Living Lab project brief – Evaluating Ecosia, ‘the search engine that plants trees’

Description of the paper

This paper describes a potential course project or dissertation project to research how Ecosia, ‘the search engine that plants trees’, compares to other search engines in terms of environmental impact. This research would help inform whether the University of Edinburgh should consider changing its default search engine.

Draft research question

Is there any significant environmental benefit to switching the University’s default search engine to Ecosia, ‘the search engine that plants trees’?

Background

The Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability and Students’ Association have received several enquiries from students who would like Ecosia to be the University’s official search engine.

The University of Sussex has made Ecosia its default search engine for students.

Although ostensibly Ecosia is the greener option, there are complexities beyond just using ad revenue to grow trees, for example:

- Whether the search engine uses 100% renewable energy (and whether parent companies ought to be included in that consideration)
- How efficient those searches are if the quality of results are lower (e.g. searching three times to find something that would otherwise have taken one search)
- If tree growing projects are responsibly managed
- Staff and student opinion of Ecosia
- The effect of seeing a ‘green’ branded search engine on University computers on staff and student perceptions of the University’s commitment to social responsibility and sustainability

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1 The search engine that is set for internet browsers such as Edge, Internet Explorer, Firefox and Chrome, not the University’s internal search engine at search.ed.ac.uk.
Objectives

- Undergo desk based research to provide a clear comparison of the environmental impact of Ecosia with other popular search engines (e.g. Google)
- Optional: interview and/or survey stakeholders (e.g. students) to gauge opinion on Ecosia
- Make recommendations for next steps