

Sustainability Skills Survey Report – 2020-21

Introduction

The NUS Sustainability Skills Survey is an annual survey of students' attitudes, views and feedback around their university experience with a specific focus on sustainability activities, credentials and their personal intentions following graduation. Questions include exploring understanding of sustainability issues, whether environmental performance of universities informs students choice when deciding which university to attend, and whether students would accept a lower paid salary to work for an organisation based on their environmental/social record.

The survey is circulated in Semester 1 without any direct connection drawn to sustainability to avoid skewing responses, and to try and attract student participation from across all disciplines – not just those who are interested in sustainability. The survey ran for the 11th year in 2020, and institutions with more than 100 responses can receive the raw data from their students' responses. This report analyses the last 3 years of data, with a particular focus on the 2020-21 responses.

2020-21 Overview

50% of those who took part in 2020-21 were 1st year undergraduate students. Students were largely from medicine and related subjects, social sciences, and biological sciences. On average, 71% are women, 27% are male and 1% describe themselves in another way. 88% are UK citizens and 67% are white British.

On average, when choosing which university students applied to, 35% of students see how seriously the university takes environmental issues as somewhat important, 19% see it as very important. 35% of students see how seriously the university takes global development issues as somewhat important, 14% see it as very important.

Total Participants

2018-19	538
2019-20	397
2020-21	514

Highlights

- 79% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that universities should develop environmental and social skills through courses.
- 71% agreed or strongly agreed that studying at Keele encourages environmental and social actions and reflection.
- 86% agreed or strongly agreed Keele takes action to limit its action on the environment and society and 76% agreed or strongly agreed the SU takes action.
- Just under half of students reported their degree explores causes of inequality in the world, just over half report looking at issues from global perspectives (which has increased by ~10% over the past two years), whereas more than 70% of programmes explore ethical issues linked to courses. Understanding human impacts on nature and the importance of efficient resource use are reported to be included in

36% and 32% of courses respectively, whilst understanding how to create change has consistently been reported by 39-40% of respondents for the past 3 years, highlighting some potential gaps to feed back to programme areas.

- Placements, dissertations, coursework and existing course content were seen as highly relevant ways to develop skills and knowledge for sustainability, with extra curricular activities through both SU's and departments also seen as relevant, and specific sustainability modules also being a popular method.
- A decrease in the percentage of students who want to use their research to help make a difference to other people (42%) and the environment (17%) compared to previous years could indicate a need to reinforce the potential benefit undergraduate research can offer, especially with dissertations and coursework being seen by students as a potential way to develop skills and knowledge.
- Students saw and suggested ways for Keele University and KeeleSU to further improve sustainability activities across the breadth of operations, from education to transport, catering to events. Some suggestions were already taking place highlighting the potential to review communications around sustainability activities. Some communication channels, i.e. toilet door signs/stalls, would have been less visible over the past year due to reduced on-campus engagement.
- 41% of students reported reduced opportunities to engage with sustainability through the formal curriculum and 50% through extracurricular activities due to COVID-19.

The role of Universities as leaders for sustainability

Most students agreed (45% average) and strongly agreed (34% average) that universities should be obliged to develop student's social and environmental skills as part of their courses. Most students also agree (40% average) and strongly agree (31% average) that being a student at Keele University encourages them to think and act to help the environment and other people.

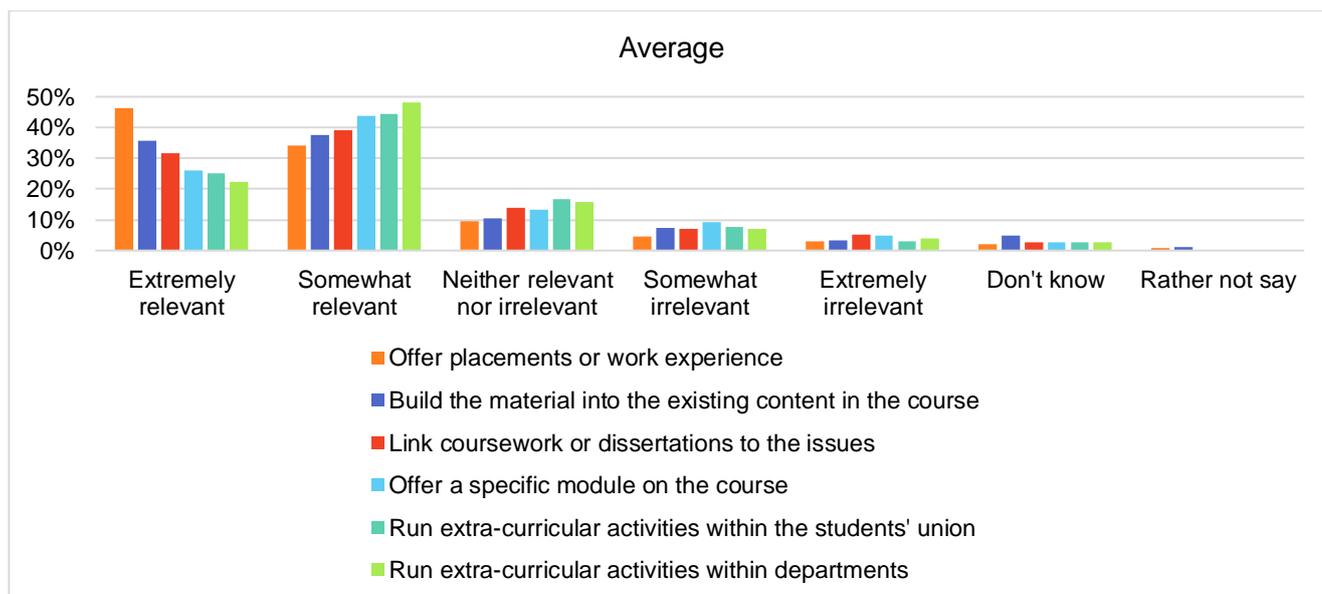
On average, students strongly agreed (47%) and agreed (39%) that Keele takes action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society. Whilst students strongly agreed (36%) and agreed (40%) that the students' union takes action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society. Awareness of this impact for both the university and the SU has evidently increased across the years. The following graph shows responses to questions exploring student attitudes towards the role universities play in tackling sustainable development, as institutions through all activities, through the curriculum, and whether they would like to learn more about sustainable development.

Sustainability competences and content in the curriculum

Students were invited to feed back on whether the issues in the 'question asked' column were included in their degree content. These questions have been linked to key sustainability competencies to highlight where Keele is embedding these competencies and students are reporting they have made these connections.

Sustainability Competency	Question asked	Response		
		2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
<i>Systems Thinking</i>	The causes of inequality in the world	41%	41%	45%
	Looking at global problems from the perspective of people from around the world	43%	41%	53%
	Solving problems by thinking about whole systems – including different connections and interactions	53%	53%	59%
<i>Futures Thinking Anticipatory</i>	Understanding how human activity is affecting nature	35%	38%	36%
	Planning for the long term, as well as the short term	51%	56%	58%
<i>Values Thinking Normative</i>	Using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people	28%	34%	32%
	Considering ethical issues linked to your subject	71%	68%	72%
<i>Strategic Thinking</i>	Challenging the way we do things now (like business, politics, education)	51%	52%	46%
<i>Interpersonal Collaboration</i>	Looking at a problem using information from different subjects or disciplines	44%	45%	56%
<i>Integrated Problem-Solving</i>	Understanding how to create change	39%	40%	40%
	Communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different types of people	63%	55%	56%

Students were also asked to imagine all university courses are required to include the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment. The graph below shows students' ranking of the most relevant ways of including the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment within their own course.



Feedback from students regarding what they hope to get from completing their dissertation highlighted a decrease in students wanting to use their research to help make a difference to other people and the environment:

<i>If your course includes completing a dissertation, what do you hope to get out of completing your dissertation?</i>	2018	2019	2020
<i>To use my research to help make a difference to other people</i>	47%	45%	42%
<i>To use my research to help make a difference to the environment</i>	23%	21%	17%

Recommendations from Students

Students were also invited to share their suggestions of actions they would like to see the university take to improve its performance on sustainable development. The responses were coded into 11 categories (Catering (4), Communication (29), ESD (78), Events (10), Living Sustainably (16), Plans and Strategy (12), Renewable Technologies (17), University Reputation (44), Transport (7), Waste Management (29) and Zero Waste (9). Specific examples are outlined below.

Catering

- Healthy sustainable food
- *“Encouraging people to eat more sustainably and a combination of vegetarian and vegan diets”*
- Local suppliers.
- Reusable containers and using less plastic.

Transport

- Encouraging car-pooling (post-lockdown), cycling, electric vehicles
- *“Think more about how students attend campus - driving, public transport, cycling... as they increase their student numbers, think about how that many people are getting to campus. Do they even need to attend as much in person in a post-COVID world?”*
- Better transport links, especially with buses

Zero Waste & Waste Management

- Be the first university to go completely plastic free. Straws, bags, bottles, cups, etc.
- Co-ordinated recycling facilities across the university.
- Composting around campus and more information about food wastage.
- *“Really enforcing recycling not just in halls but also encouraging people to do it outside in their homes and not just at university.”*
- *“the introduction of machines which will pay approximately 20p for every plastic bottle inserted for recycling. This would encourage students to be more conscious of their waste and to collect litter around campus. Such machines already exist”*
- Using less paper, reducing the need for paper with assignments.
- More information on recycling.

Strategic Planning

- Climate Action Plan both the university and the SU
- Working with sustainable companies and creating partnerships.
- Listening to the local community and the student body, involving them on the committees.
- Highlighting green spaces on campus.
- Forums where students, higher powers and sustainability team can discuss actions.

Events

- Give more staff members the capacity to do sustainable activities and be praised for their sustainable activities.
- Working with societies to create unique projects.
- ‘Sustainability Week’

Living Sustainably (Live Green)

- Tips on how to live sustainably.
- Campaigns, such as a vegetarian campaign
- Encourage courses and individuals to act more sustainably.
- Updating older accommodation blocks and developing sustainability into on-campus living.
- Encourage students to shop more locally.

Renewable Technologies

- Carbon neutrality and being transparent with this through educating and involving students, staff and community
- Update accommodation blocks
- Students have noticed the SEND project but wider communication would be good
- Consider the impact on biodiversity

Education for Sustainability

- Core compulsory part of the curriculum – 36
 - *“I think it would be a good idea if everyone across the University had to study a unit on sustainable development every year. These could be cross*

discipline courses which would help to generate a greater sense of a wider University community.”

- Elective part of the curriculum - 2
- Optional lectures and seminars open to everyone at different points in their sustainability journey - 15
- Sustainability in future careers, the work place and industries – 3
- More posters in halls and schools, and videos on Instagram
- Offer guidance for students who are not educated in sustainability (reprimand students who don't respect Keele's sustainable practices)
- Working with SU Societies and engaging students, focus groups - 6
- Regular updates / reports / videos showing what measures are in place, how successful / unsuccessful the measures are. – 6
- Books online, online assessments (rather than needing to print them)

“During my medical studies at Keele, we have been fortunate enough to have sustainability and development built into our curriculum and therefore touched upon and discussed throughout the course. One of the most valuable sessions involved discussing the impact that the healthcare system has upon the environment [...] I think it is really important for each course to have both generic sustainability teaching as well as teaching unique to their degree field to make the learning specific and relevant to their future careers.”

“More solutions oriented teaching, dwelling on problems isn't productive.”

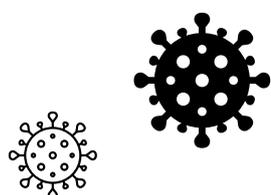
“My university has run some excellent lectures that have opened my mind to the situation the planet is in.”

University Reputation

- The university is doing a great job already. – summary of 40 students' opinions!
 - *“The university to be well known for the difference it's making across the nation.”*
 - *“I am happy with the Keele University's initiatives which are arguably the best in the UK.”*
 - *“The university is doing a fantastic job so far, thus I have nothing else to recommend.”*
 - *“My university actively acts on trying to incorporate sustainable development into university life.”*
- We need to continue to be sustainable and continue to communicate this, despite COVID-19.
 - *“Keele SU is already quite good at this, but the university itself could do better. My undergrad was maths so sustainable development wasn't particularly relevant to what we were learning but that doesn't mean they couldn't have incorporated it into the course content.”*
 - *“It's very difficult to tell what the Universities policies and practices are during these COVID-19 times. I began my part time course in September 2020 and have only been to the Uni campus 4 times because of COVID-19. The University is not operating as normal, things like recycling rubbish are not evident as everything is COVID-19 focused.”*

- Give more staff members the capacity to do sustainable activities and be praised for their sustainable activities.

What impact if any do you think COVID-19 has had on your ability to engage with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?



	Formal learning experiences that are part of your course e.g. courses, modules or lectures linked to sustainable development)	Informal learning experiences offered by your university / college or students' union but which do not count as part of your course e.g. volunteer opportunities, events, clubs)	Informal learning experiences offered by organisations outside your university / college / students' union e.g. community group or campaign)
Very negative impact	13%	20%	21%
Somewhat negative impact	28%	30%	27%
No impact	30%	23%	26%
Somewhat positive impact	10%	9%	7%
Very positive impact	3%	3%	3%
Don't know	15%	14%	15%
Prefer not to say	2%	2%	2%

Future Employment

A series of questions focused on future employment. When asked about how important, if at all, students felt different factors were when considering which jobs to apply for, students on average across the three years responded as follows:

- 35% said it was very important to have a good starting salary, 48% said it was important.
- 30% said it was very important to have a role that contributes to development within the local community, 42% said it was important.
- 34% said it was very important to work in a business or organisation that makes a difference to social and environmental issues, 37% said it was important.
- 20% said it was very important to have a role that contributes to helping the environment, 34% said it was important.

A chance to work in a business / organisation that makes a difference to social and environmental issues

	2018 -19	2019 -20	2020 -21
<i>Very important</i>	36%	35%	30%
<i>Somewhat important</i>	34%	36%	41%
<i>Neither important nor unimportant</i>	15%	16%	17%
<i>Somewhat unimportant</i>	7%	7%	6%

Further work

Linking to curriculum review – exploring whether students on specific courses are reporting differently to each other through mapping responses by year and subject area.

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