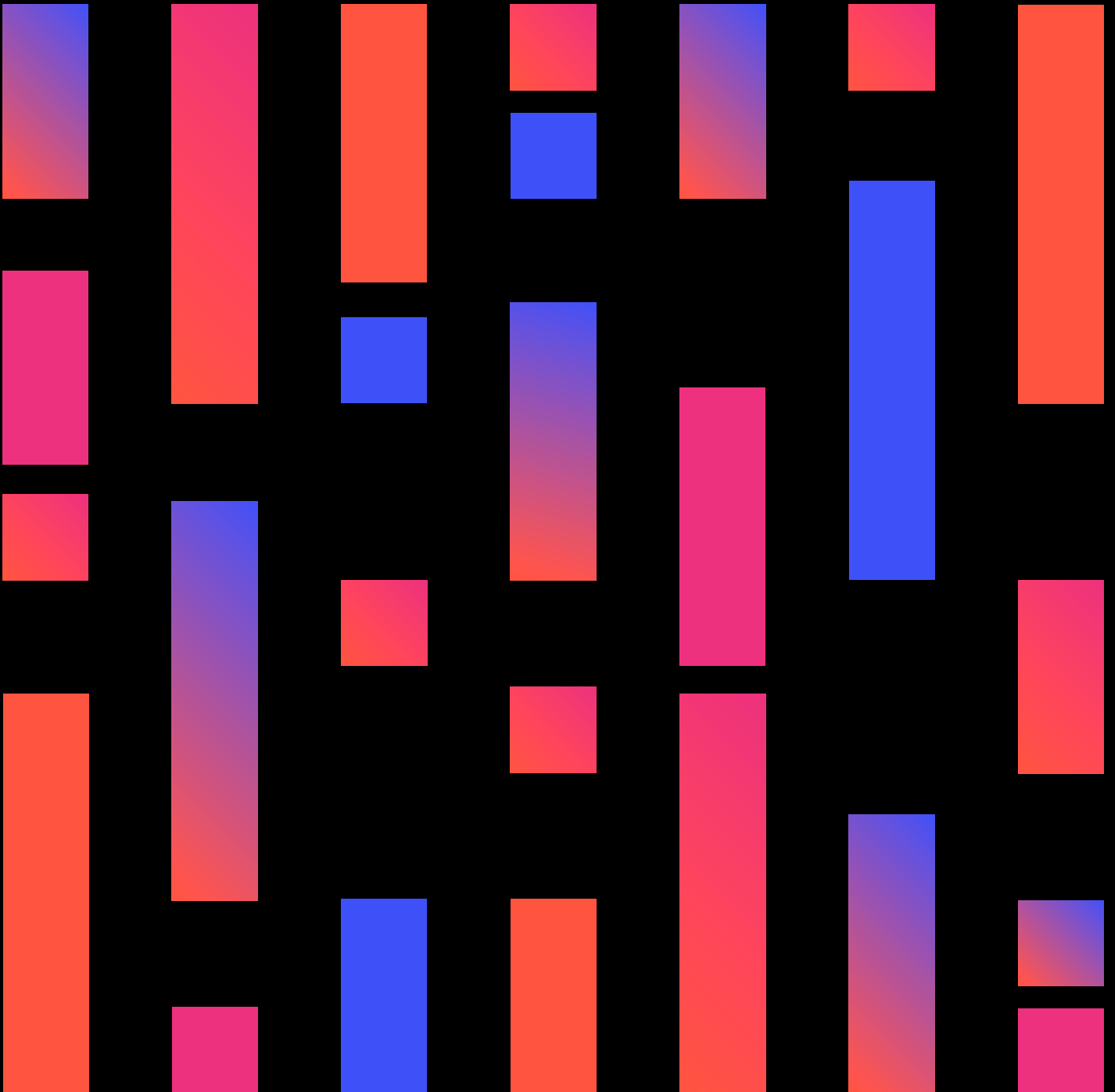


CONSULTANCY
REPORT

STUDENTS, SUSTAINABILITY, & STUDY CHOICES

MAY
2022

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF 3,151
PROSPECTIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS





The findings show how important sustainability is to students but also how much they see sustainability as a wide ranging and all-encompassing movement.

While working on the THE Impact Rankings over recent years I have been struck by the passion and commitment across the sector towards sustainable development. At our Innovation and Impact Summits, we have seen a wide variety of commitments, pledges and innovations that aim to bring about sustainable change, and the transformative research undertaken by the sector never ceases to amaze me.



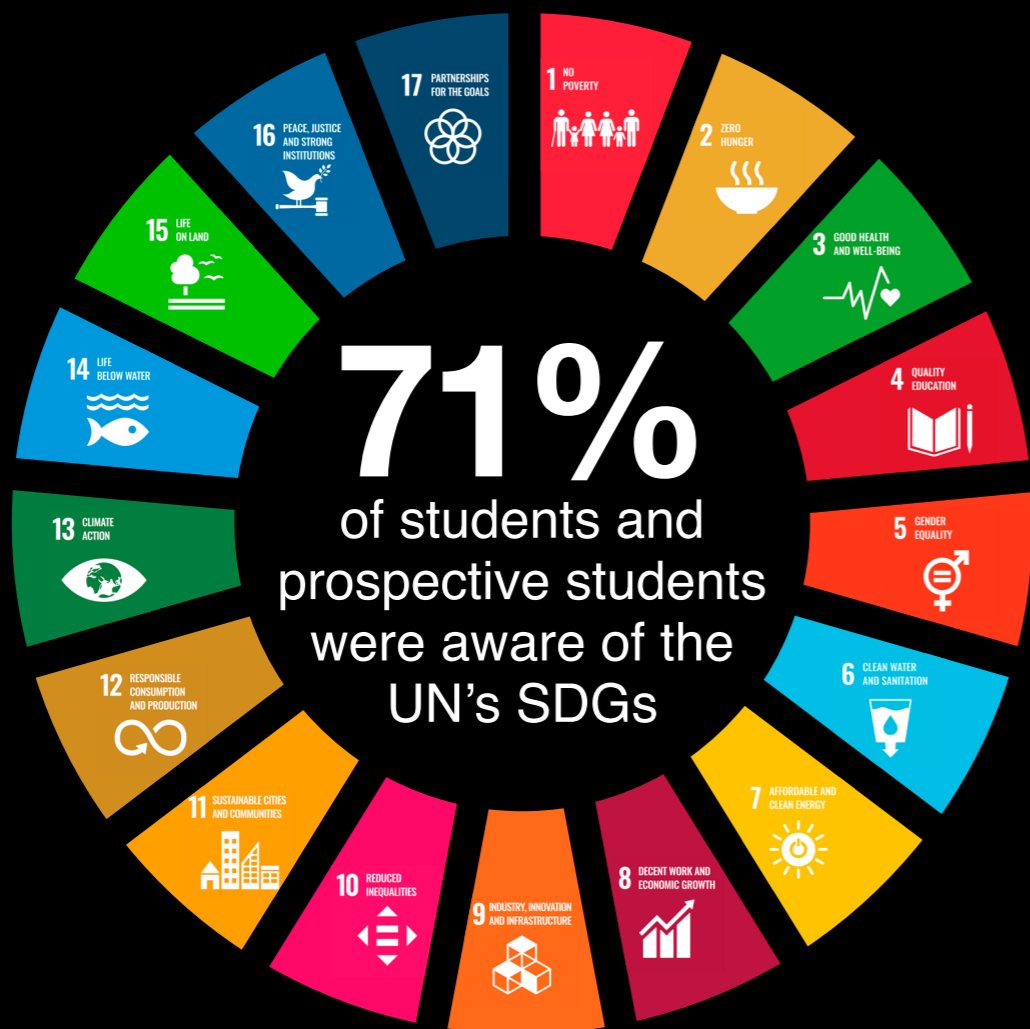
Yet something that we are cognisant of at THE is that the sector can sometimes pursue its aims without placing students at the heart of its plans. Students are often consulted behind the scenes, of course, but their voices are rarely foregrounded to the same extent as other stakeholders.

It is therefore appropriate for THE to speak to students about their views on sustainability in the sector. I am therefore pleased to introduce this THE Consultancy report, continuing their research from last year, based upon a survey of 3,151 prospective international students from the THE Global Student Research Panel, conducted in 2022.

The findings show how important sustainability is to students but also that they see sustainability as an all-encompassing movement. I am particularly excited by the inclusion of findings from focus groups conducted in late 2021 regarding climate action. The list of commitments that students created for universities to make are a blueprint for successful sustainable development to counteract the climate crisis.

By placing students at the heart of this research, the report offers valuable insights to those looking to ensure that sustainable development is not just guided by the views of researchers, teachers and administrators but also students. As one student suggested, one of the most effective ways for universities to promote sustainability is by fostering sustainable values in their student community. Only by speaking the language of students can universities hope to harness this nascent potential and to bring about the transformation that the sector hopes to.

Phil Baty
CHIEF KNOWLEDGE OFFICER
TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION



87%

of students agreed that universities have an important role to play in enhancing the ethic of sustainable citizenship in their students

33% OF STUDENTS SEE SDG 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION AS THE HIGHEST PRIORITY SDG WITH 32% SEEING SDG 13 – CLIMATE ACTION AS THE HIGHEST PRIORITY

Students expect universities to perform multiple functions in terms of driving the sustainability agenda forwards, something that they clearly feel universities can and indeed ought to do more

48%

of students rated an institution's policies and practices as a top three most important factor used to assess an institutions reputation for sustainable development for students

86%

OF STUDENTS SEE UNIVERSITIES AS HAVING AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN ACHIEVING THE SDGS, A SIMILAR PROPORTION TO THOSE THAT SEE GOVERNMENTS, SOCIETY AND BUSINESSES HAVING AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY

Students are a diverse group with diverse views on sustainability, but for most it is an important factor in the way that they conduct their lives and for a small but passionate minority it is a guiding factor in the way that they make decisions about where to study

STUDENT VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND AWARENESS OF THE SDGS

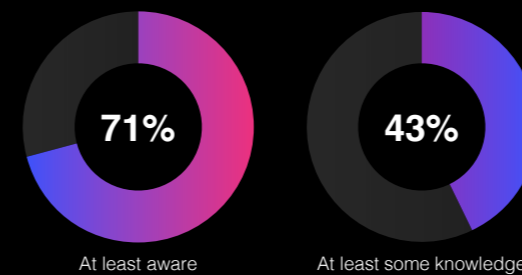
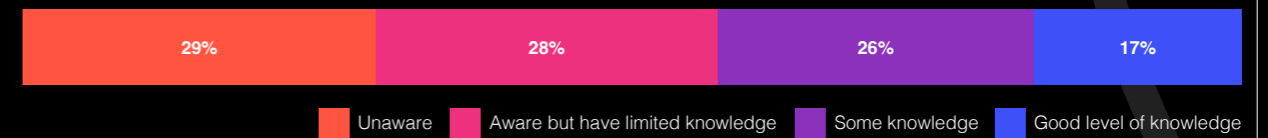
The role of sustainability in the higher education sector has been growing both in terms of debate around the role of universities and education in promoting sustainability and in terms of research output that concerns the SDGs. To take SDG 13 (climate action), for which we will conduct a qualitative deep dive later in this report, when looking at keyword searching in Elsevier's Scopus database, there has been a 115% increase in publications that relate to climate action between 2011 and 2020 at the time of reporting.

As sustainability and the UN's SDGs become an ever more important part of the sector, it is worth taking stock of student understanding and appreciation of these agendas to see whether students and institutions align on these priorities. To help this understanding, the THE Consultancy team conducted a survey of 3,151 students and prospective students to understand their priorities about sustainability and how it fits into their decision making about where to study. The survey was conducted with prospective and current students, with a skew towards individuals looking to study at postgraduate level (71%) compared to undergraduate (29%), with 30% currently studying at undergraduate level compared to 41% at postgraduate and 19% currently at high school or in further education. A full breakdown of the sample utilised in the survey is included on page 24.

71% of the students that took part in the survey were aware of the SDGs. Broken down, 28% of students were aware of the SDGs but had limited knowledge, 26% had some knowledge and 17% had a good level of knowledge of the SDGs. This shows that the SDGs are not only impactful for decision makers within the sector but also something that students are cognisant of, although understanding can be somewhat limited for many students. Despite this, it is clear that university communications about sustainability and the SDGs will resonate with students.

We asked students about sustainable citizenship to gain a broader understanding of their opinions on sustainability. 82% felt that it was important for them to live their day-to-day lives in ways which are consistent with the goals of sustainability, illustrating the importance of sustainability for both current and prospective students. A greater proportion of students strongly agreed with the statement that universities have an important role to play in enhancing the ethic of sustainable citizenship (46%). This highlights a repeated theme throughout this survey that students emphasised the importance of the role of universities in promoting as well as actively contributing to sustainable development. ■

STUDENT AND PROSPECTIVE STUDENT DESCRIPTION OF THEIR LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)



Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

A 'SUSTAINABLE CITIZEN' IS DEFINED AS SOMEONE WHO TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR LIVING THEIR OWN LIVES IN A SUSTAINABLE MANNER. WITH THAT IN MIND, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

Universities have an important role to play in enhancing the ethic of sustainable citizenship in their students through the teaching of knowledge, skills, practices, and values of sustainability

Overall agreement (%)



It is important to me that I am able to live my day-to-day life in a way that is consistent with the goals of sustainability



It is important for my future career prospects that I can demonstrate to employers that during my time at university I have developed into a sustainable citizen



Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

VIEWS ABOUT THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN TERMS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The majority of the students that took part in the survey felt that universities have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs (86%). The same proportion of students agreed that businesses have an important role to play, and only a slightly larger proportion of students felt that society and governments have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs (90%). This emphasises the importance of universities' contributions to sustainable development to both prospective and current students as much as any other actor.

We also asked students to rate the importance of a universities policies and practices related to sustainability in terms of influencing their decision on where to study. Students said that a wide range of factors were important. The most popular was a university's commitment to teaching the knowledge, skills, practices and values of sustainability across all programmes (77%), shortly followed by the opportunity to contribute to sustainability-related research while at the university (76%), and then the sustainable qualities of student life on the university's campus (75%).

Students see universities as central to the movement to ensure a sustainable future and students expect a wide range of action from their universities in ensuring this, from including sustainability in teaching to ensuring the opportunity to living sustainably on campus. ■



Students said that a wide range of sustainability related factors were important considerations when making study choices.

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THE FOLLOWING IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS TO YOU WHEN DETERMINING WHICH UNIVERSITIES YOU HAVE APPLIED TO, OR WILL APPLY TO?

The university's commitment to teaching the knowledge, skills, practices & values of sustainability across all programmes

Net (4 or 5): Important (%)



The opportunity to contribute to sustainability-related research while at the university



The sustainable qualities of student life on the university's campus



The opportunity to take part in university or student-led activities that enhance sustainability



The university's overall commitment to, and reputation for, sustainability



The commitment to sustainability of the country that the university is located in



The availability of degree programmes in specific sustainability-related disciplines



1 (not at all important) 2 3 4 5 (very important)

Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

STUDENT PRIORITIES REGARDING THE FORM OF SUSTAINABLE ACTION FROM INSTITUTIONS

As part of our survey, we aimed to understand how students assess a university's reputation for sustainable development.

Nearly half of the students that took part in the survey (48%), said that a university's policies and practices were one of the three most important factors which they would use. The next most popular factor proved to be the quality and impact of sustainability-related research carried out at a university (36%), shortly followed by opportunities to take part in university or student-led activities that promote sustainability (34%).

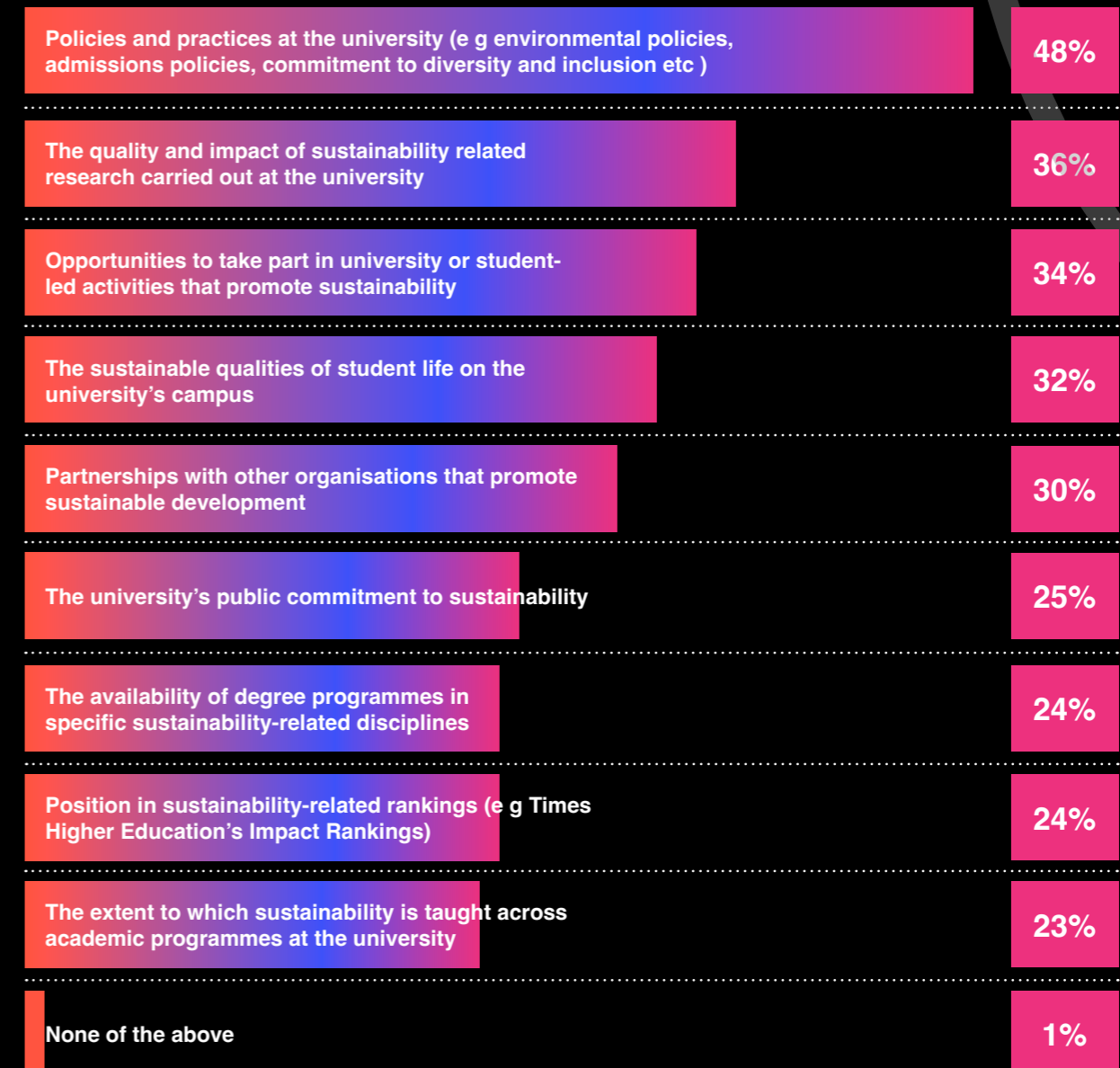
This suggests that students prioritise assessing universities' activities which have a measurable impact on sustainable development. Building on this point, other factors which related to learning about sustainability through university courses proved to be less popular. For example, 23% of students, the smallest proportion, said that the extent to which sustainability is taught across academic programmes at a university is the most important factor. Yet at 23%, this is not an insignificant number of students who would assess a university's reputation for sustainability through the lens of teaching.

Students are a diverse group, with differing desires regarding what they would like to see from institutions in terms of progressing sustainable development. Universities need to address sustainability on multiple fronts, covering their policies and practices, research, student offerings, external partnerships, teaching and more in order to be judged to be truly sustainable by students. ■



Policies and practices at the university were the most important factor used to assess an institutions reputation for sustainable development for students.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN ASSESSING A UNIVERSITY'S REPUTATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT? [SELECTING UP TO A MAXIMUM OF 3]



Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

STUDENT PRIORITIES REGARDING SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SDGS

Students were also asked which of the three SDGs are their highest priority and in response, students showed that they cared about all SDGs to some extent, with some given higher priority than others. Overall, this suggests that students as a whole grasp the interrelated nature of the SDGs and the idea that they all are required in order to attain truly holistic sustainable development.

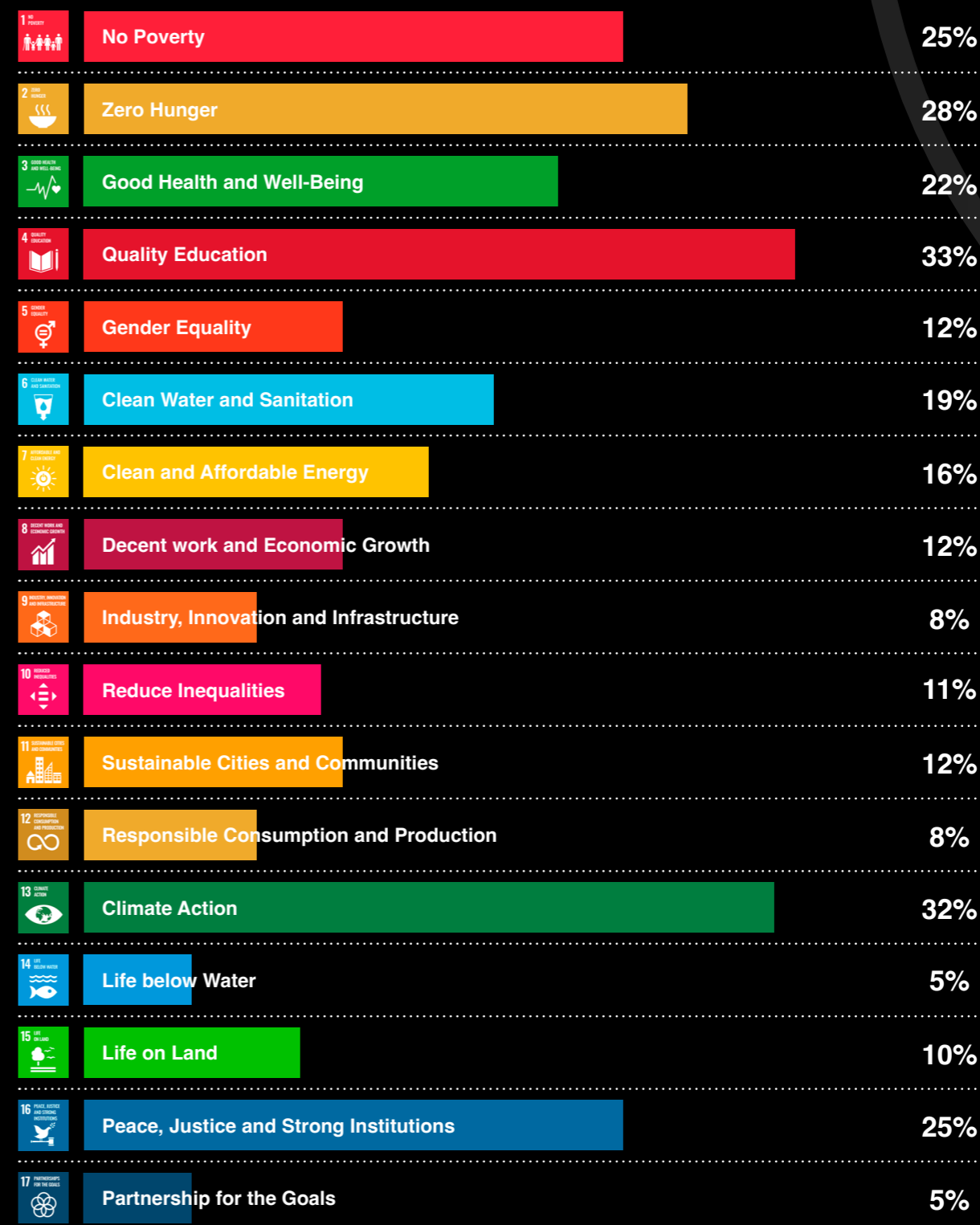
From the student perspective, the highest priority SDGs proved to be SDG 4 (Quality Education: 33%), closely followed by SDG 13 (Climate Action: 32%), and then SDG 2 (Zero Hunger: 28%). SDG 1 (No Poverty: 25%), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: 25%) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well Being: 22%) were also commonly selected as priority SDGs by students. It is perhaps unsurprising that SDG 4 was so highly selected by a group of individuals clearly invested in the educational sphere. The priority of these SDGs were similar to when this question was last asked in 2021.

Students demonstrated that they see sustainability as more than just climate change or economic development, but a wide-ranging movement for broad improvement in ways that are consistent with the UN's SDG framework. From developing sustainable healthcare systems that promote good health and wellbeing, through eradicating poverty, attaining gender equality and protecting life on land and at sea, across the student body there is appreciation for every element of the sustainability agenda. ■



Students demonstrated that they see sustainability as a wide-ranging movement for broad improvement in ways that are consistent with the UN's SDG framework.

WHICH IN YOUR OPINION ARE THE HIGHEST PRIORITY SDGS? [SELECTING UP TO A MAXIMUM OF 3]



Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

COMMITMENTS TO CLIMATE CHANGE

In order to better understand what students wanted to see from their universities in terms of commitments, policies and practices relating to sustainable development, we arranged some deep dive qualitative work with students and prospective students to unpick their thoughts. To focus our work, we concentrated on SDG 13 (climate action).

This qualitative work took the form of focus groups with 30 students and prospective students, organised in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) ahead of a conference co-organised between THE and UNEP that ran in Glasgow around the same time as COP 26. In these focus groups, students were asked to co-create a long-list of commitments and pledges from universities that they would like to see regarding climate action. This list was then shortened to a 10 point manifesto for change through an online survey of 1,028 students and prospective students.

The list of 10 pledges are shown overleaf. The power of this manifesto is that it harnesses the student voice to push institutions towards the changes that they most want to see. It was clear that students see the potential for universities to act as beacons for change. As one student put it, "there are universities in all corners of the world... they have a unique opportunity to learn from each other and to teach each other and to pull together to find solutions for us all."

Part of this sustainable work was student-focused, with students desiring to see strong teaching for sustainable development that creates students with "the right attitudes" who go into the world and influence positive sustainable development around climate change. Students saw this as an immediate need, not a distant one, with one student decrying the fact that universities are "dragging the chains when among students there's all this energy to get things done."

The specific actions that students wanted to see from their institutions included offering assistance to local communities, both individuals and businesses within them, to help them to make a difference, with a student stating that "they should be educating beyond the ivory tower."

Yet change was required at home too: students did not think that enough was being done on campus to create green campuses, from provision of adequate resources to recycle to offering green alternatives in shops and restaurants to rewilding elements of the campus to protect biodiversity. Students wanted to see universities manifesting the physical spaces of the future, showing the world how buildings, campuses and urban spaces can incorporate technology and nature to help battle the climate crisis.

Students also wanted to see a clear and concise commitment from all institutions globally to using no single use plastic by 2030 and

to ensuring that waste plastic is reused or recycled properly. One student made it clear that there were no excuses to miss this target by highlighting that "universities have complete control over this."

Students also felt that the research output of universities should be used to address the climate crisis. Students wanted to see substantial proportions of research budgets put towards addressing this issue, with one student drawing parallels to the investment in research into COVID-19, stating that "COVID-19 is more obviously immediate, but climate change is an immediate issue too." Students suggested that investments should be removed from large fossil fuel companies where they still exist, with divested resources re-routed towards investment in companies offering green solutions. Finally, students also wanted universities to use their influence with funding bodies and governments to drive the agenda, influencing where research funding is placed.

Students demonstrated a wide-ranging understanding of the sustainability work required to truly tackle climate change. If this one deep dive on a single SDG is reflective of student expectations of their universities regarding other sustainable goals, then universities will be expected to perform multiple functions in terms of driving the sustainability agenda forwards, something that students clearly feel universities can, and indeed ought, to do more. ■

“
Students expect universities to perform multiple functions in terms of driving the sustainability agenda forwards, something that they clearly feel universities can, and indeed ought, to do more.

MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE REGARDING CLIMATE ACTION

Universities as Beacons for Change

1. Think Globally, Act Locally

Universities must think globally and not just locally as it's a global challenge requiring global solutions. But they must also do this while acting locally, as many solutions start at home.

2. Green Beacons

Universities must act as a beacon in their communities by influencing organisations around them, harnessing existing partnerships and forging new ones that promote positive change.

Calls to Immediate Action

3. Harness the Power of the Student Community

Universities should offer free, green transport for students looking to volunteer at rewilding projects or engage in tree planting initiatives and seek to offer more of such opportunities to students.

4. Community Outreach

Universities should offer assistance to local communities to enable them to understand energy efficiency and help them to generate energy sustainably.

5. No Time to Waste

Universities must ensure that their research addresses the immediate consequences of climate change in their localities, including drought and flooding.

Green Universities

6. Green Campuses

Universities must provide adequate resources to enable students to recycle and enable them to live life on campus in a sustainable way.

7. Physical Spaces of the Future

Universities should install solar panels on all viable university campus space and incorporate green spaces in innovative new ways to demonstrate to the world the physical spaces of the future.

8. Zero Single Use Plastic by 2030

Universities must commit to using no single use plastic by 2030 and to ensuring that waste plastic is reused or recycled properly.

Transformative Research

9. Clean Energy Research

Universities should commit substantial proportions of research budgets to researching clean energy sources.

10. Influence Funding Bodies

Universities should encourage research funding bodies to invest more heavily in research to find solutions to climate change related problems.

SUSTAINABILITY AND STUDY CHOICES

In order to understand where sustainability ranks in the priorities of students when making decisions about where to study, prospective students were asked to rank various factors in terms of how important they are when making these study decisions. This was included within the THE Global Student Research Panel tracker survey about sustainability, part of the monthly tracker survey series.

The quality of teaching that a university offers came out as the most important factor (an average score of 4.9, with higher scores representing greater importance), followed by the cost of tuition (average score of 4.6). In terms of the frequency with which these factors were ranked as the most important factors to make decisions about where to study, these two factors were again ranked of the greatest importance by prospective students (cost of tuition 26% of students, the university's quality of teaching 23%).

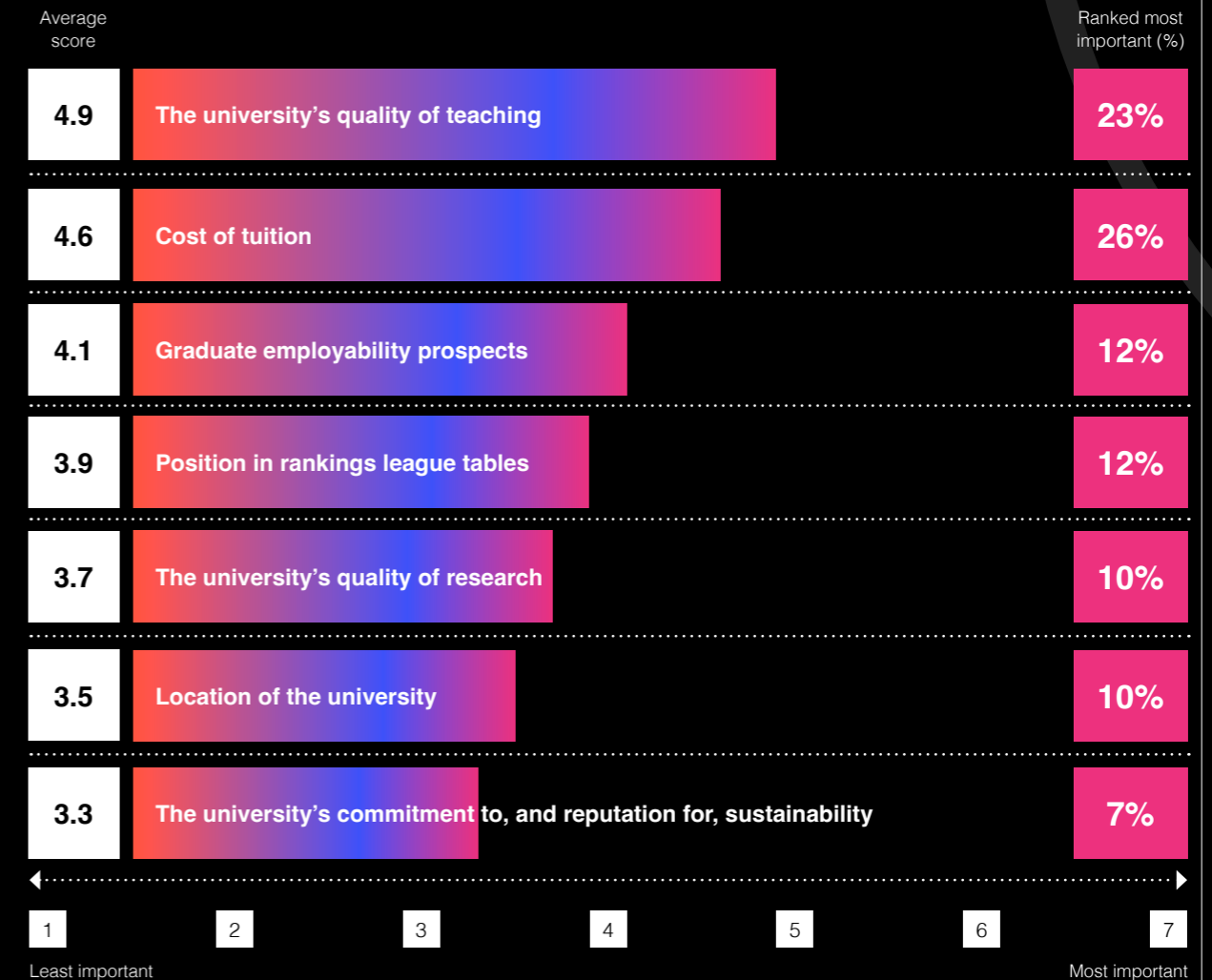
The university's commitment to, and reputation for, sustainability was seen as the least important factor by students (3.3), but was still prominent as a factor, with 7% of students stating that it was the most important factor for them, increasing to 14% for those listing it as one of the top two most important factors. This is broadly consistent with findings from 2021, when the same question was asked. Given that it was being compared to factors that have been traditionally seen as central to study choices, this reflects the fact that sustainability has solidified itself as a prominent part of decision making, with an average score just 0.2 behind the location of the university, clearly an important part of deciding where to study.

This links back to the way that students assess a university's reputation for sustainability, as discussed earlier in the report. In this regard, it is clear that for different students different things matter. Universities that want to speak the language of sustainability persuasively to prospective students will need to develop multiple ways to demonstrate their value regarding sustainable development. ■



Universities that want to speak the language of sustainability persuasively to prospective students will need to develop multiple ways to demonstrate their value regarding sustainable development.

PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING FACTORS IN TERMS OF HOW IMPORTANT THEY ARE IN DETERMINING WHICH UNIVERSITIES YOU HAVE APPLIED TO, OR WILL APPLY TO?



Base= all students responding to the monthly sustainability tracker survey (719)

STRENGTH OF FEELING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY AS A DRIVER OF STUDY CHOICES

The strength of feeling that students had about the importance of sustainability can be demonstrated by the small but passionate numbers of students that demonstrated multiple commitments to sustainability. The venn diagram opposite displays these groups, beginning with the majority of students (82%) for whom they agreed that it is important or very important to them that they are able to live their day-to-day life in a way that is consistent with the goals of sustainability.

Within this, 27% of all prospective students felt that this was **important or very important**, but also **agreed or strongly agreed** that they would pay higher tuition fees if an institution had a better reputation for sustainability and had assessed at least one element of sustainability to inform study choices. Focusing in again, 8% of students had this same profile but also **strongly agreed** that they would pay higher tuition fees to study at an institution with a better reputation for sustainability. And then the final group of prospective students, those who can be considered to be most committed to sustainability, had the same profile but also felt that it is **very important** to them to be able to live their day-to-day life in a way that is consistent with sustainable goals.

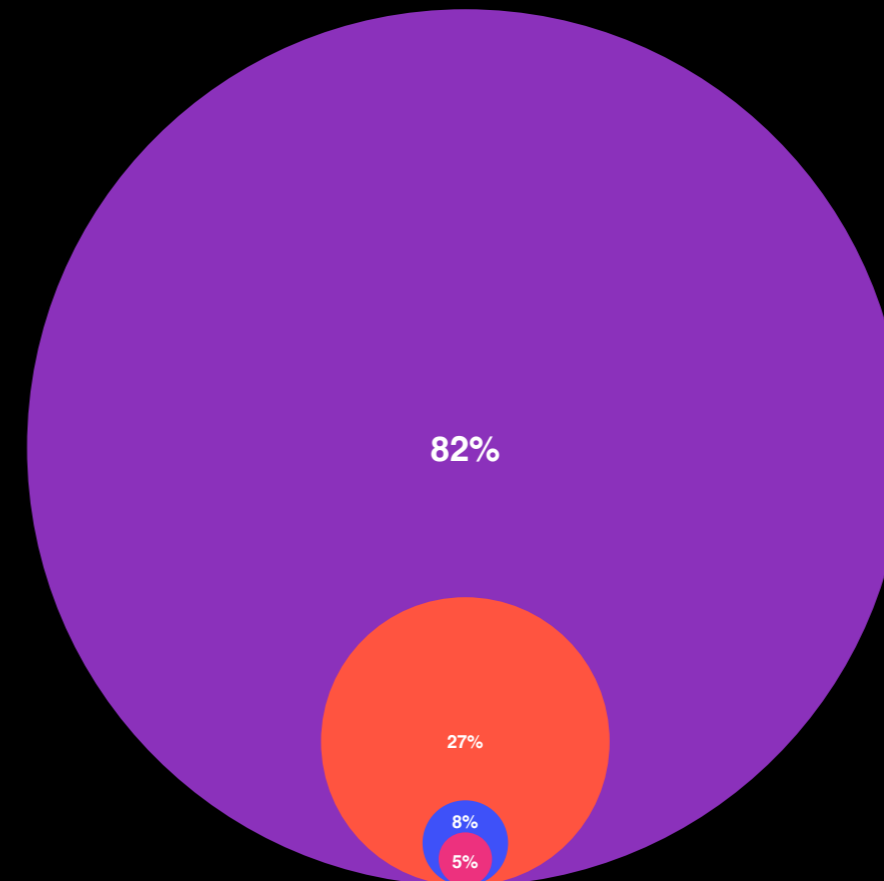
This cross-section of prospective students reflects a profile of a student body with different levels of concern and strength of feeling about sustainability. This cascades down from most students, for whom it is a concern, to those who were most likely to take action on their views in terms of their study choices: a fairly small but not insignificant 5% of students.

This data provides an indication of how seriously students take sustainability. For a vast majority of students, sustainability is on their agenda, but for universities to truly speak to all students, they need to be able to show their sustainable credentials to this most committed group of students that represents one in twenty of the prospective student body. ■



For universities to truly speak to all students, they must show their sustainable credentials to this most committed group of students.

VENN DIAGRAM SEGMENTING THE STUDENT POPULATION BY UTILISATION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN STUDY CHOICES



- It is **important / very important** to me that I am able to live my day-to-day life in a way that is consistent with the goals of sustainability
- Above definition and:
● **Agree / strongly agree** that they would pay higher tuition fees if an institution had a better reputation for sustainability
● Have assessed at least one element of sustainability to inform study decisions
- Above definition and **strongly agree** that they would pay higher tuition fees if an institution had a better reputation for sustainability
- Above definition and it is **very important** to me that I am able to live my day-to-day life in a way that is consistent with the goals of sustainability

Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

CONCLUSIONS: STUDENTS, SUSTAINABILITY AND STUDY CHOICES

These findings, generated by the THE Global Student Research Panel, provide insights into the way that students and prospective students think about sustainability and how this links to study choices. 7% of students stated that sustainability was the most important factor for them when deciding where to study, with 14% stating that it was a top two priority. A much larger group again see sustainability as an important part of their day-to-day lives, although not the most important factor when making choices about where to study.

Students also showed that they value a wide variety of elements of the sustainability agenda, prioritising a broad swathe of the SDGs in fairly large proportions. Education, climate action and work to combat food shortages came out as the highest priority SDGs, although other elements such as eradicating poverty, providing peace, justice and strong institutions, promoting gender equality and retaining biodiversity remained priorities to students. Students also displayed a strong belief that universities have an important role to play in achieving these diffuse and ambitious goals.

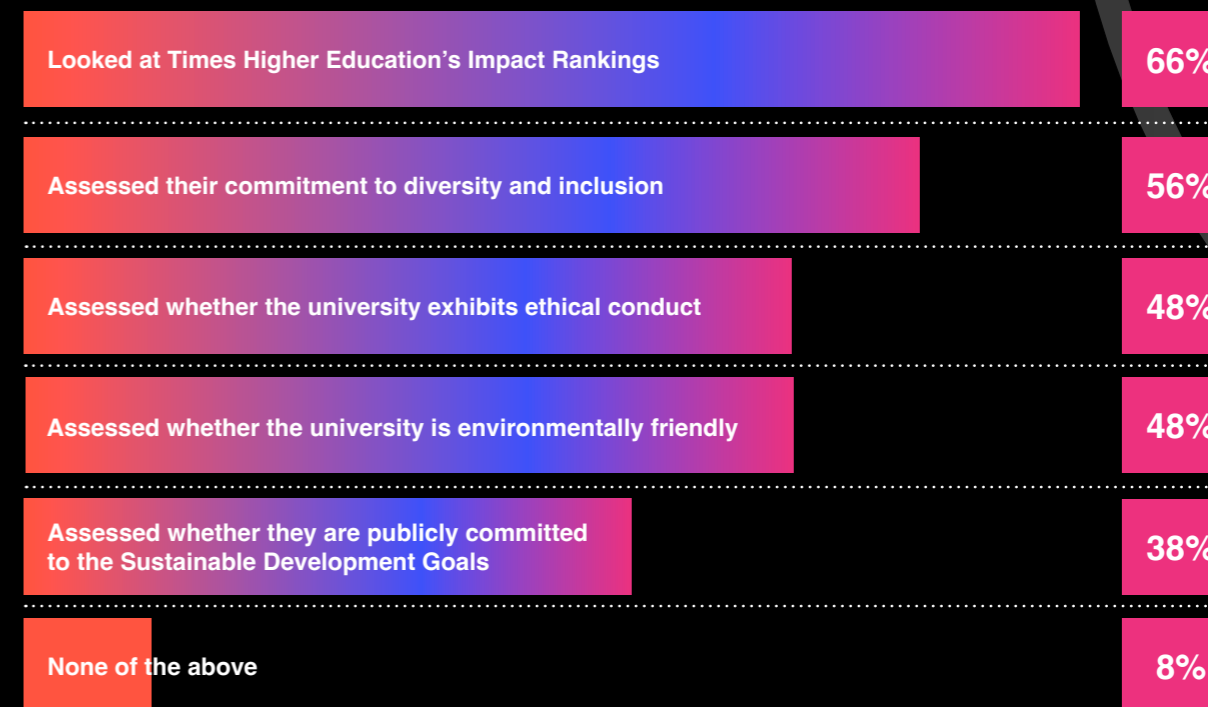
When focusing on climate action, it was clear that students expect a diverse range of actions and commitments from universities for each of the SDGs. Students expect universities to cover a breadth of action across the SDGs but also within them. Students demonstrated that they see universities as holding a powerful place in the movement for sustainable development, able to act as beacons for change, act immediately and powerfully, harnessing their international reach and research capabilities to transform the world for the better. But this started at home, in university buildings, on campuses and with staff and student communities, where students feel that more can still be done to promote sustainability.

As with our research in previous years, one key conclusion was that students and prospective students should be situated as a key stakeholder in all sustainable work that institutions undertake. Students on the whole have fairly ambitious and complicated expectations for their universities regarding sustainability and want to see achievements and plans clearly communicated by institutions. What is clear is that for universities to speak persuasively to the modern student, they must speak confidently about sustainability in much the same way that they do about research, teaching, internationalisation and university facilities. ■



Students should be situated as a stakeholder in all sustainable work undertaken by universities.

WHEN RESEARCHING WHICH UNIVERSITIES TO STUDY AT HAVE YOU DONE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING TO HELP INFORM YOUR DECISIONS?



Base= 3,151 students and prospective students

METHODOLOGY

- Online survey of 3,151 prospective international students.
- Drawn from the THE Global Student Research Panel, which is composed of users of the THE Student website or attendees at THE Student events.
- Survey of individuals from more than 150 different countries applying to more than 75 different countries around the world.
- Fieldwork conducted between 24th March and 12th April 2022.
- Survey administered, conducted and analysed by the THE Consultancy team.

Current level of study	
High school / Further Education	19%
Undergraduate	30%
Postgraduate	41%
Level of study that they are looking to apply to	
Undergraduate	29%
Postgraduate	71%
Subject that they want to study	
Business and Economics	18%
Engineering	13%
Arts and Humanities	12%
Computer Science	12%
Clinical and Health	9%
Life Sciences	9%
Physical Sciences	9%
Education	5%
Law	5%
Psychology	4%
Social Sciences	4%

THE CONSULTANCY

The THE Consultancy provides strategic, data-driven guidance to universities, governments and organisations working with the higher education sector globally. Building on our vast sector expertise and long history, we support our partners to build effective and sustainable strategies aligned to their unique mission.

Understanding that all organisations are unique, we combine proprietary and primary data to design customised solutions. Our consultancy practice harnesses THE's strong network in the sector, combining engagement of global stakeholders within our analyses.

Since 2021 we have also developed the THE Global Student Research Panel, the uniquely global panel of international students. We will draw on our vast experience in quantitative and qualitative research methods to generate fresh insights into the worldwide student community.

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