

NUS Sustainability Skills Survey: Leicester Responses (2016-17)

Background

1. For the past seven years the NUS have run a Sustainability Skills Survey amongst students as they have identified it as a priority area. In 2016 this survey was carried out twice (in April and November) and gained a high response from Leicester students in both.
2. The results of the earlier survey were reported to SSG in November 2016 so this paper compares the Leicester results of both surveys and examines the implications.

Introduction

3. 646 Leicester students responded, compared to 900 respondents to the previous survey, possibly due to timing.
4. As with any survey of this nature there is a potential for participant bias but the findings presented are very similar to those reported previously (2015/16) and to the national results consistently found by HEA/NUS for the past six years.

Demographics

5. Responses came from 81% undergraduates and 16% postgraduates. 20% were international students (down 14%) and 61% were female (down 3%). Moving the survey to the autumn term had the desired effect of spreading the responses between study years more evenly (away from the first year bias) due to lack of dissertation deadlines.
6. All three colleges were well represented, although Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities again dominated

Leicester's perceived sustainability credentials

7. 88% of respondents believed that universities should actively incorporate and promote sustainable development.
89% of UK and non-EU respondents believed this, compared to 92% of students from the rest of the EU.
8. 72% of respondents agreed that Leicester takes action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society. This breaks down to 72% of home students and 79% of international (non EU) students, compared to 56% home students and 69% of international (non EU) students last year. The 13% difference has reduced to 7%, we still engage with international students more effectively but engagement with home students is catching up and both have made statistically significant improvements.
9. 75% felt that the SU takes action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society. In both the case of the university and the SU the majority of those that agreed did not strongly agree.
10. Although the majority of students believe that the University should promote sustainable development, only 50% agreed that being a Leicester student encouraged them to think and act to help the environment, however there is a continued disparity between home (48%), EU (58%) and non EU (73%) students. It would seem that the further students travel to study the more likely they are to participate in extra-curricular sustainability activities.
11. 17% of students disagree to some extent that being a student at the University of Leicester encourages them to think and act to help the environment, and other people.

Previous sustainability education

12. The survey asked questions to ascertain students' sustainability educational background. Most sustainability-related issues were reported to have been learned about at secondary school.
13. Exceptions to this included:
 - More international (non EU) students reported learning about consumerism, global and ethical trade at University (39%), compared to UK (19%) and EU (22%) students.
 - Students reported learning about CSR and business ethics about evenly between secondary school, college and university.
 - In the previous survey more International (non EU) reported learning about Human rights and Social Justice at University, 59% & 50%, down to 28% & 38% this year.
 - Only 2% international (non EU) students reported that they had not learnt about climate change yet, down from 11.4% of international (non EU) students last year.
 - Similarly, only 2% of international (non EU) students reported that they had not learnt about, about waste, water & energy compared to 9.3% last year.
 - 12% of home students have not yet learnt about social justice, down 3% on last year.
 - 20% of home students felt they had not learnt about CSR and business ethics yet, down from 29% last year,
 - Half of all international students also felt they had learned about corporate social responsibility and business ethics at University, whilst 29% of home students felt they had not learnt this yet, although this is likely related to their chosen course of study.
 - Post-graduates and international (non EU) students were more likely to report that university had encouraged them the most to act to help the environment and people.

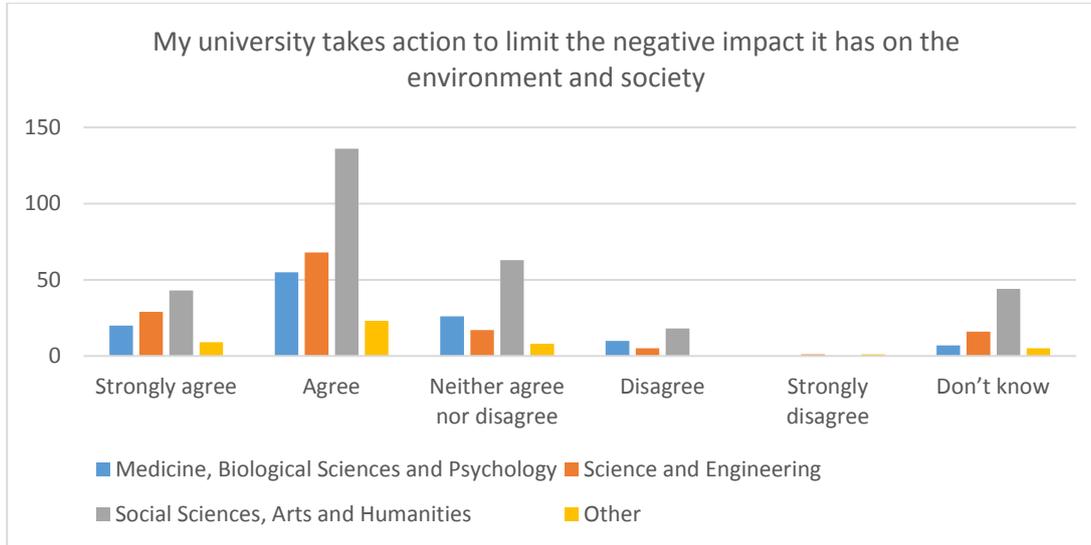
Teaching & Learning at Leicester

14. 78% of respondents agreed that sustainable development should be actively incorporated and promoted within courses, up on last year.

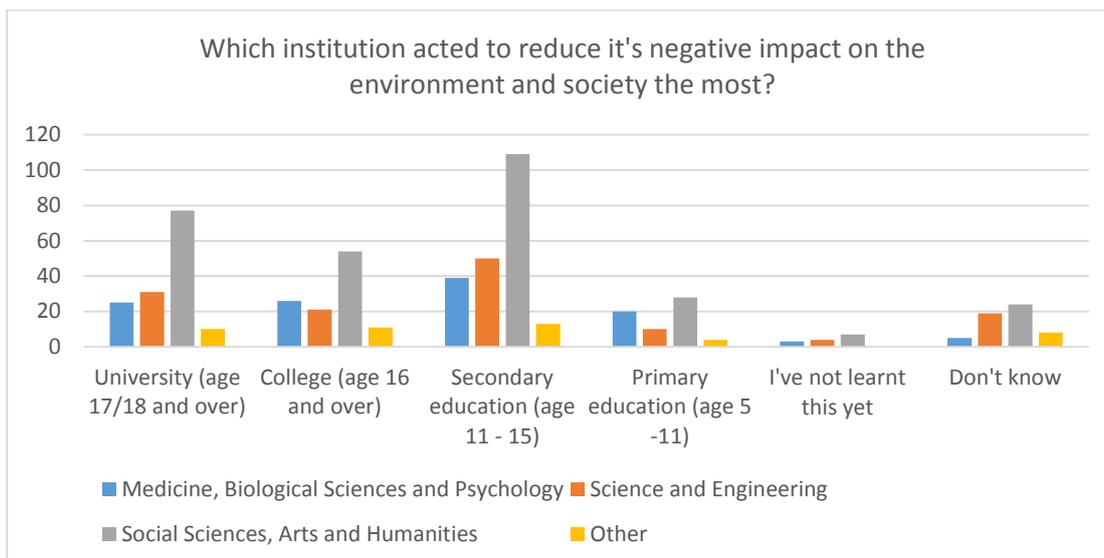
Over half agreed that they would like to learn more about sustainable development.
15. 74% didn't agree that Leicester covers how human activity is affecting nature, 78% didn't agree that Leicester covers how to use resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment. 54% agreed that Leicester covers considering ethical issues linked to your subject, and 49% agreed that Leicester covers solving problems by thinking about whole systems.
16. However, 69% believed that learning about how human activity is affecting nature was either fairly or very important, with only 10% believing it was not very or not at all important. 72% believed that using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment was fairly or very important, with only 8% believing it was not very or not at all important.
17. Opinions were fairly consistent across subjects; more than 38% of students strongly agreed that sustainable development is something in which universities/colleges should actively incorporate and promote. More than 50% of students generally agreed this is something universities should incorporate.
18. 50% of respondents agreed that they can contribute to the development of the curriculum at Leicester.
19. 78% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that university courses should actively encourage and promote sustainable development.
20. Last year the breakdown of responses by student origin revealed that 70% of home students believed that courses should promote sustainable development, vs 84% amongst non-EU international students. That has reduced to 78% vs 82%, which either demonstrates that UK/EU students are becoming more aware of this area, or it reflects the increased responses from third year students who have had more opportunities to learn about this.

Responses by college

21. This year 24% of respondents thought that the University has acted to reduce its negative impact on the environment and society more than other institutions they have attended, up from 20% last year.
22. 21% of medicine, biological sciences and psychology students thought the University had acted the most, compared to 26% of social sciences, arts and humanities.
23. 19% of participants reported that the University has encouraged them to think and act to help the environment and other people more than the other institutions they have attended.



24. 23% of students from the social sciences, arts and humanities thought the University has done this more than other institutions, compared to 16% of other students.
25. 28% of social sciences, arts and humanities students reported that they learnt about cultural diversity and equality at University. Compared to only 13% of students from science and engineering – 8% below the average across all three colleges of 21%.

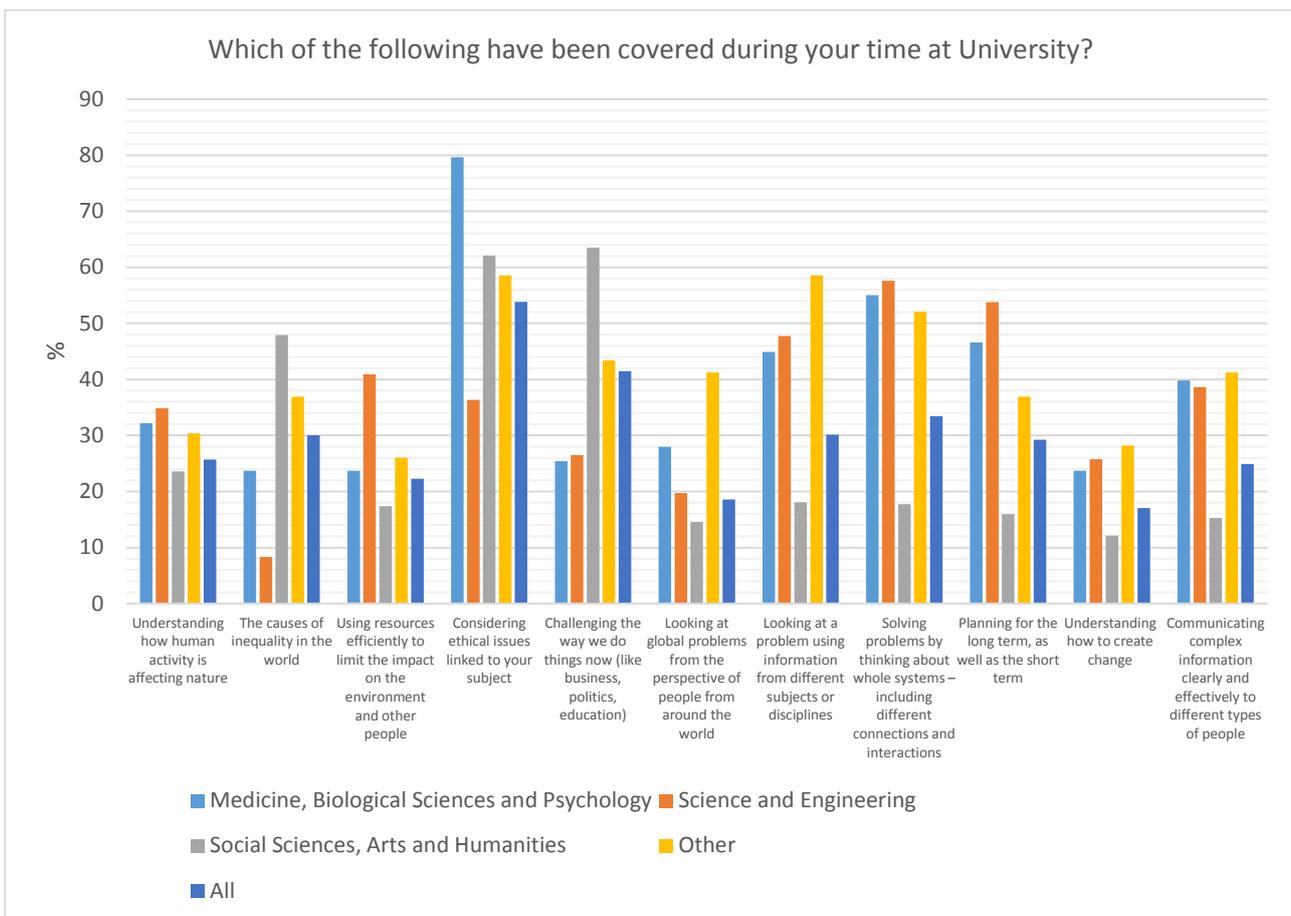


26. Only 13% of students reported that they learnt about ecosystems and ecological principles at University. Medicine, biological sciences and psychology reported the highest rate at 16%, with social sciences, arts and humanities coming in under average at 12%.
27. 29% of social sciences, arts and humanities students reported learning about CSR at University, compared to 12% of medicine, biological sciences and psychology students – 29% of whom had not learnt about this yet.



28. Over 60% of students from medicine, biological sciences and psychology and from the social sciences, arts and humanities agreed that considering ethical issues linked to your subject were covered during their time at university, whilst less than 40% of science and engineering students reported this. Science and engineering students also reported the lowest rates of learning about causes of inequality in the world at 8%.

29. Unfortunately, whilst social sciences, arts and humanities students reported the highest levels of learning how to challenge the way we do things now (62%), they also reported the lowest rate of understanding *how* to create change (12%).



Why students want to learn more about sustainable development

30. This question was asked as an open question and analysed as themes. In answer to ‘What do you understand the term ‘Sustainable Development’ to mean?’ most answers dealt with development’s relationship to the environment and resources. The most common impression was that it meant

carrying out the business of existing without destroying the planet for future generations, and making sure that whatever we are doing can feasibly be done continuously without destroying Earth's environment. There was not much mention of the social aspect of this, perhaps only as many as 23 replies.

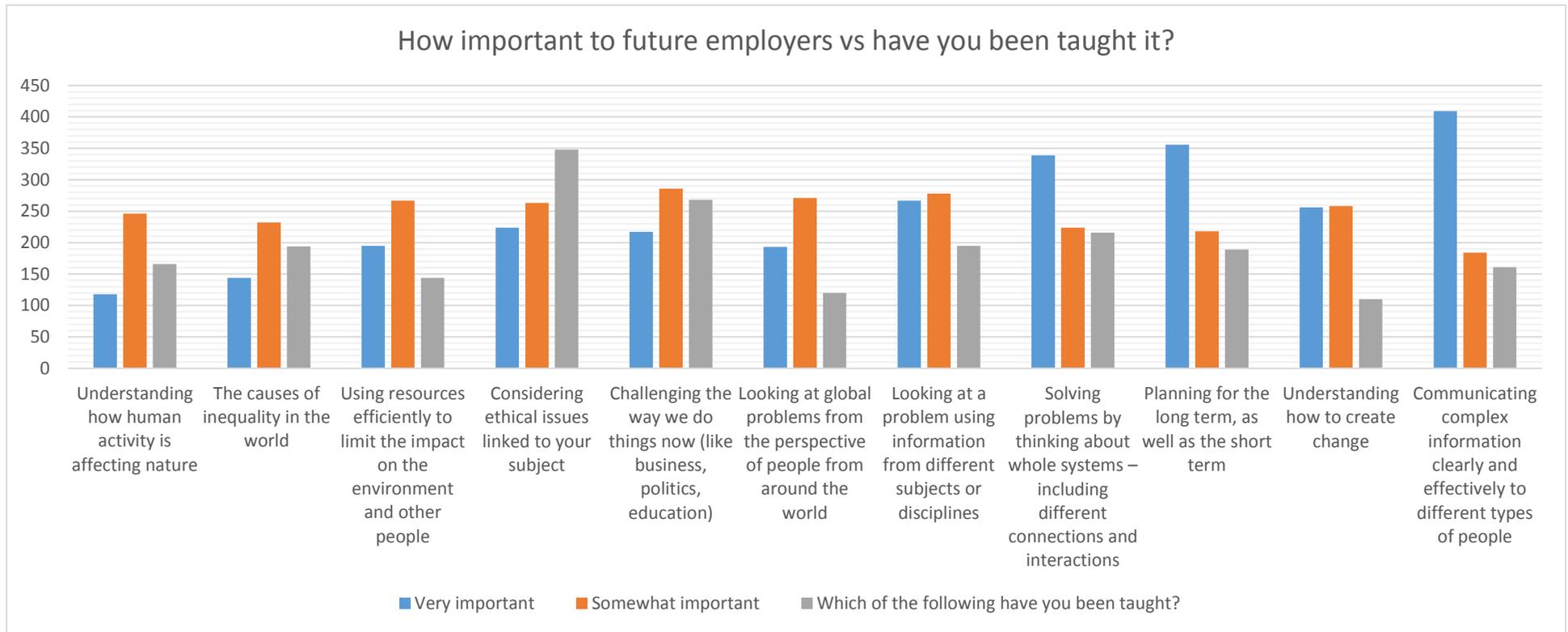
31. Some respondents mistakenly had the impression that sustainable development meant "Follow a steady way to develop new things" or of constant/"continuous progression, upwards and forwards".
32. When asked to say why they would like to learn more about sustainable development a lot of responses talked about personally contributing and doing their 'bit' – becoming more educated so that they might integrate their knowledge into whatever they may do next. Sometimes it was not clear whether this was at a micro or macro level, however a lot of the responses were well thought out and considerably ambitious, for example;

"Having done much research into the business environment of 2050 as part of my course, I have seen that environmental and technological factors almost compete with each other. Certain technology will not be available in the future if we use all of the resources we have now. Also, if sustainable development could help slow global warming, it is in our interest to learn about it."
33. Although the majority of students did not seem to consider working in an exclusively "eco" or sustainable role a priority (46% felt that a role that contributed to helping the environment was important), they did express an interest in taking skills and knowledge of sustainable development with them into other roles in most of the open responses and 66% felt that working in a business or organisation that makes a difference to social and environmental issues was important to them.
34. Over 30 responses talked about a concern for the future (of the planet, or of future generations) with 10 respondents citing concern for future generations explicitly – a commonality between this year's responses and last years.

Future employment

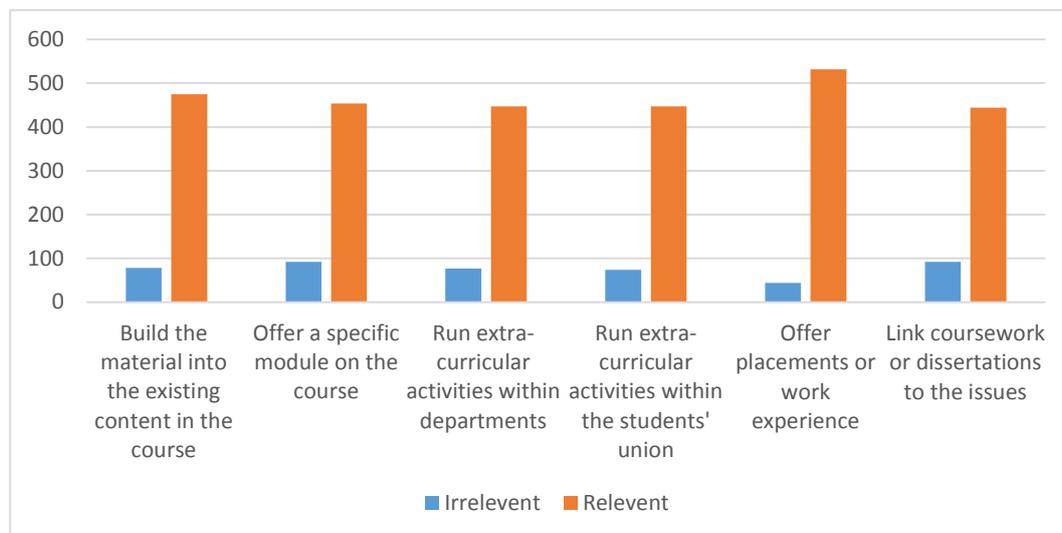
35. The most common reason respondents gave for taking a particular course of study was to improve their chances of getting a job. However it was very close to perhaps the more traditional answer of wanting to learn more about an interesting subject.
36. Students were asked about their perceptions about their employability skills and what they believe to be important to employers. The 2005 Government White Paper, 'Ensuring the Future' stated: To maintain a more competitive economy...we will need...to make sustainability literacy a core competency for professional graduates. This need has been recognised by employers: A study carried out for the HEA in 2008 found that over half of employers surveyed (n=87) had at some time referred to social and environmental responsibility in their selection of recent graduates.
37. Just as employers are increasingly looking for sustainability literate employees, graduates are looking for sustainably responsible employers. 65% of Leicester respondents said they would consider important a chance to work in a business / organisation that makes a difference to social and environmental issues, something which has not changed since the previous survey.
38. 72% said they would consider a position with a starting salary of £1000 lower than average (£20,000) in a company with a strong environmental and social record. This reduced to 49% when asked to choose between either a starting salary £3000 higher than average, or £3000 lower than average. £49% of respondents also said that they would take a position with a starting salary £3000 below average in a *role* that contributed to positive environmental and social change.

39. One encouraging finding was the smaller gap this year between what respondents reported they had learned at the University so far against what they believed to be important to their future employers:



40. Students felt, much as they did last year, that a combination of real world experience (specifically placements which only 7% of respondents classified as irrelevant, and 82% classified as relevant) and building sustainability into existing course content and coursework would be the most relevant way to help them to gain the sustainability skills they require.

41. Offering a specific module on the course, and linking coursework to the issues were ranked most irrelevant – but 70% and 69% of respondents still classified them as either somewhat or extremely relevant.



Conclusion and Recommendations

International students seem to learn more about sustainability-related issues prior to higher education, but this gap is reducing each year as more home/EU students report greater awareness of such issues.

Once again students have confirmed that sustainable development is important to them; that it should be promoted within their institution and that they want to learn more about it both for personal and career aspirations.

There are several projects that will address this that need to be supported:

- Curriculum transformation project – will audit the current sustainability-related activities in the curriculum and will identify opportunities to develop this further.
- Projects for Purpose – based on the NUS Dissertations for Good database, this project will develop a Leicester specific database matching local organisations' project requirements with students who want to do real world dissertations or voluntary projects.
- Living Labs – will formalise the current ad hoc practice of students carrying out their dissertations with Estates staff and develop opportunities throughout Professional Services where students can gain real world project experience whilst also adding value to the University.

A communications plan should also be developed to promote these opportunities to students and to help students recognise the skills and knowledge they have gained.

Appendix – Additional analysis

