Sustainability in Higher Education: What More Can Universities Do?

How prospective international students feel about the higher education sector’s sustainability efforts

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Introduction

Environmental sustainability is a critical, global issue which touches every industry and nation, and the higher education sector is no exception.

Universities across the globe are implementing initiatives to reduce their carbon footprint and improve their environmental sustainability, but is it enough for students? To explore how the higher education sector is performing when it comes to students’ environmental expectations, we conducted the QS Environmental Concerns Survey in August 2019.

The survey received responses from more than 3,700 prospective international students who are currently looking to study in the UK, Australia, Canada, or United States.

The results reveal some interesting insights with prospective international students identifying both the higher education sector’s significant strengths and its areas for improvement.

This report will also reveal what students think universities can do to improve their sustainability efforts, how they should educate students when it comes to environmental concerns, and students’ global view of sustainability and the environment.

Read on to discover how universities are performing when it comes to sustainability, and how to rectify these gaps.

“
The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.

Robert Swan, British historian, explorer, and activist.
”
How do students feel about the higher education sector’s current approach to sustainability?

The first section of this report will tackle how students perceive the current efforts that universities are adopting to address environmental concerns.

This can help the higher education sector and its decision makers to understand how students feel about their current approach to environmental initiatives.

In general, how environmentally friendly do you think universities are?

When examining how environmentally friendly they perceive universities to be, the majority of respondents consider universities to be either very environmentally friendly (33%) or somewhat environmentally friendly (49%).

This clear majority is an encouraging testament to the dedication and commitment of universities when it comes to sustainability.

On the other end of the spectrum, we can see that 10% believe that universities are not very environmentally friendly and 2% state that they’re not environmentally friendly at all.

This shows that a significant minority still need to be persuaded that universities are doing a good job when it comes to the environment, so there’s still a lot of work ahead for higher education institutions.
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Universities care about the environment."

These results also demonstrate the commitment that universities have shown towards the environment.

Of those surveyed, 36% strongly agree that universities care about the environment, while 35% slightly agree.

Interestingly, 21% of respondents were neutral towards this statement, suggesting that they believe universities neither support nor detract from the sustainability cause.

Finally, 6% disagree slightly and 2% disagree strongly, demonstrating that some think universities aren't doing enough.

Do you think universities could do more to be environmentally sustainable?

Despite the above positive responses, an overwhelming majority agree that universities could do more to be environmentally sustainable.

A staggering 94% of respondents want to see universities do more, while only 2% believe they don't need to do more and 4% are unsure.

This mixed report card suggests that while prospective international students believe that universities care about the environment and exhibit environmentally friendly behaviors, they can still do more.
When it comes to sustainability, what do students think universities should do?

Given these results, it’s clear that students expect more from the higher education sector.

But what exactly do they expect and how can universities take actionable steps to meet these standards?

This section will examine the importance students place on universities taking action to improve their sustainability, what they think universities need to be responsible for, the most important activities they think universities should engage in, and how they should promote these efforts.

How important is it to you that a university takes action to reduce its environmental impact?

First and foremost, students want to see universities take action to reduce their environmental impact.

Of those surveyed, 47% believe this to be essential and 41% think it’s very important. Only 9% think it’s moderately important, 2% slightly important, and 1% not at all important.

This majority demonstrates that prospective international students expect action from higher education institutions.
Which of the following do you think universities have a responsibility for?

- Protecting the environment: 66%
- Developing sustainable technologies: 65%
- Developing green energy technologies: 61%
- Improving the quality of life in local areas: 48%
- Taking part in cultural events in their local area: 46%
- Providing employment opportunities for the local population: 43%
- Bringing local communities together: 39%
- Investing in the local area: 31%
- Supporting local businesses: 30%

So, what does action mean to these students?

They believe that universities should take responsibility for a variety of areas, including protecting the environment (66%), developing sustainable technologies (65%), and developing green energy technologies (61%).

They also believe that universities should play a part in improving the quality of life in local areas (48%), taking part in cultural events in their local area (46%), and providing employment opportunities for the local population (43%).

This demonstrates that students value universities taking sustainability steps on both a global and local level.

What five environmental activities are most important for universities to engage in?

Prospective international students were asked to choose the top five activities that universities should engage in to improve their environmental friendliness. The top five were:

1. Increasing funding for research into sustainable initiatives
2. Reducing the amount of single-use plastics they use
3. Reducing the amount of waste which goes to landfill
4. Increasing how much energy comes from renewable sources
5. Installing energy efficient lighting

This demonstrates the actionable steps that universities could take to meet student expectations and boost their sustainability efforts.
To contrast, these were the other environmentally friendly activities that students could choose, ranked in order of popularity:

6. Ensuring all food served on campus is from sustainable sources
7. Decreasing the amount of paper and printer ink they use
8. Reducing their carbon footprint
9. Investing in ethical initiatives
10. Increasing the amount of water they use from recycled sources
11. Improving heating insulating in university buildings
12. Investing in carbon-offsetting initiatives
13. Restricting the amount of air miles traveled by university staff

**How should universities communicate their commitment to reducing their environmental impact?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Their own university website</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education events (e.g. university fairs)</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At their own open days and events</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In their university prospectus or brochure</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV adverts</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor print adverts</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In other university publications</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio adverts</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They shouldn’t publicize them at all</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once universities have decided how they’re going to implement their sustainability initiatives, they may want to publicize and promote them.

When doing so, 82% of respondents preferred that universities publicize these efforts on their own university website, 71% suggested Facebook, and 58% chose higher education events like university fairs. Paid media like TV adverts and outdoor or print adverts weren’t popular choices, suggesting that universities should focus their spend on their own media.
How should universities educate students about sustainability?

Beyond the environmentally friendly initiatives that universities can introduce, sustainability can also impact how students approach and learn about specific subjects.

In this section, we will examine the environmental education expectations of students, taking a close look at the skills they want to gain, how they want to learn about the environment, and whether these factors impact their course decision.

**Which of these skills would you most want to learn while studying at university?**

- Solving problems by thinking about whole systems, including different connections and interactions: 59%
- Understanding how to create change: 57%
- Using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people: 56%
- Planning for the long term, as well as the short term: 53%
- Looking at global problems from the perspective of people from around the world: 53%
- Understanding how human activity is affecting nature: 53%
- Challenging the way we do things now (like business, politics, education): 49%
- Communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different types of people: 43%
- Looking at a problem using information from different subjects or disciplines: 42%
- Considering ethical issues linked to your subject: 36%
- The causes of inequality in the world: 32%

It’s important to consider how sustainability is taught in higher education. This could influence a range of courses and subjects, not just those specifically related to the environment.

Prospective international students are seeking to learn a number of skills that can help them prioritize and value sustainability in their future endeavors, whichever career path they take.

Of those surveyed, 59% want to learn how to solve problems by thinking about whole systems, including different connections and interactions.

Additionally, 57% want to understand how to create change, and 56% want to learn how to use resources effectively to limit the impact on the environment and other people.
What are the best ways for students to learn about the environment whilst studying at university?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Running extracurricular activities within departments</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking coursework or dissertations to the issues</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through placements or work experience</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running extracurricular activities within the students’ union</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering a specific module on the course</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building the material into the existing content in the course</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When teaching these skills and other sustainability information, 55% of prospective international students would like to learn through extracurricular activities within departments.

Others preferred to learn through linking coursework or dissertations to the issues (54%), whilst some wanted to learn through placements or work experience (54%).

When choosing a degree, if the content helped you to learn about reducing your environmental impact, would that affect how likely you would be to apply to that course?

- Much more likely: 43%
- Somewhat more likely: 36%
- Wouldn't make any difference: 14%
- Somewhat less likely: 3%
- Much less likely: 4%

Some universities may be wondering whether it’s worth it to implement these new initiatives and integrate more environmentally friendly topics into their course curriculum.

To address this, QS asked prospective international students whether their degree decision would be influenced by whether the degree’s content taught them how to reduce their environmental impact.

Interestingly, 43% said they would be much more likely to choose such a degree, while 36% said they would be somewhat more likely.

This demonstrates that universities which incorporate sustainability topics into their course curriculum could potentially see an increase in interest and applications from prospective students.
Subject breakdown

When asked what five things are most important to them when choosing a university, 62% of students seeking to study veterinary sciences, agriculture, and related subjects emphasized the importance of the university being environmentally friendly (unsurprisingly).

Additionally, 52% of those looking to study architecture, building, and planning and 52% of those seeking to study physical sciences valued how environmentally friendly a university was.

Many of the other subject areas, such as biological sciences (40%), business and administrative studies (42%), education (40%), engineering (36%), social studies (40%), and technology (42%) had little variation.
How do students feel about the global state of sustainability?

We also asked prospective international students how they felt about the state of sustainability on a global scale.

In this section, we will look at what students perceive to be the most pressing issues facing young people today, how they feel the older generation has treated the environment, and which sustainability skills will be valued by their future employers.

What do you think are the top three most important issues facing young people today?

![Bar chart showing the top three issues faced by young people worldwide.]

Like young people across the globe, prospective international students face a range of pressing issues.

The top issue was a lack of employment opportunities (60%), followed by drug abuse (44%), mental health problems (37%), the pressures of social networking (35%), and climate change (30%).

This suggests that while survey respondents agreed that universities need to take action to reduce their environmental impact, they see climate change as less of a priority compared to these other issues.
Do you personally feel that older generations have neglected the environment?

According to the QS survey, 58% of prospective international students feel that older generations have neglected the environment. In contrast, 31% don’t feel this way and 11% don’t know.

This majority suggests that many young people may feel that they have inherited these environmental problems from previous generations.

How important do you think the following skills and subjects are to your future employers?

Planning for the long term, as well as the short term: 76%
Solving problems by thinking about whole systems, including different connections and interactions: 75%
Understanding how to create change: 73%
Communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different types of people: 72%
Using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people: 70%
Understanding how human activity is affecting nature: 69%
Looking at global problems from the perspective of people from around the world: 66%
Looking at a problem using information from different subjects or disciplines: 65%
Challenging the way we do things now (like business, politics, education): 61%
Considering ethical issues linked to your subject: 58%
The causes of inequality in the world: 49%

Finally, prospective international students were asked what sustainability skills they think future employers will value.

Planning for the long term, as well as the short term was the most popular at 76%, followed by solving problems by thinking about whole systems (75%), understanding how to create change (73%), and communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different types of people (72%).

However, many of the skills listed hit similar numbers, suggesting that students see value in a lot of these skills.
Key findings

This report has revealed a range of insights regarding student expectations when it comes to sustainability.

Most importantly, it's revealed how they expect universities to tackle this complex issue, from what they're doing now to how they can improve and what they should teach.

- The majority of respondents consider universities to be either very environmentally friendly (33%) or somewhat environmentally friendly (49%).
- 36% strongly agree that universities care about the environment.
- 94% agree that universities could do more to be environmentally sustainable.
- Respondents believe that universities should take responsibility for a variety of areas, including protecting the environment (66%), developing sustainable technologies (65%), and developing green energy technologies (61%).
- When learning about sustainability, 59% want to learn how to solve problems by thinking about whole systems, 57% want to understand how to create change, and 56% want to learn how to use resources effectively to limit the impact on the environment and other people.
- 55% would like to learn about sustainability through extracurricular activities within departments, linking coursework or dissertations to the issues (54%), and placements or work experience (54%).
- 43% said they would be much more likely to choose a degree if it taught them how to reduce their environmental impact.
- 58% of prospective international students feel that older generations have neglected the environment.

We hope that these insights will aid universities in improving their sustainability efforts and meeting students' environmental expectations.
About QS

With offices around the world, QS is a global market leader for the research and understanding of international and domestic students. Each year we deal with hundreds of thousands of students globally, giving us a unique insight into the student recruitment market. Our research, strategy, enquiry, admissions, and enrollment services mean we have hands-on experience of the obstacles and opportunities within specific countries and regions, helping clients mitigate risk, benefit from our existing relationships, and build sustainable recruitment strategies in an increasingly complex marketplace.

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