking’, ‘socialising’ and ‘like-minded people’.
2. **Inspiration** – Participants described BUC as ‘inspiring’, ‘uplifting’, ‘empowering’, ‘stimulating’, ‘hopeful’ and ‘life-affirming’. Passion and enthusiasm for botany were also strongly represented.
3. **Education** – Learning remained central to students' perceptions, reflected in terms including ‘learning’, ‘educational’, ‘knowledge’, ‘informative’, ‘expertise’ and ‘development’. A number of responses also linked the experience to future opportunities, careers, employability and mentorship.
4. **Fun** – Fun and enjoyment featured particularly strongly, with students repeatedly describing BUC as ‘fun’, ‘exciting’, ‘joyful’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘engaging’ and ‘amazing’.

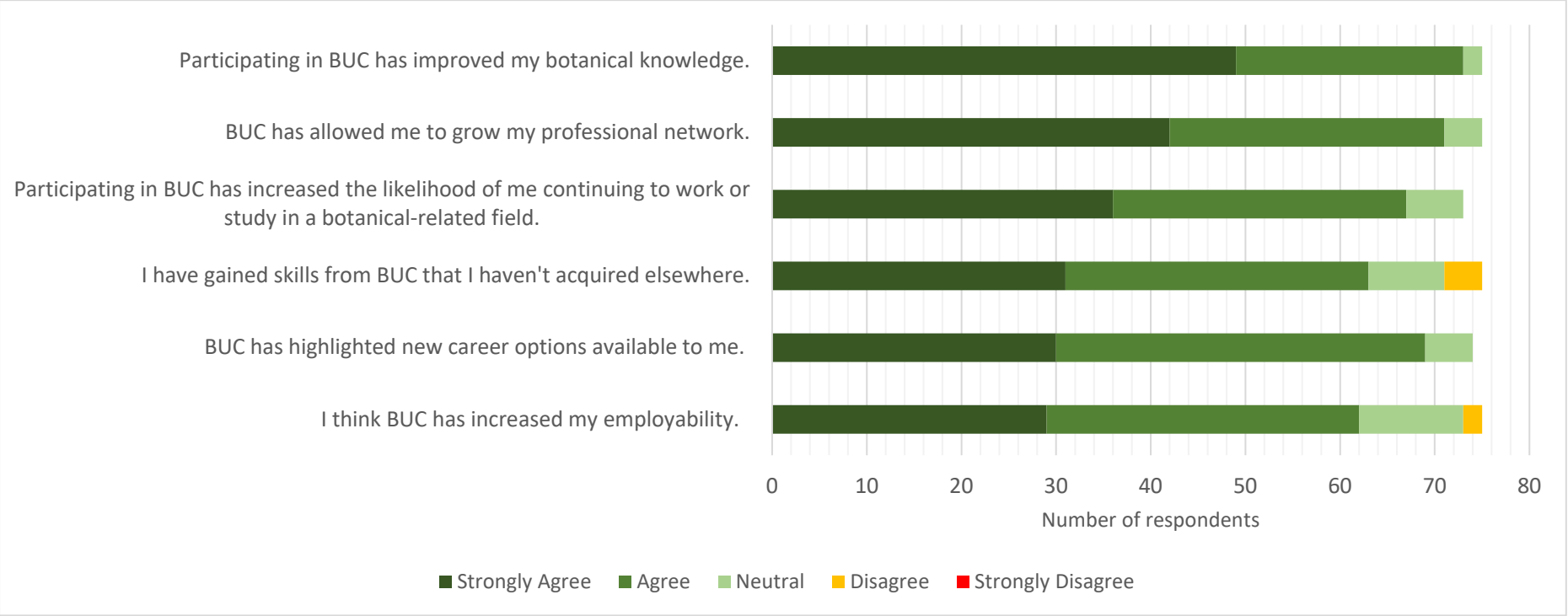
Taken together, the responses portray BUC as much more than a training event. Students associate it with learning and developing their botanical interests, but equally with finding a community of like-minded people, feeling inspired about their future, and enjoying botany together.



Student perception in the value of BUC

Students were presented with a series of statements to evaluate their perceived value of participating in BUC. The results indicate a strong positive impact across all six areas, with no students logging 'Strongly Disagree' for any question:

- 73 out of 75 (97.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that their botanical knowledge had increased through participation.
- 71 out of 75 (94.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that BUC had helped them grow their professional network.
- 67 out of 75 (89.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that BUC had increased the likelihood of them continuing to work or study in a botanical field.
- 63 attendees (84%) agreed or strongly agreed that they gained skills through BUC that they could not acquire elsewhere.
- 69 out of 75 (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that BUC had introduced them to new career options.
- Lastly, 62 attendees (82.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that BUC had improved their employability.



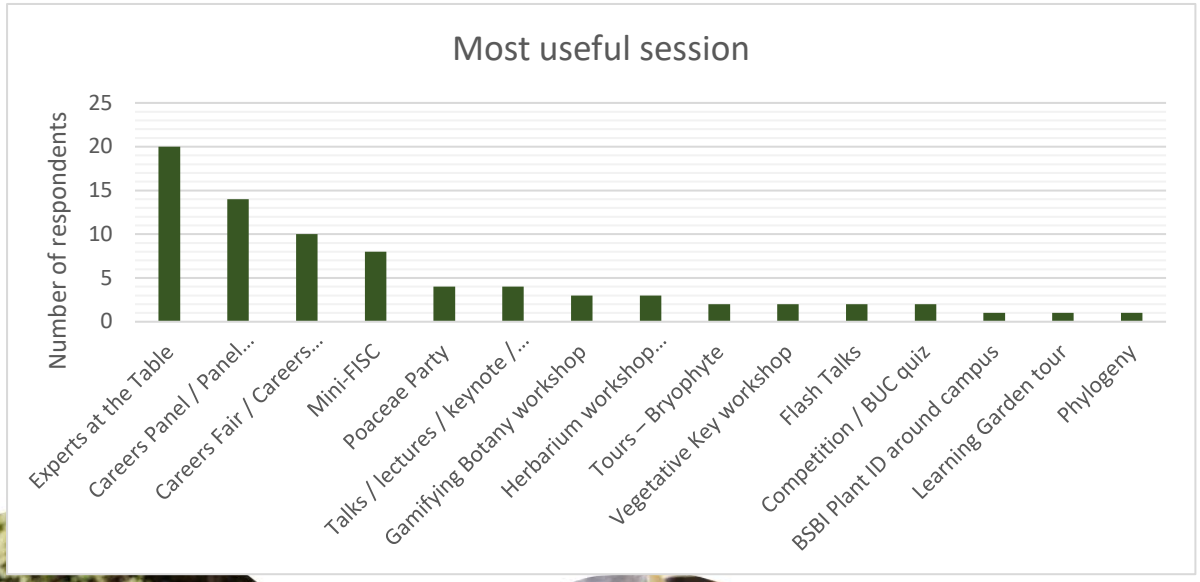
Student rating of BUC 2026

When asked to rank BUC 2026 on a scale of 1-5 stars, the average rating was 4.8 stars, indicating very high overall satisfaction with BUC 2026 attendees. Individual feedback from attendees further supports the positive impact BUC has on attendees:

> *"BUC has fundamentally changed my outlook to plant science. Whilst I've always loved what I study, being surrounded by such a passionate group of students has rejuvenated my dedication to this field and has allowed me to finally feel part of a community! Thank you and Long Live BUC."*

Sessions of most use for professional/academic development

Students were asked which session they found most useful for their professional or academic development, with an open-ended option to select more than one session. The responses revealed a broad range of preferences, though the most popular was the new session for 2026 **"Experts at the Table"** session, referenced by 20 students. The Careers Panel, and Careers Fair continue to vote highly, as they have since 2024, showing students really value time and insight into diverse careers. This below figure shows the diversity of sessions that students found useful for their development and the range of opportunities provided by the BUC Student Botany Festival.





Impact of BUC on career aspirations

Students were asked to describe how BUC 2026 had shaped their career aspirations. Responses to the open-ended question were analysed for recurring themes. Of the 75 substantive responses received, the overwhelming majority identified ways in which BUC had influenced, clarified or reinforced their career thinking.

A particularly strong theme was greater awareness of the breadth of careers and pathways available within botany and plant science. Students described discovering opportunities in areas including ecological consultancy, academia and research, horticulture, education and outreach, farming, science communication, and botanical institutions. Several participants also emphasised that BUC had helped them recognise that career pathways do not need to be linear. One student explained:

> *"It's broadened my horizons of what a career in plant science can look like. It's inspiring to see successful professionals studying plants, when a lot of careers fairs leave botanists feeling a bit lost."*

A further recurring theme was increased confidence, motivation and a clearer understanding of the steps required to progress. Participants described being inspired to improve their plant identification and field skills, pursue FISC accreditation, gain work experience, consider postgraduate study, and engage more actively with the botanical community. Some specifically reported greater confidence in their employability after speaking with professionals and employers.

For some students, attendance at BUC translated into specific educational or career decisions. Respondents described considering or choosing particular MSc courses, returning to academia, selecting plant-based university modules, and exploring research opportunities. Several returning participants provided particularly tangible evidence of longer-term impact:

> *"After attending BUC in 2025 I realised it is possible to have a career in botany. I went on to apply for the ecological survey skills masters at Reading, and I am currently working as an assistant ecologist and hopefully on my way to be a field botanist."*

> *"BUC 2025 drove me to become the auditor of our universities botany society and help encourage botanical curiosity, and this year it has fully inspired me to continue promoting plant science and to become involved in youth outreach programmes. I also feel like I gained skills (identification, public speaking) that allow me to venture past my initial research interest and to keep an open mind for a much wider range of career opportunities that I would of not even applied to before BUC"*

Taken together, the responses demonstrate that BUC's career impact operates at several levels: introducing students to careers they had not previously considered; reinforcing existing aspirations; increasing confidence in pursuing botanical careers; identifying skills and qualifications to develop; and, in some cases, contributing to concrete decisions about further study and employment. This supports BUC's wider aim of inspiring and developing the next generation of botanists while helping students translate their enthusiasm for plants into realistic and varied future pathways.

Specific connections or collaborations

A second open-ended question asked students about specific connections or collaborations that had arisen through participating in BUC. Of the 75 substantive responses, the large majority described making new peer or professional connections. These ranged from new friendships and contacts across universities to planned society collaborations, employment opportunities, and direct research partnerships.

- **Cross-university connections and friendships:** Students frequently described meeting like-minded peers from other universities, as well as strengthening relationships within their own teams. Several connections have developed into plans for future activities, including joint botany society events, field trips, and sharing ideas between university societies. Irish participants, for example, reported plans to organise botanical hikes together, while other students discussed collaborations between societies at different universities.
- **Professional networks and career opportunities:** Students reported making contacts with botanical organisations, employers and professional scientists, including representatives from BSBI, RHS, WSP, Syngenta, Dyson Farming, and UKCEH. One participant reported that networking had already helped them secure accommodation for a placement and led to discussions about a second placement. BSBI have reported they now have several BUC alumni supporting their organisation on committees.
- **Research and academic collaboration:** A number of responses demonstrate connections progressing beyond networking into tangible academic activity. Students reported meeting potential PhD supervisors, identifying postgraduate opportunities, and making contacts relevant to their research.
- **Connections with lasting impact:** The strongest evidence of longer-term impact comes from returning participants. One student reported meeting their future **PhD field assistant at BUC 2024**; that person subsequently contributed to their temperate rainforest research and will now be included as an author on resulting papers. Another described how a conversation at BUC had provided a new contact at RBGE for training and career advice, alongside another expert they planned to approach about their research project.



A message to the participants of BUC 2027

The penultimate compulsory question for BUC 2026 attendees was: “What would you say to students who are considering participating in BUC 2027?” This open-ended question allowed participants to respond in their own words.

The response was overwhelmingly encouraging. Variations of “Do it!”, “Go for it!”, “Join!” and “Sign up!” appeared repeatedly throughout the feedback, with students describing BUC as an opportunity they felt others should not miss.

Several recurring messages emerged:

- **Fun and enjoyment:** Participants repeatedly described BUC as *fun, exciting, memorable* and an experience they would happily repeat. The combination of the competition and Student Botany Festival was particularly valued.
- **Reassurance and accessibility:** A particularly strong theme was “you don't need to be an expert”. Students encouraged prospective participants not to be intimidated by the quiz, lack of botanical knowledge or being a beginner. Several specifically stressed that being knocked out of the competition should not prevent students from attending the festival.
- **Learning and development:** Respondents emphasised the opportunity to expand botanical knowledge, encounter different areas of plant science and develop through participation. Some also highlighted the value of BUC for CVs, careers and discovering new professional pathways.
- **Community and connection:** Meeting other people who share an enthusiasm for plants was one of the strongest messages. Participants spoke about making friends, meeting future colleagues and mentors, networking and experiencing a welcoming community of like-minded people.
- **Value beyond the competition:** Students repeatedly emphasised that BUC is about much more than winning the quiz. The Student Botany Festival, conversations between sessions, and opportunity to become part of the wider botanical community were presented as valuable outcomes in their own right.

To illustrate the personal impact of BUC, here are a few selected quotes from participants:

> *“Do it. This has been a genuinely exciting and inspiring thing to participate in. Even if you think of yourself as just a beginner, I promise, it's worth it.”*

> *“Go for it! It will be one of the most fun things you ever do, the people you meet will inspire you and be friends and colleagues for your future.”*

> *“BUC has been the most transformative experience throughout my degree, I have made friends centred around loving plants (which is very hard in any other setting) and have been given career opportunities and direction that would not have been possible without BUC. The deep-rooted feeling of community I gained from attending BUC has completely inspired me to become more involved within my field and has given me hope for this wonderful science.”*



Assessing BUC 2026 against its core aims

Evaluation of BUC 2026 demonstrates strong progress against its three core aims. As shown throughout this report, fostering community is particularly evident, nurturing botanical knowledge has remained central to the experience. BUC continues to inspire future botanists by broadening students' awareness of career pathways, increasing their confidence and helping participants identify practical next steps towards further study, and employment.

Looking ahead to BUC 2027

Student feedback also identified opportunities to strengthen the programme further. In response, we will:

- **Review the programme and timings**, adjusting the scheduling of activities where possible to give students more time to participate, network, and get the most from individual sessions.
- **Improve pre-event communication**, making it clear that all participating students are entitled and encouraged to attend the Student Botany Festival, regardless of how far their team progresses in the competition. This will ensure more students benefit from the Festival's training, networking, and career-development opportunities.
- **Reduce financial barriers to participation.** Travel costs can make attending a national event difficult for some students. We will therefore aim to raise sufficient funding to introduce travel bursaries for BUC 2027, helping make participation accessible to students regardless of their financial circumstances. This is especially relevant as we look to take BUC to Aberdeen for 2027.

These improvements will build on the strengths identified through the 2026 evaluation while helping ensure that more students can access—and fully benefit from—the opportunities BUC provides.



The Vital Support from You

None of this would have been possible without the generous supporters of BUC who contributed both with monetary and in-kind donations. This year a total of £51,335 was raised to run BUC 2026.

BUC supports widening participation and prides itself in having an open to all policy. Donor support ensured that students from a wide range of backgrounds were able to participate in such an inspiring event, without worrying about financial considerations. We hope you have enjoyed hearing from the student participants of BUC 2026, your contributions made a huge difference to them.

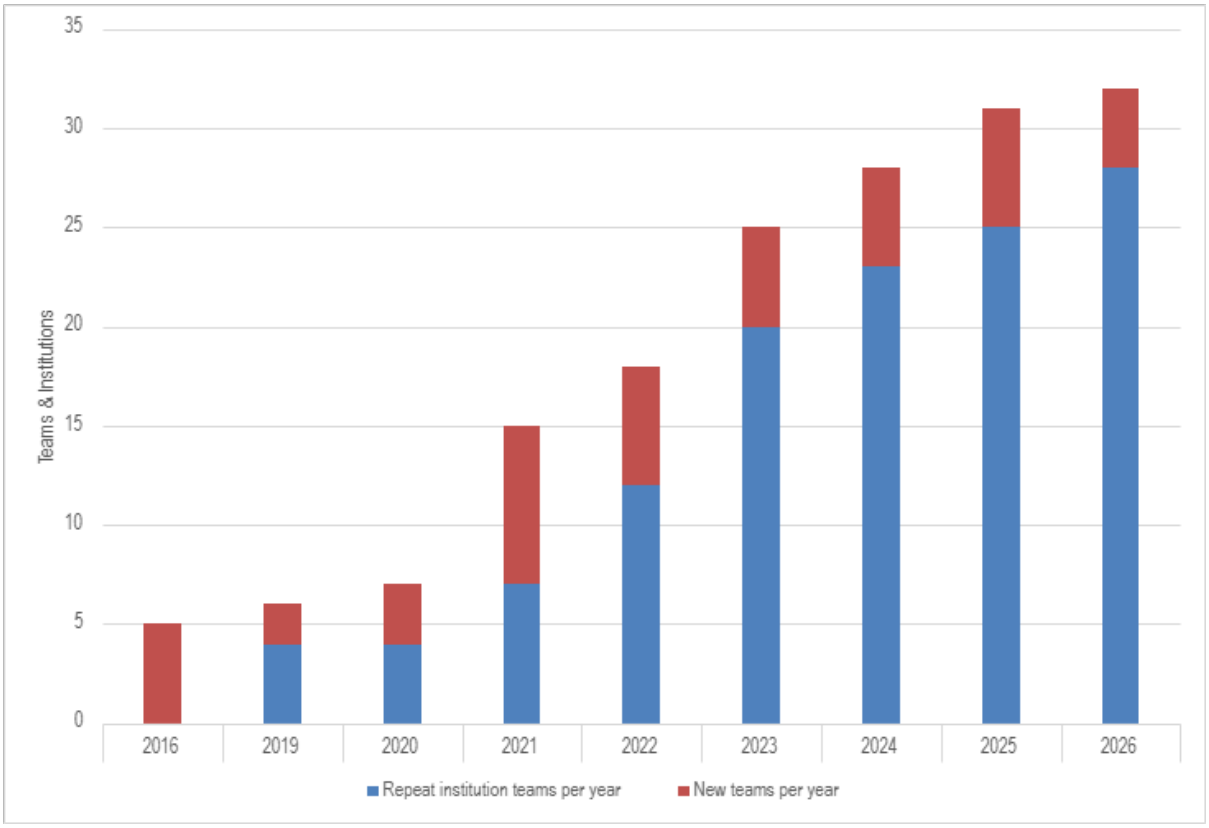
The BUC planning team would like to thank the following organisations for their valued support:

- The Annals of Botany Company
- Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland
- Botanical Society of Scotland
- The Botanist Foundation
- British and Irish Bryological Society (BIBS)
- CABI
- Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)
- Colegrave Seabrook Foundation
- Durham University
- Dyson Farming
- Edge Hill University
- Field Studies Council (FSC)
- Friends of the Harris Garden
- The Friends of the University of Reading
- IES Consulting
- Jonathan Drori
- Linda Pitkin
- National Trust
- Natural History Museum
- New Phytologist Foundation
- RHS Foundation (Bursary Scheme)
- Rothamsted Research
- Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh
- Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
- Royal Holloway
- Royal Horticultural Society
- She Grows Veg
- Society of Experimental Biology
- Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust
- Syngenta
- University College Dublin
- The University of Aberdeen
- The University of Cambridge
- The University of Edinburgh
- The University of Essex
- The University of Galway
- The University of Leeds
- The University of Oxford
- The University of Plymouth
- The University of Reading
- University of Reading Development Office
- The University of York
- The Wild Flower Society
- WSP
- And all individual sponsors who donated through our Crowdfunding page.

There is no doubt that the external funding that was received enabled BUC 2026 to run, and ensured that more students than ever were able to participate. We hope you will consider continuing your support for BUC 2027.

The Participating Teams of BUC 2026

BUC is seeing continual growth across the sector, as shown in the graph below:



We were particularly delighted to welcome teams from these 32 institutions to BUC 2026, we hope they all can join us for BUC 2027:

1. Aberystwyth University
2. Anglia Ruskin University
3. Bangor University
4. Cardiff University
5. Durham University
6. Eden Project University Centre
7. Edge Hill University
8. Harper Adams University
9. Oxford Brookes University
10. Queen Mary, University of London
11. Queens University Belfast
12. Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh
13. Royal Holloway, University of London
14. University College Dublin
15. University College London
16. University of Aberdeen
17. University of Bristol
18. University of Cambridge
19. University of Dundee
20. University of Essex
21. University of Edinburgh
22. University of Galway
23. University of Leeds
24. University of Liverpool
25. University of Nottingham
26. University of Oxford
27. University of Plymouth
28. University of Portsmouth
29. University of Reading
30. University of Sheffield
31. University of Southampton
32. University of York

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