

Student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

Executive summary: Students
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I. Executive summary

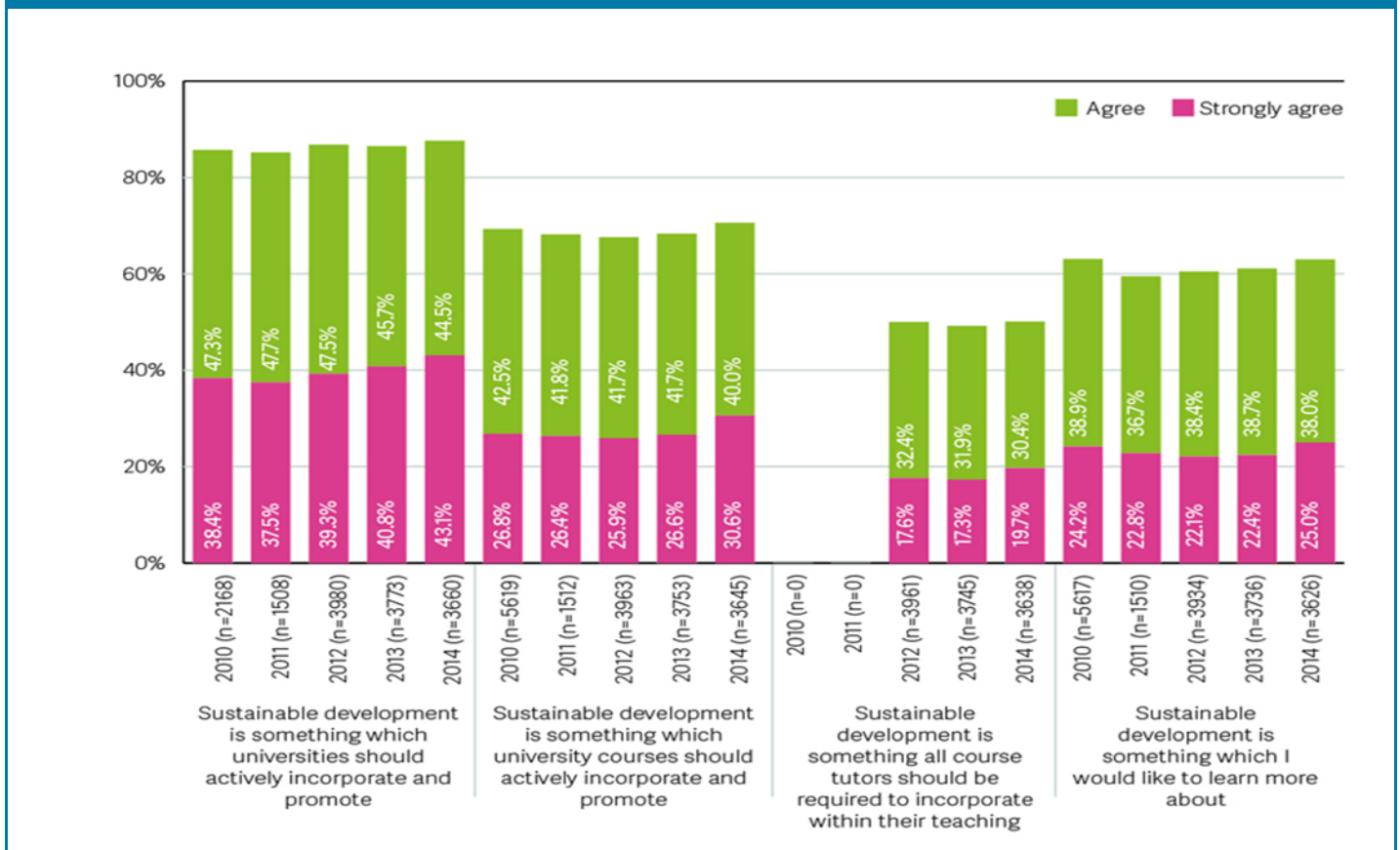
2. Student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

Research into student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development (SD) was conducted for a fifth consecutive year in 2014. This annual study:

- updates our understanding on student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development through 3,775 first year and 1,973 third year respondents in academic year 2013/14;
- identifies trends in demands and expectations from first year students new to university;
- tracks longitudinal demands and expectations from first year students as they progress through their university career;
- analyses the longitudinal variability in approximately 27,000 student responses between 2010 and 2014.

The research content repeated the previous questions to capture comparable longitudinal data. There was no reference to sustainable development in its promotion to reduce bias. Responses were weighted to reflect the demographic makeup of the UK student population.

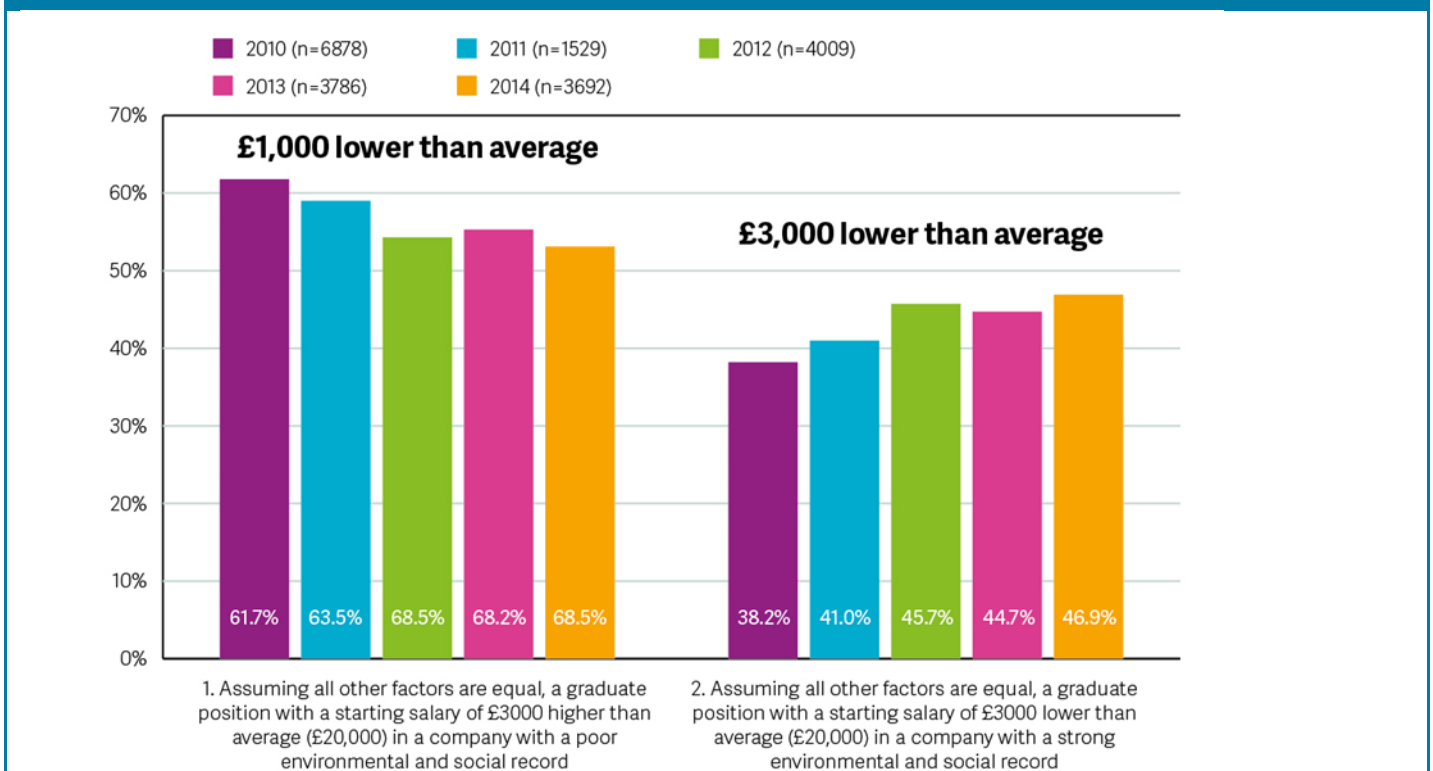
Figure 2.1 | To what extent, if at all, would you say that you personally agree with the following statements? [1ST YEARS TRACKER]



2.2 Key findings

- 1 Eight in every ten students consistently believe that SD should be actively incorporated and promoted by universities, and this increases as respondents progress through their studies. International students are significantly more likely to agree that action should be taken by universities in this way.
- 2 Over two-thirds of respondents consistently believe that SD should be incorporated into all university courses.
- 3 Over 60% of domestic students and three-quarters of international students would like to learn more about sustainable development.
- 4 There is a continued desire among students for a reframing of curriculum content, rather than additional content or courses. However, only approximately half of respondents currently identified their courses as a source of skills development across the range of skills for sustainable development, with most believing these skills had been developed through their everyday lives. A notable exception is understanding people's relationship to nature, which continues to lack coverage in all contexts.
- 5 Skills development is also high on the agenda with over two-thirds of first-year respondents consistently agreeing that universities should be obliged to develop their sustainability skills as part of their course.
- 6 At the same time, maintaining and developing links with employers remains increasingly relevant to students with internships increasingly seen as a method of further skills development.
- 7 Approximately two-thirds of students would be willing to sacrifice £1,000 from an average graduate starting salary to work for a company with a positive social and environmental record, while over two-fifths would be willing to sacrifice £3,000.
- 8 Significantly more respondents are willing to make a £3,000 sacrifice from their starting salary for a specific role that contributes to positive social and environmental change.

Figure 2.3 | We are interested in your prioritisation of social and environmental aspects in the future. Please select which option you would choose. [FIRST YEARS TRACKER]



2.4 Key recommendations

In response to the continuing student demand, this research reinforces recommendations that HEIs should support staff and students to collaboratively embed sustainability into the formal and informal curriculum.

Reviews of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within the UK carried out during the UNESCO Decade for Education for Sustainable Development highlighted the often small scale and uneven incorporation of sustainability across the education sector¹. The consistency of the survey results, such as the demand to learn more about sustainable development, seen across five years of research could be seen as an indication that the reorientation of higher education towards comprehensive inclusion of education for sustainable development is making slow progress across the sector as a whole. Significant leadership is needed at all levels within the UK's education system to encourage and achieve wider adoption of ESD.

Across the five years of student-facing research there is a consistent ranking of the relationship between people and nature as a less important, relevant and understood skill. This could be seen as a result of a systematic compartmentalisation of humans away from the natural environment. Evidence suggests this compartmentalization is occurring at multiple levels within society, with the same finding applying within the concurrent employer-facing research and research conducted more widely by organisations such as the National Trust and RSPB². Addressing the separation between humans and nature requires a consistency of approach and exposure to sustainability throughout all levels of education.

Respondents have shown a consistent preference for building environmental and social skills into existing course content; however the research also suggests that respondents may need further assistance identifying how the skills they are learning translate to sustainable development. For example, only 50% of respondents identified developing sustainability skills through the formal curriculum. The framing of learning opportunities for sustainability should be considered to aid students identify what and how they are learning about the subject.

There is a clear association between extracurricular learning opportunities and skills for sustainable development amongst respondents. Higher education institutions should therefore ensure resources are available for developing extra-curricular initiatives and activities, at the same time ensuring their design encompasses the full definition of sustainable development.

The desire to work for organisations and in roles that positively contribute to the environment and society has been increasingly demonstrated by respondents across the full five years of research. Employer groups and higher education institutions should work in partnership to use these expectations as a key part of communicating the business case for engaging further with sustainable development amongst the business community.

3. Wider actions within higher education and beyond

The following actions, outlined in previous reports associated with this research, would ensure holistic support for prioritising learning and skills development for sustainability:

3.1 Students and students' unions should:

- continue to encourage their institutions to take a holistic approach to SD, ultimately embedding it into their core purpose through their teaching and learning, ensuring understanding and ability to take action becomes a graduate attribute;
- work in partnership with their institution to create quality informal curricular activities that develop sustainability skills.

¹ Martin, S. et al, (2013), *ESD in the UK – Current status, best practice and opportunities for the future* (<http://www.unesco.org.uk/uploads/Brief%209%20ESD%20March%202013.pdf>)

² For example, RSPB, (2013), *Connecting with nature* (http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/connecting-with-nature_tcm9-354603.pdf)

3.4 Academics should:

- continue to engage with students, students' unions, senior management and operational staff to integrate SD across the student learning and university experience;
- conduct interdisciplinary teaching and research across their institutions and the HE sector that demonstrates the relevance of SD to a students' academic studies;
- make use of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and HEA 'Education for sustainable development guidance'³.

3.5 Higher education institutions should:

- continue to encourage academic staff to develop formal and extra-curricular resources for sustainability and employability skills relevant to their discipline;
- continue to instigate enterprise work with employers and professional bodies to develop the skills and knowledge needed for business opportunities in an emerging sustainable economy;
- conduct further research on: the importance of SD skills to graduate employers; community, student, and academic partnerships for SD; the different definitions and application of SD being used by students, academics, and policy makers.

3.6 Government and policy makers should:

- continue to promote the importance of SD across the HE sector and to the student population;
- increase the resources and support for the higher education (HE) sector in responding to the clear student demand for SD to be promoted in and incorporated by their institutions;
- support HEIs in the evaluation of SD performance, for example, through the inclusion of questions in the National Student Survey.

3.7 Employers and professional bodies should:

- work with HEIs and policy makers to identify the skills and knowledge needed for business opportunities in a sustainable and responsible economy;
- work with academics to incorporate professional sustainability skills into the curriculum and extracurricular activities;
- work with students' unions on providing opportunities for work placements and internships that provide professional and subject relevant experience, whilst improving sustainability skills for students.

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Education-sustainable-development-Guidance-June-14.pdf>

4. This summary forms part of a series of short reports. Further detail on different aspects of the research can be found at:

Executive summary: Employer attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development

Summary 1: Existing skills – the influence of further education

Summary 2: Understanding attitudes and behaviours for sustainable development during higher education

Summary 3: Learning and using skills for sustainable development during higher education

Summary 4: Sustainability, skills, and employability

Appendix 1: Methodology

Appendix 2: Desk review – student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

Appendix 3: Desk review – employer attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development

Appendix 4: Student surveys

Appendix 5: Employer survey

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