

SOS-UK 2022 Student Skills Survey

KEY FINDINGS FOR UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

May 2023



UNIVERSITY of STRATHCLYDE
CENTRE FOR
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT



Executive Summary

Key Findings

- Almost 90% of Strathclyde respondents believe the University should actively incorporate and promote Sustainable Development in everything it does.
- Almost 83% of Strathclyde respondents believe that Sustainable Development should be incorporated and promoted in all courses offered at Strathclyde.
- 40% of students were able to provide an accurate description of sustainable development
- From the student perspective there is a gap between what they currently receiving and what they would like to receive in relation to sustainability education and the development of related skills
- Students showed a strong preference for practice- and research-based credit bearing education, which Strathclyde is well placed to accommodate

Implications

- Sustainable development and climate change are areas which are in high demand from our students, both UG and PG, and across all four faculties
- These are not add-on but integral components of what our educational programmes should be delivering. The new QAA Subject Benchmark Statements indicate this will be a sector-wide shift, which Strathclyde is well-placed to accommodate with greater support and resourcing.
- Students receive more prominent and consistent learning for sustainability at school level. This is dropping off at University level as ESD is not currently mainstreamed. This may also reflect a need to articulate where these skills are being developed.

Key recommendations

- We need to improve our understanding of what we are currently delivering across the University. We can achieve this by:
 - Mapping curricula for skills and competencies as well as explicit SDG content
 - 'Badging' and articulating clearly to students where they receive this knowledge and skills throughout their programmes
- We must develop a clear plan to support staff to assess ESD and competency development, and where necessary improve and adapt their content to deliver ESD
- We need to develop a clear mechanism to measure our progress
- The link between sustainability skills development and employability should be emphasised across the institution
- Sustainability should be more prominent in the prospectus and in induction material so that student understand the University's commitment to this aspect of their education before they set foot on campus.
- The University should commit to continuous support of the Responsible Futures framework (accreditation needs to be renewed every 2 years) and distribution of the SOS-UK Sustainability Skills Survey so that we can track student satisfaction in this area

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Note: datasets can be accessed [here](#)

Introduction

University of Strathclyde and Sustainable Development

The University of Strathclyde's Vision 2025 Strategic Plan puts sustainability at the heart of everything we do and underpins the University's commitment to mobilize our resources to deliver against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across all areas of activity, including research, teaching, and operational matters.

SOS-UK Sustainability Skills Survey

Students Organizing for Sustainability UK (SOS-UK) is an education charity created by the student movement in 2019 in response to the climate emergency and ecological crisis. SOS provides a number of services to educational institutions, including the Responsible Futures sustainability accreditation mark and their annual Sustainability Skills Survey.

The survey aims to track student experiences and expectations around teaching and learning for sustainability and, crucially, to help institutions understand their students' needs and expectations in relation to sustainability and skills development in their curricula.

In 2022, for the 13th year in a row, SOS-UK repeated their survey of student attitudes towards skills for sustainable development. This has allowed the organisation and individual institutions to extract useful insights by monitoring year-on-year progress. This research has been key in providing cross-sector evidence of growing student demand and support for action on education for sustainable development.

Strathclyde participated in this national survey for the first time this year (2023). With 836 responses coming from Strathclyde students, Strathclyde had the second largest number of student responses from a cumulative total of 10385 from all participating HEIs across the UK.

Methodology and Research Questions

SOS-UK launched the national survey for the year 2022/23 in November 2022. It was completed by over 10385 students across over 26 institutions, building on data gathered since 2010-11.

The SOS-UK Sustainability Skills Survey included over 100 multiple choice questions (MCQs). For the purposes of this report, the questions are categorised as follows:

- **Respondents:** General questions about their course, university, and demographics including gender, ethnic background, student status related to nationality, as well as interests and involvement in student clubs and societies
- **Choice of study:** Includes questions about the place of study and course of study and why the students chose them
- **Definition of Sustainable Development and Implications:** Students were asked about their perceptions of Sustainable Development (SD) based on a generally accepted definition, i.e., the Brundtland definition 1987

- **Actions for Sustainable Development:** Questions about students' perceptions of their University and Student Union's actions around Sustainable Development (SD)
- **Sustainable Development Methods (Covered):** Questions about teaching and learning (T&L) methods related to SD which students recognized as being covered to date during their time at their university
- **Sustainable Development Methods (Importance):** The same questions were re-worded to ask about students' perceptions of the importance of the said T&L methods in relation to SD
- **Teaching & Learning Competencies:** Students were asked about their awareness of competencies and to what extent they found these competencies helpful when included in their T&L
- **Employment:** Students were asked about their perception of what SD methods and skills were required by future employers, as well as what qualities they felt were important in a future employer in relation to SD (e.g., working for institutions with ethical practices in relation to sustainability)

Data Considerations:

This Strathclyde report (published before the National SOS-UK Skills Survey report) draws on comparisons with the last SOS-UK Skills Survey UK-wide report, published in 2021. Data points and percentages were rounded down for 0.0-0.5 and rounded up for 0.51-0.99. The cited texts are only representative of sampled textual entries that students were asked to provide and are neither conclusive nor exhaustive in nature.

Except for demographic related discrete questions and those with specific choices, respondents were asked to respond to questions using a Likert scale. For example, the scale used the following criteria:

- Not at all important, not important, neither important nor unimportant, fairly important, very important, don't know, not applicable or
- Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree, don't know, not applicable

The graphs contained showed the combined percentage of positive answers which stated 'somewhat agree' and 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat important' and 'very important'.

Respondents

Students were asked to provide information related to their key demographic information, including nationality, gender, and student status (UK national, international from within the EU, international from outside the EU), as well as their level of study and involvement in student clubs and societies.

UG and PG student: The 2021/22 UK survey showed a larger proportion of Undergraduate (74%), and Postgraduate (26%) respondents compared to the more even Strathclyde split of 50% and 44% respectively, representing a more balanced representation of UG and PG student voices than that offered by the 2021/22 UK survey.

Academic Year (UG): The majority of UG responses were from 1st and 2nd year students (55%), although Strathclyde did have a higher representation from 3rd and 4th year of Undergraduate studies (42%), compared with the 2021/22 UK-wide data (31%).

Faculty: There was a reasonably even distribution of responses across all four faculties with Engineering, Humanities (HaSS), Science, and the Business School (SBS) somewhat evenly represented, with a slightly higher response rate in Engineering (fig. 1).

Gender and student origin: Gender split for respondents was consistent with the UK-wide survey data (male 45%, female 50%, other 5%). Students were primarily from the UK (66%) with International-within the EU (8%) and International-outside of the EU (23%) making up remainder. Most international students were in PG studies (75%). These were aligned with the UK wide data for 2021.

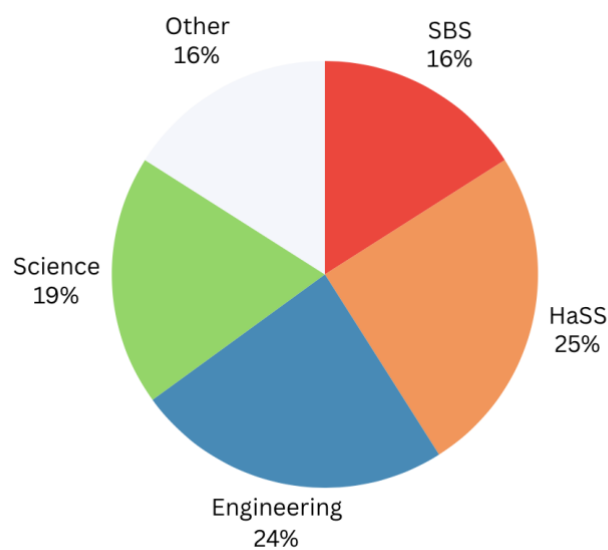


Figure 1: Respondent breakdown by associated faculty

Place and discipline of study

Factors Affecting Choice of Place of Study

Respondents were asked to indicate how important a range of factors may have been in influencing their choice in place of study. Overall, Strathclyde responses closely aligned with the national responses to this question (Figure 2).

Employment prospects, course reputation, reputation of University and teaching methods featured prominently in students' choice of place of study. Nevertheless, the reputation of the institution in terms of their commitment to global development and environmental issues were also important to over half of the respondents overall, with these being particularly important to postgraduates (56% environmental issues; 61% global development issues). As this is the first year of the survey for the University, it is not possible to track longitudinal changes in these responses. However, it is evident from UK wide data that prospective students are placing more and more importance on global development and environmental issues in their choice of place to study ([SOS UK 2022](#)). **It is therefore**

integral that Strathclyde continues to place sustainable development at the heart of our strategy and actions, and that our approach to sustainability in the curriculum is emphasised in future prospectus.

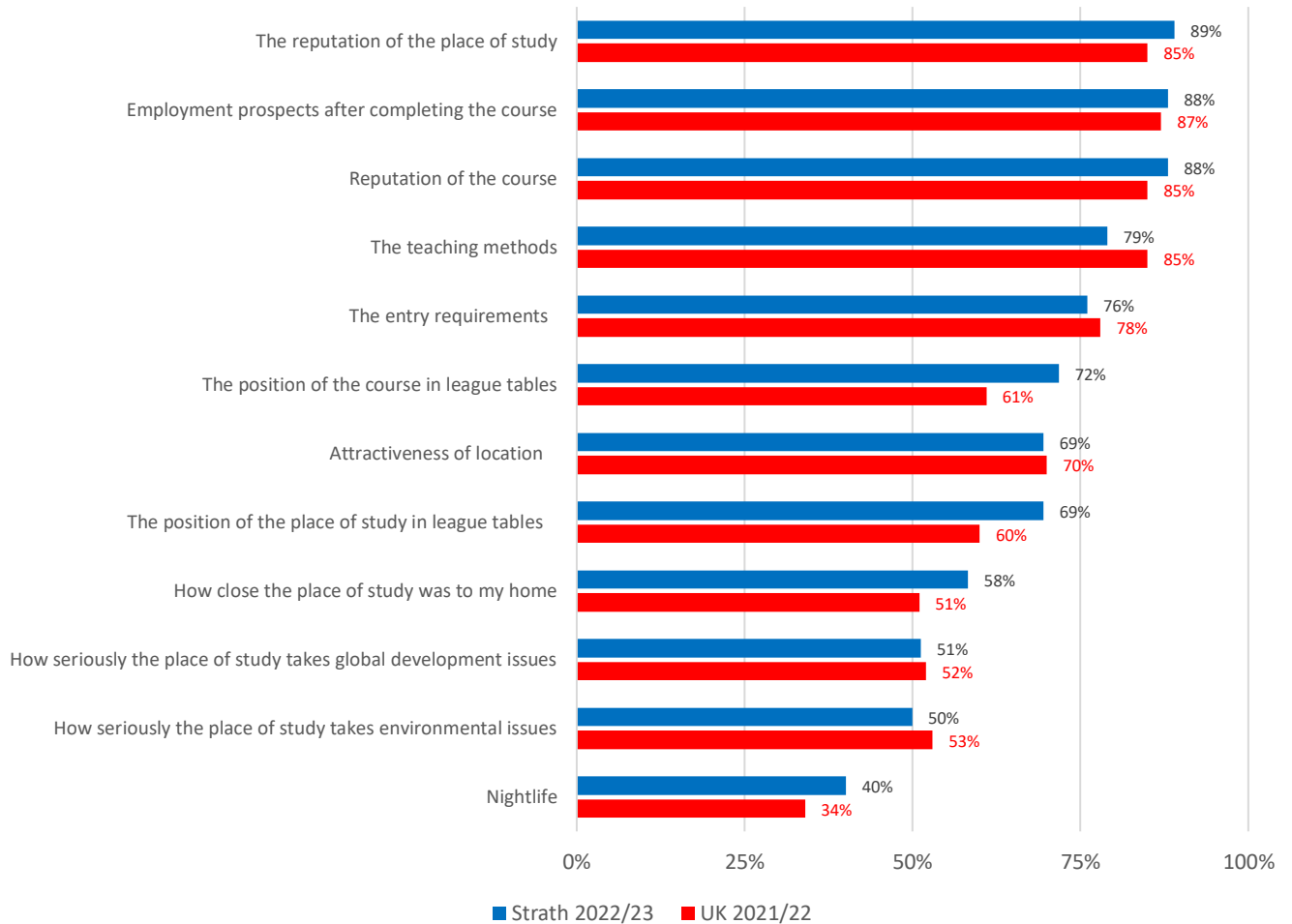


Figure 2: Responses to question “How important were the following when choosing where to apply to University?” ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

Factors Affecting Choice of Course

Respondents were asked to indicate the main reasons for taking the course they are currently studying. The responses revealed that UK-wide and Strathclyde opinions remained consistent, with gaining qualifications and increasing employability prospects ranked top among the options. In contrast, ‘improve ability to make a difference to other people (22%)/the environment (10%)’ were ranked lower (Figure 3). Nevertheless, as understood from wider employability and skills surveys ([Green Skills Survey 2022](#)), employability is now strongly linked to holding the necessary skills and competencies associated with Education for Sustainable Development to enable all sectors to tackle complex problems, and although students did not articulate this in their choice, it is our responsibility to ensure that their education enables them to understand this linkage.

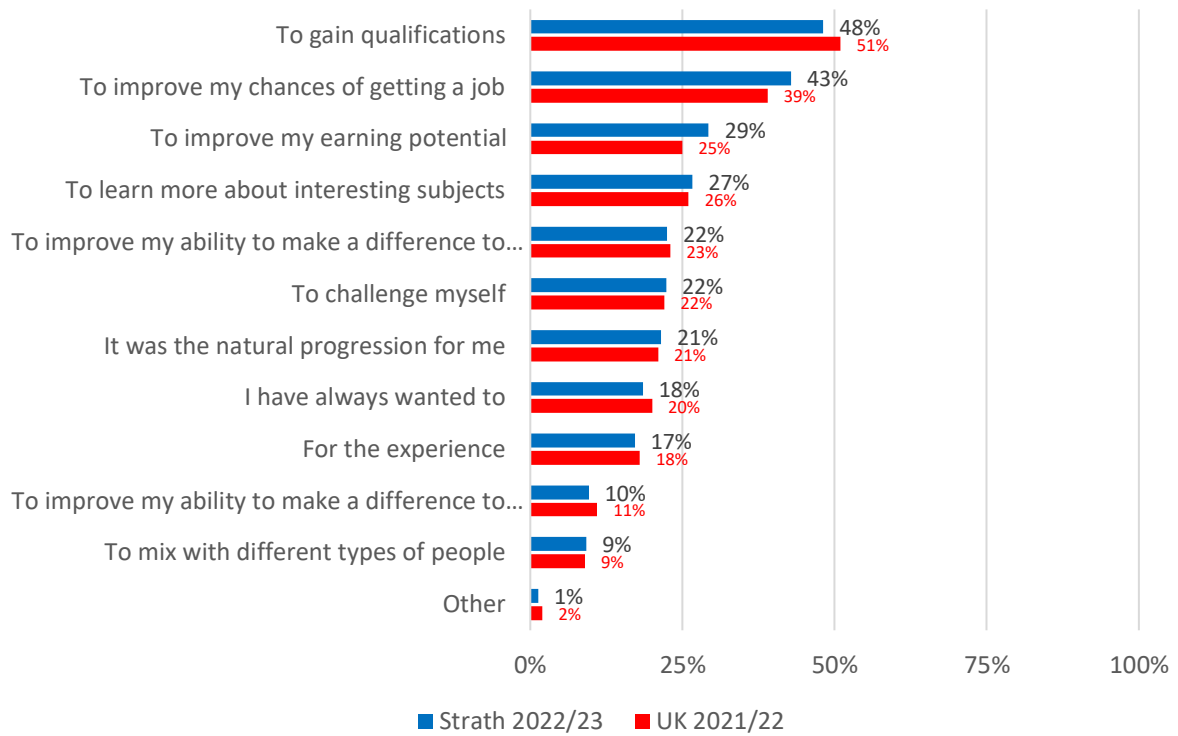


Figure 3: Responses to “What were the main reasons for taking the course?” reference SOS report for 2021 data – how many responses were they allowed? ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

Strathclyde students were then asked: “How do you think the course you are currently studying will help you to improve your ability to make a difference to other people and/or the environment?”

There were a range of responses (n=99) indicating a varying level of understanding of the links between specific courses across all four faculties, and their ability to support improvements for people and the environment (Figure 4). The number of responses only reflect 12% of the Strathclyde students who completed the survey implying that there is still a need to support students to understand and reflect upon the linkages with their disciplines and future careers with sustainable development.

” I am studying to become an engineer, I would like to make a difference by making solutions to real life problems

” The exposure I am getting, and different methods of learning help increase my ability to make a difference.

” Primary teaching means you are a role model for children so can positively impact a Childs life by giving them positive learning experiences and good progressive opportunities.

” Will allow me support the community as a medical professional in pharmacy

” I think business can help people have access to goods and services which they require to improve living standards

Figure 4: Sample of open text responses from University of Strathclyde students from across all four faculties to the question “How do you think the course you are currently studying will help you to improve your ability to make a difference to other people and/or the environment?”.

Understanding Sustainable Development

What does Sustainable Development mean to our students?

Students were asked how they would define Sustainable Development in their own words. Of the 94 students who responded to the question, 40% were able to provide a holistic definition which included the environmental, societal and economic dimensions. 32% referred to the environment only, and the remainder mentioned at least two dimensions of sustainable development. Given the priority of climate change and environmental challenges across the media, and the recent hosting of COP26 in Glasgow, it is unsurprising that these are the focal areas for student responses. However, it is integral that our students and staff are conversant with, and drive action across, all three dimensions of sustainable development.

Students were asked if “sustainable development is something they would like to learn more about?”, with 66% of respondents indicating agreement. Students were also asked to provide reasons why they would want to learn about sustainability and sustainable development. 96 students provided free text responses with the majority (64%) outlining the need to have a better understanding of sustainable development and develop their professional skills to tackle global challenges. 27% of students also referred to the need to protect the future of the planet for generations to come, with an additional 15% specifically stating a desire to protect their families.

Providing introductory training to all students, and staff, in the University to ensure that we have an institutional understanding of sustainable development is a key step in providing a strong foundation from which to support sustainability locally, nationally, and internationally.

Subsequently, mainstreaming Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and more widely embedding the SDGs across curricula will support the integration of the necessary skills and competencies across all disciplines.

Students were subsequently provided with the Brundtland Report definition of Sustainability: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN, 1987) and were asked how they would like to see SD integrated in their education. Based on this definition, many respondents felt it should be incorporated in their studies (Figure 5) through the formal curricula.

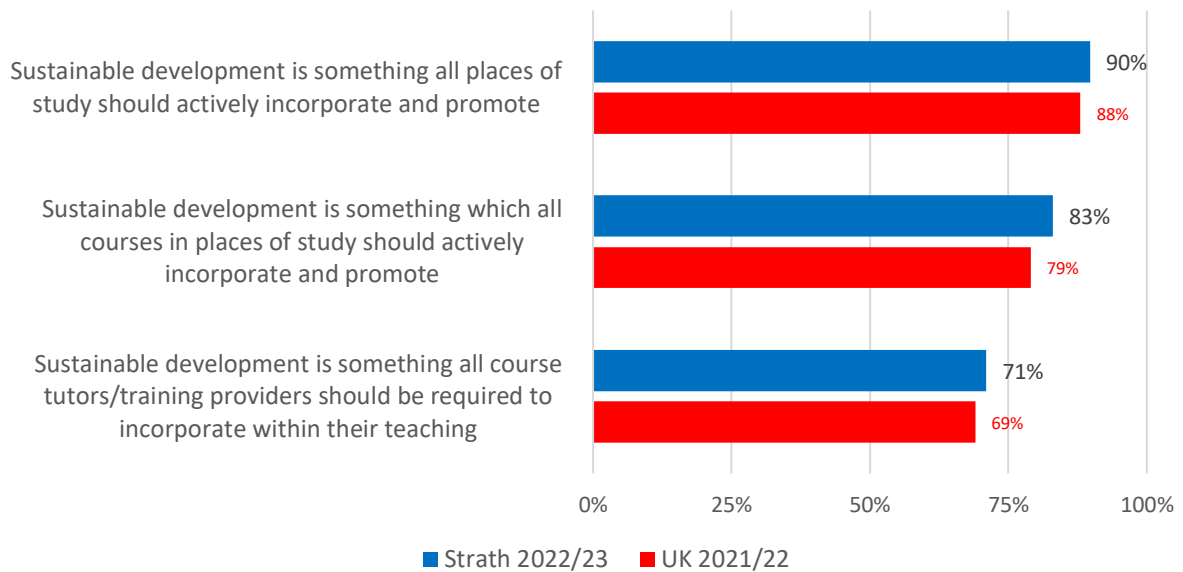


Figure 5: Levels of agreement from students on where sustainable development should be embedded in their education. (SOS-UK 2022)

This was reflected across both undergraduate (84%) and postgraduate (91%) level where respondents felt that Strathclyde, should actively incorporate and promote sustainable development in everything it does. Variations across undergraduate and postgraduate by faculty can be seen in Appendix 1.

This confirms the demand for a whole institution approach to Sustainable Development, and in particular embedding Sustainable Development in the formal curriculum. We have successfully embedded ESD in the curriculum in some areas but meeting this demand will require us to mainstream of this approach across all programmes and for a scaled-up approach to staff training.

Student Perceptions of University and Student Union Actions for Sustainable Development

UK-wide results from 2021 and Strathclyde’s 2022 survey results were again broadly in line when it came to student perception of actions being taken by their University and Student Union to positively impact the Sustainable Development agenda (Figure 6). The majority of students (72%) had broadly positive perceptions of the actions being undertaken in this regard.

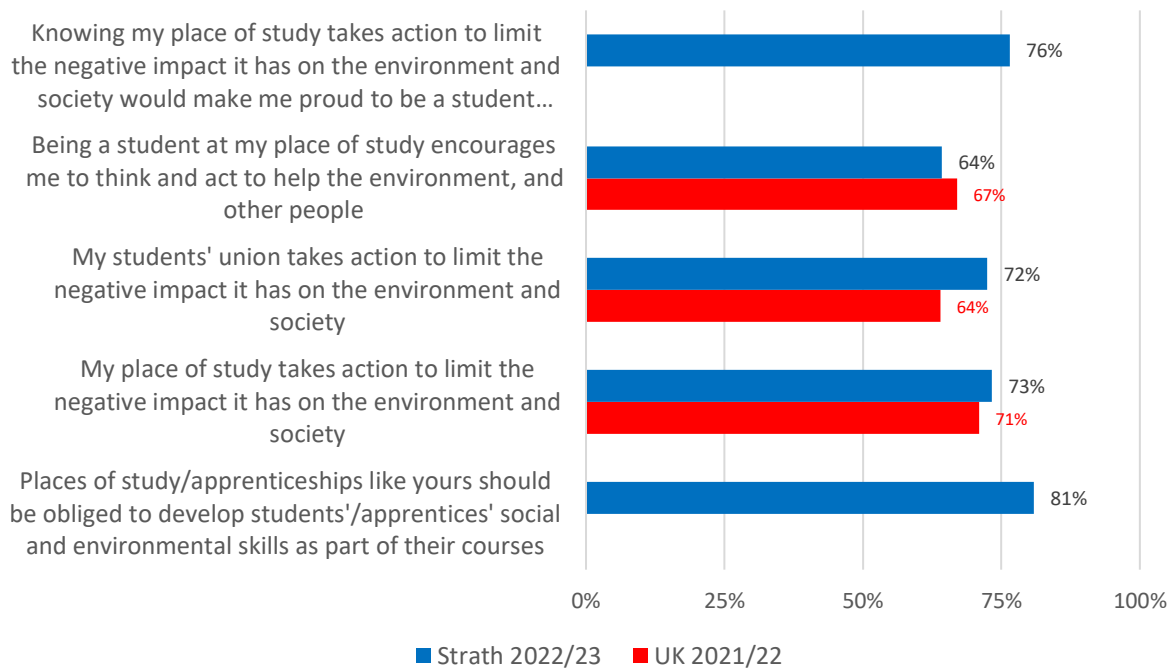


Figure 6: Levels of student perceptions of University and Student Union Actions for Sustainable Development. ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

Sustainability in the Strathclyde Curriculum

Students were asked to what extent sustainability is present in their current curriculum through a series of related questions on specific topic areas. Figure 8 shows that the 2022 Strathclyde responses were broadly consistent with the 2021 UK responses. What is evident in both data sets is that there remains significant scope for improvement, with 30-55% of students responding positively regarding sustainability skills being included in their learning experience. 59% of Strathclyde students reported experience of solving problems by thinking about whole systems compared to 50% nationally, while a further 55% reported communicating complex information clearly and effectively to a range of audiences, compared to only 49% nationally. Strathclyde is therefore performing comparatively well to other UK institutions when it comes to giving students the opportunity to develop skills in Systems Thinking and Communication, but work is needed to draw this out more fully across the institution and meet student and employer demand. **These results could reflect both the need to improve the offering at the University, and to support students to understand and articulate where they are currently learning these skills and competencies. Mapping of the curricula with clear ‘badging’ and articulation of where sustainable development lies in learning outcomes could improve this area.**

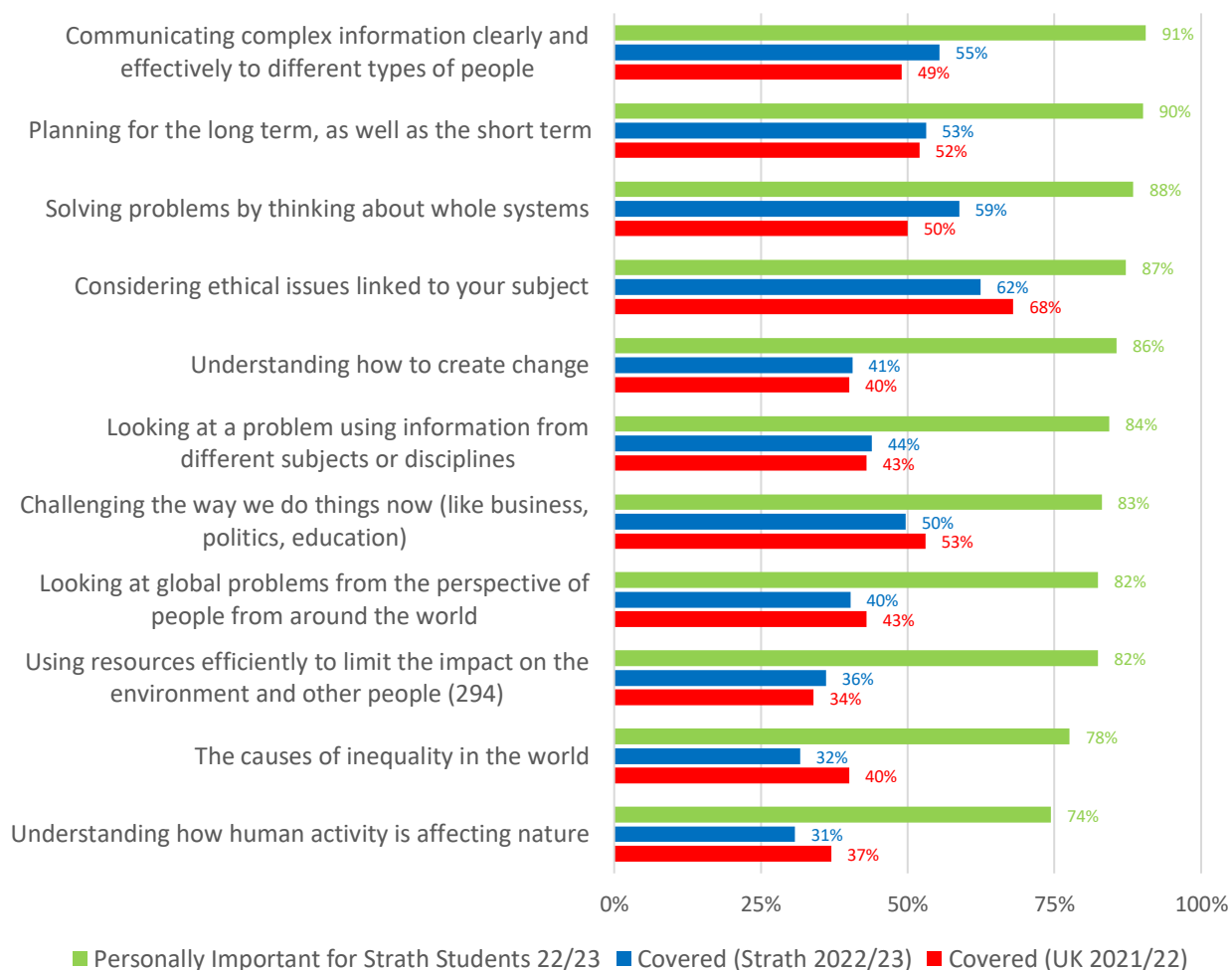


Figure 7: Student perceptions of sustainability related issues in their current curricula at Strathclyde through responding to the question “Thinking of your time at your current place of study, have any of the following skills and knowledge been covered in the teaching you've experienced so far?” and “How important to you personally is learning these skills, attributes and knowledge?”. (SOS-UK 2022)

Respondents were also asked to indicate how important developing these skills, knowledge and attributes is to them personally. This was asked for the first time in 2022. As outlined in Figure 7, a high proportion of students feel all these areas are important to them: communicating complex information clearly (90.59%), planning for long and short terms (90.09%), solving problems by thinking about whole systems (88.44%) and considering ethical issues linked to subject (87.18%) were of key focus. **These responses show some disparity between what students find important in their learning experience and what they have been delivered thus far and should be taken into consideration when undertaking curricular review in terms of content, learning outcomes and articulation of where these issues are being covered.**

Respondents were also asked to comment on the stage in their education where they had learnt about the key underpinning principles which support sustainable development (Figure 8), such as:

- Accountability and ethics
- Biological diversity and nature
- Citizenship and democracy
- Consumerism, global and ethical trade

- Cultural diversity and equality
- Business ethics
- Ecosystems and ecological principles
- Rural and urban development
- Social justice
- Health and wellbeing
- Human rights
- Climate change
- Waste, water, and energy
- Colonialism and its influences in the past and today

Multiple responses were allowed, and it was clear that secondary school and university level were the institutions in which these issues were primarily learned and were influenced by disciplinary areas. At university level we appear to be underperforming compared to secondary school education. These results potentially indicate the emphasis placed on sustainable development in the Curriculum for Excellence. The Vision 2030+ agenda states that all learners are entitled to Learning for Sustainability (Lfs) and new GTCS Professional Standards further require that all practitioners, schools and education leaders include Lfs in their practice. **As the updated QAA Subject Benchmark Statements will require the inclusion of ESD, this is a shift we should also see in Higher Education practice. Strathclyde should seek to stay ahead of this expectation by embedding ESD and sustainability training in all staff inductions.**

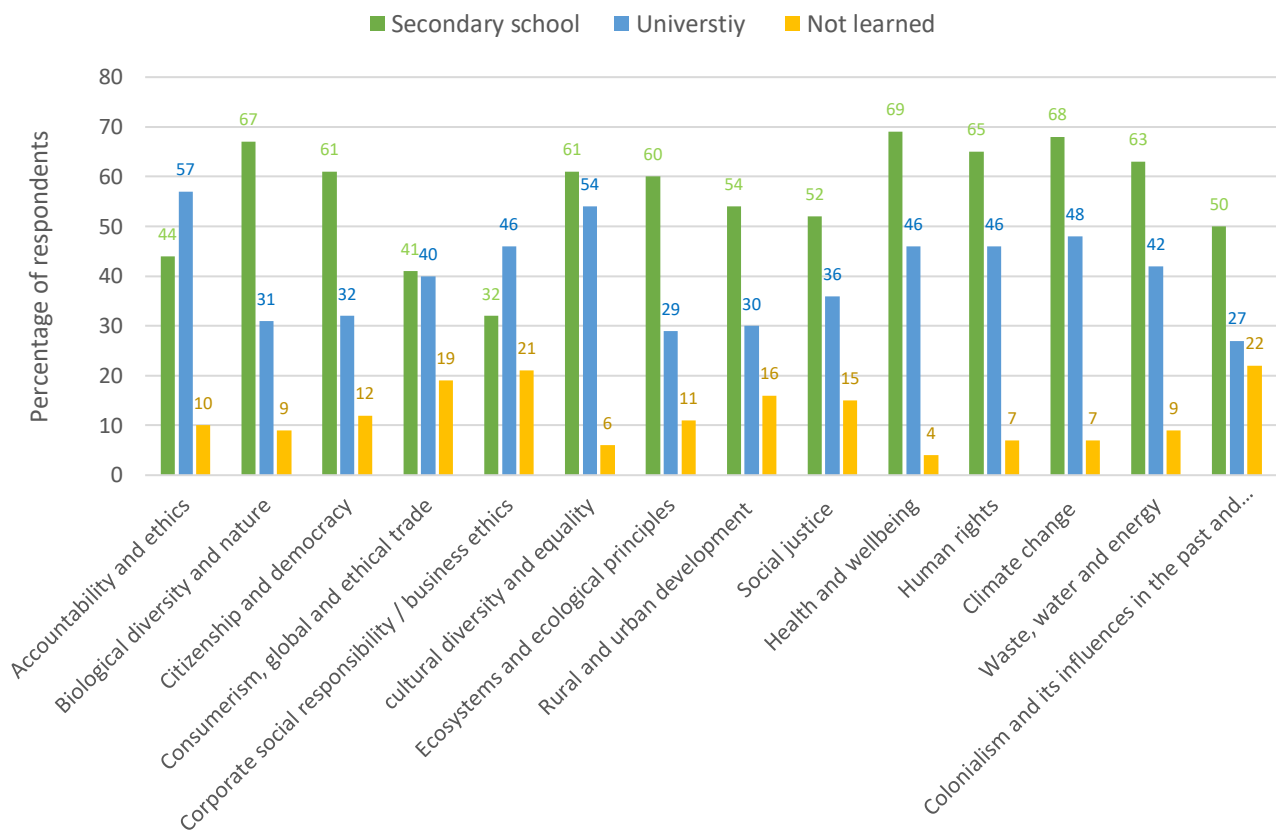


Figure 8: Student reflections on where they learned about issues which underpin sustainable development.

Importantly, learning about these areas had had an important influence on respondents, particularly around their chosen career plans.



Learning about these important topics really changes the way you act and think about how the world works



Learning about cultural and racial diversity has benefited me and helped me to want to use my skills to create change for those who have been marginalized or historically underserved.



Learning about social injustice has encouraged me to want to pursue a career in this area and make a difference to people



Trying to incorporate my knowledge on those topics into my design in order to make a difference to the environment and people.

Figure 9: Sample of open text responses from University of Strathclyde students outlining why they felt it was important to learn about sustainability related issues in their programmes.

Understanding Climate Change

The survey explored the respondents' understanding of climate change as a stand-alone area of sustainability: questions explored the level of learning received across educational experience. 85% of respondents indicated that they knew what climate change is. However, this value dropped to 78% when asked if they understood what could be done to mitigate against climate change, and to 67% when asked if they understood what our daily lives will look like because of climate change. Only 50% felt they understood what their jobs would look like because of climate change. This disparity between understanding the climate science, to the actual actions and implications for our lives and careers is one which needs to be addressed through both curricula and extra curricula activities. This is crucial for ensuring that we have the skills and knowledge to take the urgent actions needed to address these global challenges.

Understanding the Role of Colonialism

The survey explored the respondents' experiences of learning and colonialism. Through their education so far, students indicated that they had learnt perspectives from cultures around the world (77%), and underrepresented groups in our society (70%). Only half of respondents, however, indicated that they understood how the ways in which they are taught and the content they learn are influenced by processes such as colonialism. To effectively reflect on our ways of learning, content, and unconscious bias it is imperative that the influences of colonialism be recognised, challenged, and addressed.

Engaging with Sustainable Development

How do Students Prefer Sustainability Skills and Competencies to be Incorporated in their Learning Experience?

Students were asked about their preferences in relation to how these sustainability skills and competencies could be incorporated into their studies and assessments. The Strathclyde 2022 and UK 2021 responses broadly align (Figure 10). The highest ranked Strathclyde preference for this inclusion was via placements or work experience (83%), followed by linking coursework/projects/dissertations to sustainability-related issues (82%), and building sustainability-related material into existing course content (almost 80%). Notably, course-linked voluntary activities and the Student's Union were the lowest ranked, which could be attributed to the lack of credit bearing opportunities and the constraints on students' time to be able to volunteer.

This demonstrates a strong preference for practice- and research-based credit bearing education, which Strathclyde is well placed to accommodate with a wider rollout of successful initiatives such as the Vertically Integrated Projects for Sustainable Development programme, Strathclyde Inspire's Exploring Entrepreneurship Challenge, Engineers without Borders People for Engineering Design Challenge, and the multiple opportunities for internships across all four faculties.

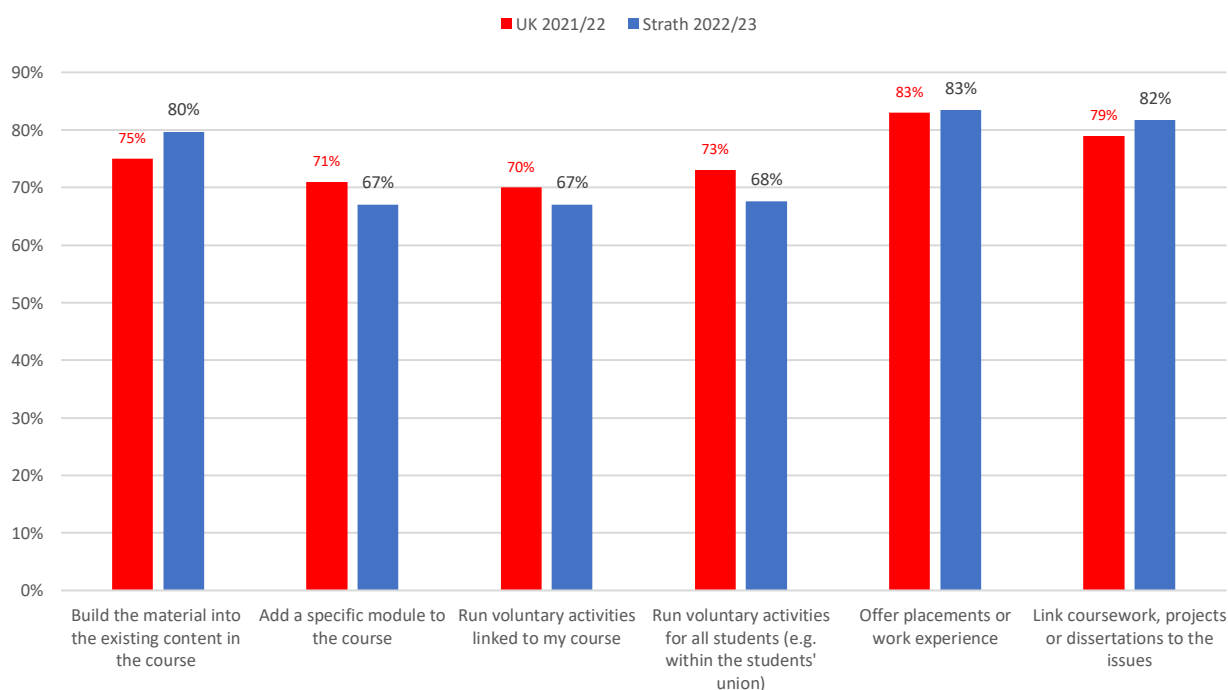


Figure 10: Strathclyde students' preferences of incorporating Sustainability Skills and Competencies in their Learning Experience – "What do you think are the most relevant ways of including the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment?" ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

Ways in which students have been learning skills and knowledge for sustainable development

Students were asked about the ways of learning related to sustainable development at the University: what they had experienced, and what had been most helpful (Figure 11).

The following 'ways of learning' were offered as options for students' consideration:

- Case Studies: Real-life examples of local and global issues
- Stimulus Activities: Providing a prompt (such as a poem, dance, artwork, quotation, piece of music or newspaper article) to stimulate discussion or reflection on a topic.
- Experiential project work: Experiential, interactive, or participatory activities.
- Simulation: Activities and projects that simulate real-life situations including role plays, debating, mock trials and gaming.
- Problem-based learning: Student-led, collaborative work which can be focused on a real-world problem or issue.
- Participatory approaches to learning: Students co-creating lectures or feeding into how courses are assessed.

Respondents had primarily been exposed to a range of learning mechanisms, with the most common being case studies (72%), and problem-based learning (73%). In all cases the use of these interactive methods of teaching and learning to bring sustainable development challenges to life were seen to be helpful. When looking at the breakdown per faculty of responses to ways of learning experienced by students, responses remained consistent (14% to 27%) with HASS and Engineering being towards the higher end of the average than other faculties. 'Stimulus activities' saw an exceptionally high selection from HASS faculty (39%). (See appendix figures A2 A & B).

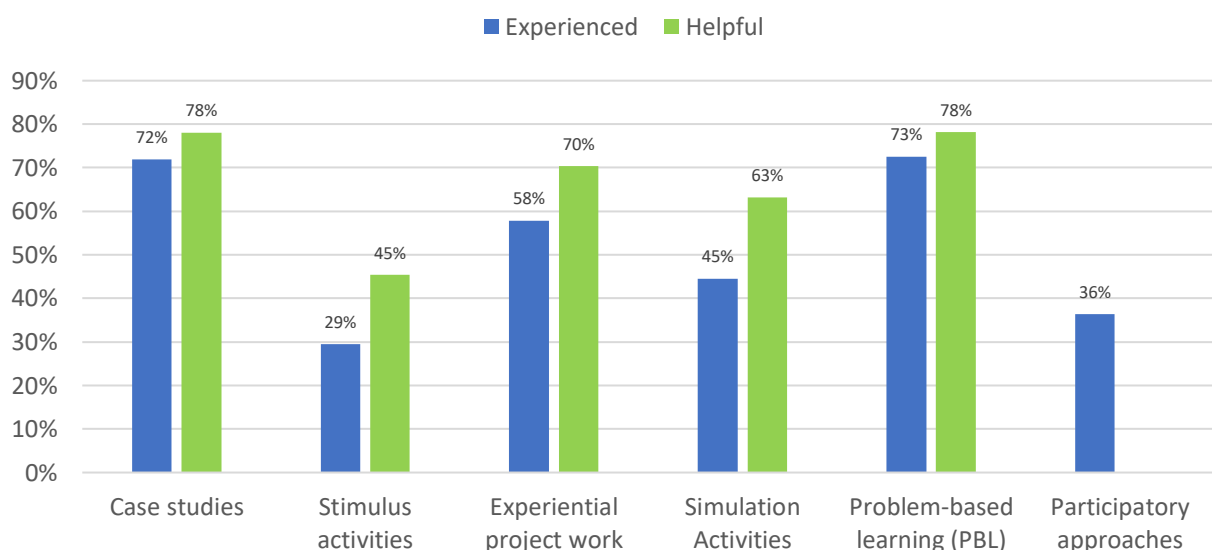


Figure 11: Ways of learning experienced and indicated as 'helpful' by respondents in relation to Sustainable Development. *Note that respondents were not asked how helpful they found participatory approaches.*

Employment

What Future Employers Want

The student respondents were asked which of the previously identified skills they perceived as being highly sought after by future employers. The repetition of the same set of skills year-on-year enables SOS-UK and participating institutions to observe and understand trends in this area.

The 2022 Strathclyde responses consistently follow the trends observed in 2021 UK-wide data (Figure 12), with 'Communicating complex information clearly' (93%), 'Planning for long...(and) short term' (93%) and 'Solving problems by thinking about whole systems' (91%) ranking most important. Interestingly respondents felt that social issues such as inequality, human impact on nature and global perspectives were the least crucial factors for future employers.

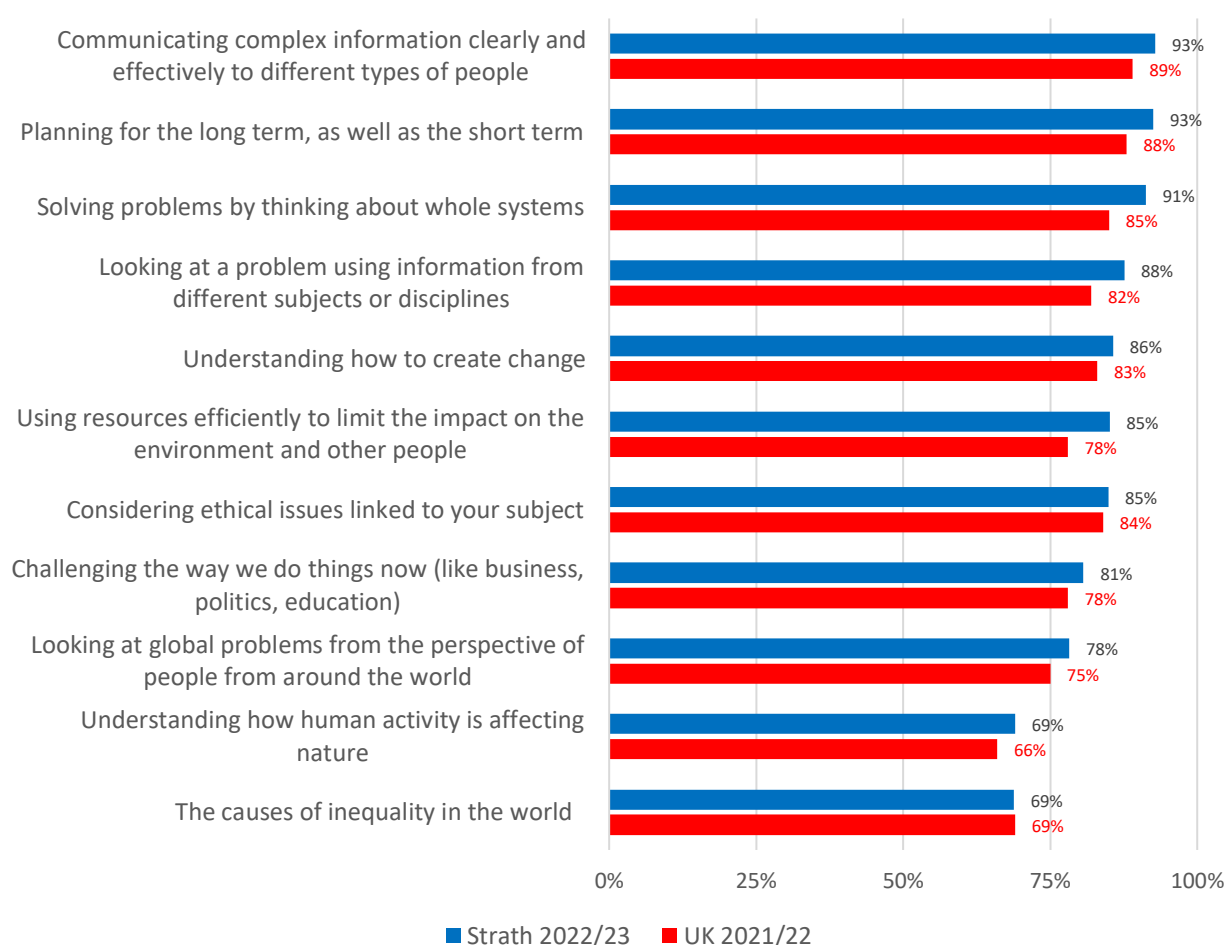


Figure 12: Students' perception of what Skills and Competencies potential future employers look for in university graduates: University of Strathclyde (2022) compared to UK level (2021) data ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

What Students are Looking for in Future Employment

Student respondents were further asked questions about their outlooks, specifically about what they look for when applying for jobs in future (Figure 13).

Not surprisingly, a good salary (89%) and opportunities to progress (81%) were the most popular responses. However, these were closely followed by areas which included wider positive impacts on society and the environment. 45% were willing to take up to a £3,000 starting salary cut to work with a company that has a strong social and environmental record, with up to 73% being willing to take a £1,000 cut for the same.

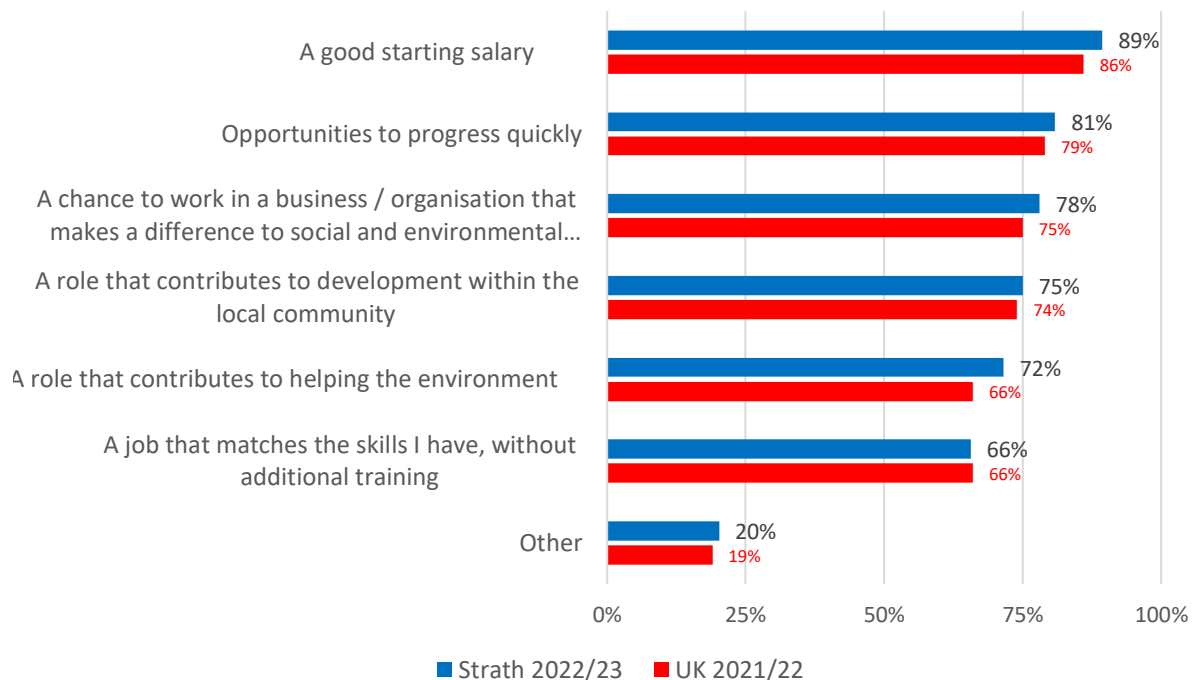


Figure 13: Factors that students felt were important when considering jobs to apply for: University of Strathclyde (2022) compared to UK level (2021) data ([SOS-UK 2022](#))

Identifying and addressing gaps

Throughout the questionnaire, respondents were asked about skills' 'coverage' in current courses; 'importance' to students to learn about; and importance for future 'employability' prospects for the same range of areas:

- Impact of human activity on the environment
- Causes of inequality in the world
- Using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people
- Considering ethical issues
- Looking at global issues from others perspectives
- Challenging the way we do things now (status quo)
- Inter and transdisciplinary working
- Whole systems thinking
- Planning for the long and short term

- Understanding how to create change
- Communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different people

When analysing the three sets together (Figure 14), the responses show consistency between what the students feel is personally important for them to learn about with students' perception of what future employers actively look for in graduates. This is self-explanatory and is consistent with other sets of questions that indicate that students highly value future employment prospects and that one of their main expectations of their place of study and courses is to equip them with relevant, useful, and impactful skill sets to be well placed with in the job market at the conclusion of their studies.

However, the coverage of these areas reported in the current teaching and learning infer there is a significant difference between what is desired by students and what is currently being delivered.

This is a gap which could be closed with a clear and structured programme for staff and students to engage with education for sustainable development.

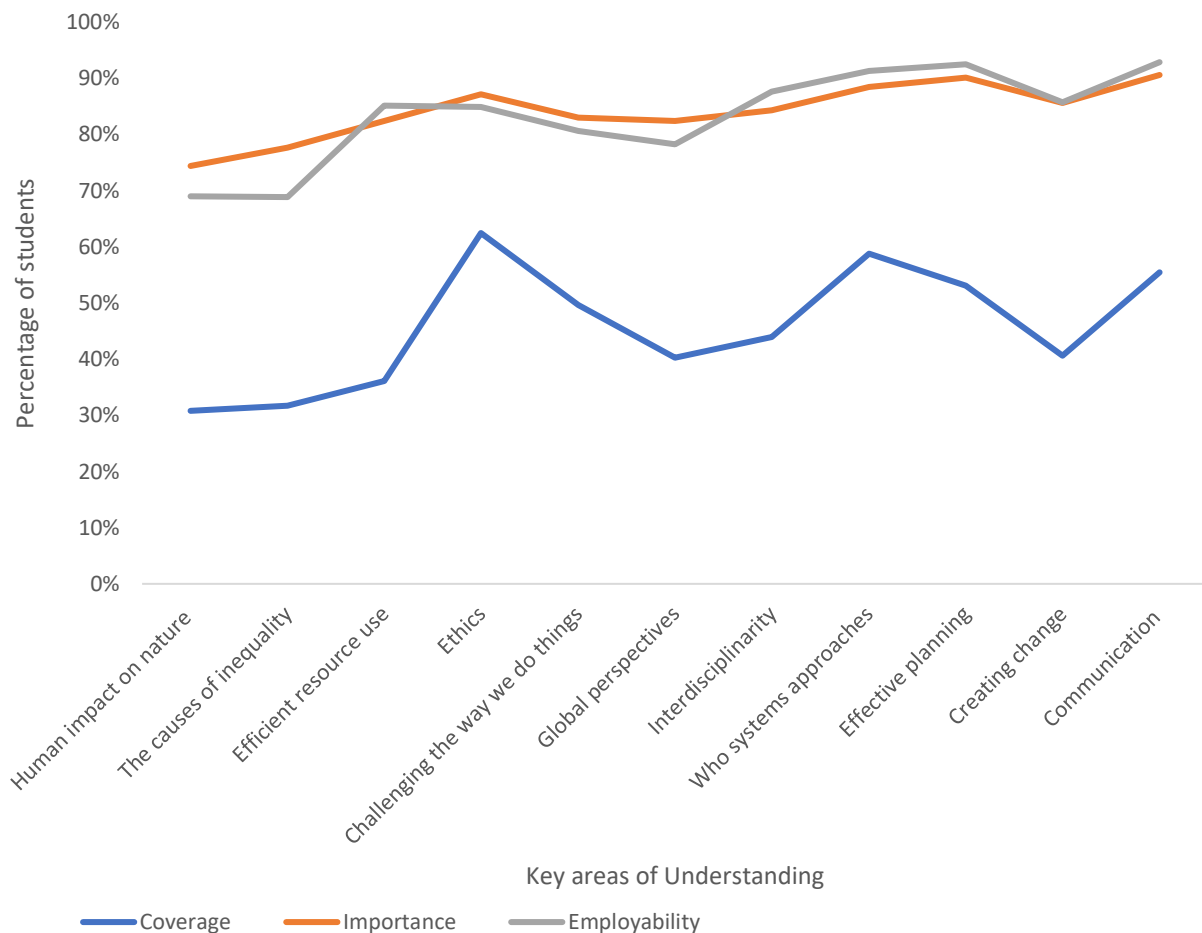


Figure 14: Three sets of questions combined to show Strathclyde students' recognition of Sustainability skills and competencies covered during their studies plotted against the students' perception of which of the skills are 'personally important' for them to learn by the end of their studies, and which Skills they perceive future employers to look for in graduates

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key findings

- Sustainable development and climate change are areas which are in high demand from our students, both UG and PG, and across all four faculties
- These are not add-on but integral components of what our educational programmes should be delivering. The new QAA Subject Benchmark Statements indicate this will be a sector-wide shift, which Strathclyde is well-placed to accommodate with greater support and resourcing.
- From the student perspective there is a gap between what they currently receiving and what they would like to receive in relation to sustainability education and the development of related skills.
- Students receive more prominent and consistent learning for sustainability at school level. This is dropping off at University level as ESD is not currently mainstreamed. This may also reflect a need to articulate where these skills are being developed.

Key recommendations

- We need to improve our understanding of what we are currently delivering across the University. We can achieve this by:
 - Mapping curricula for skills and competencies as well as explicit SDG content
 - 'Badging' and articulating clearly to students where they receive this knowledge and skills throughout their programmes
- We must develop a clear plan to support staff to assess ESD and competency development, and where necessary improve and adapt their content to deliver ESD
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Appendix

Figure A1: Faculty and Study Level Breakdown of Strathclyde responses for the questions relating to Sustainable Development definitions and implications for students

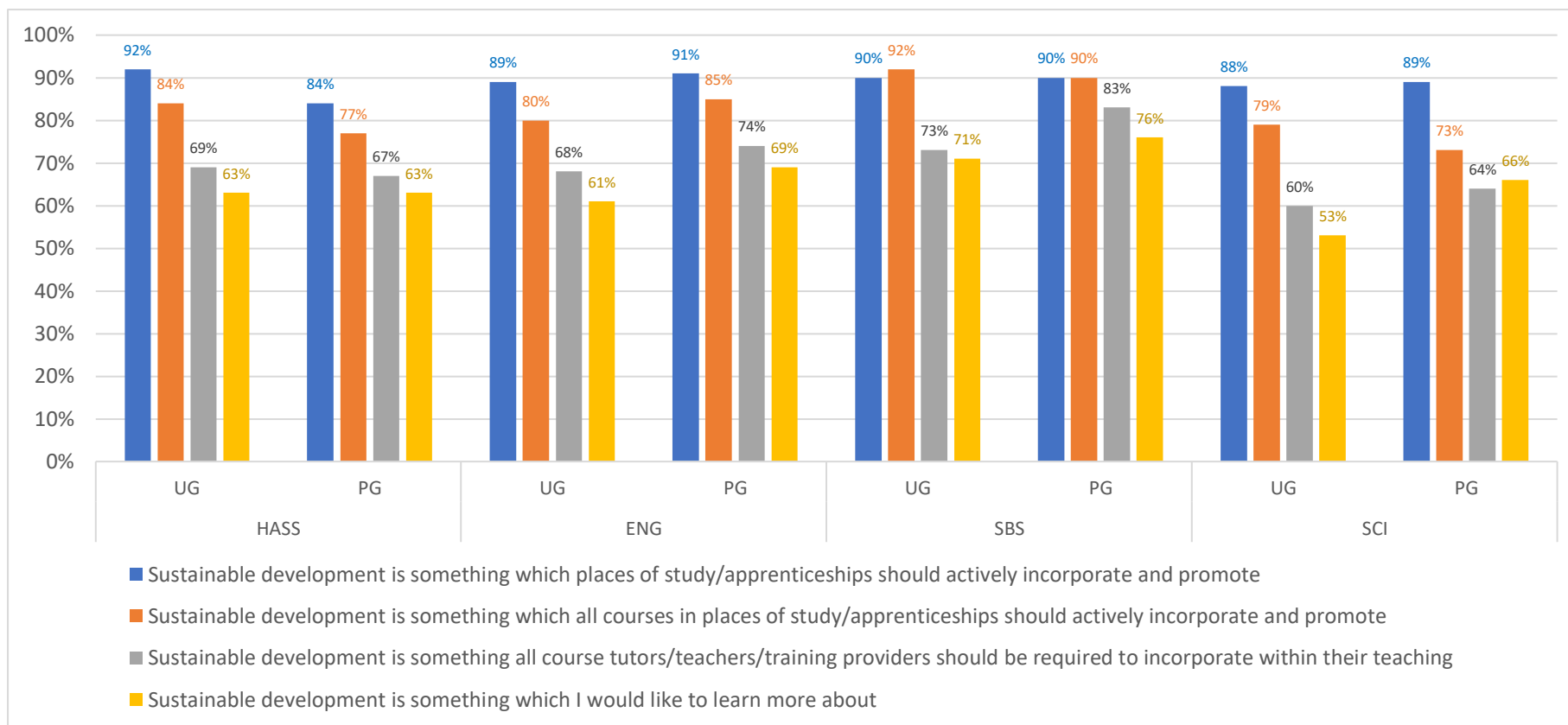
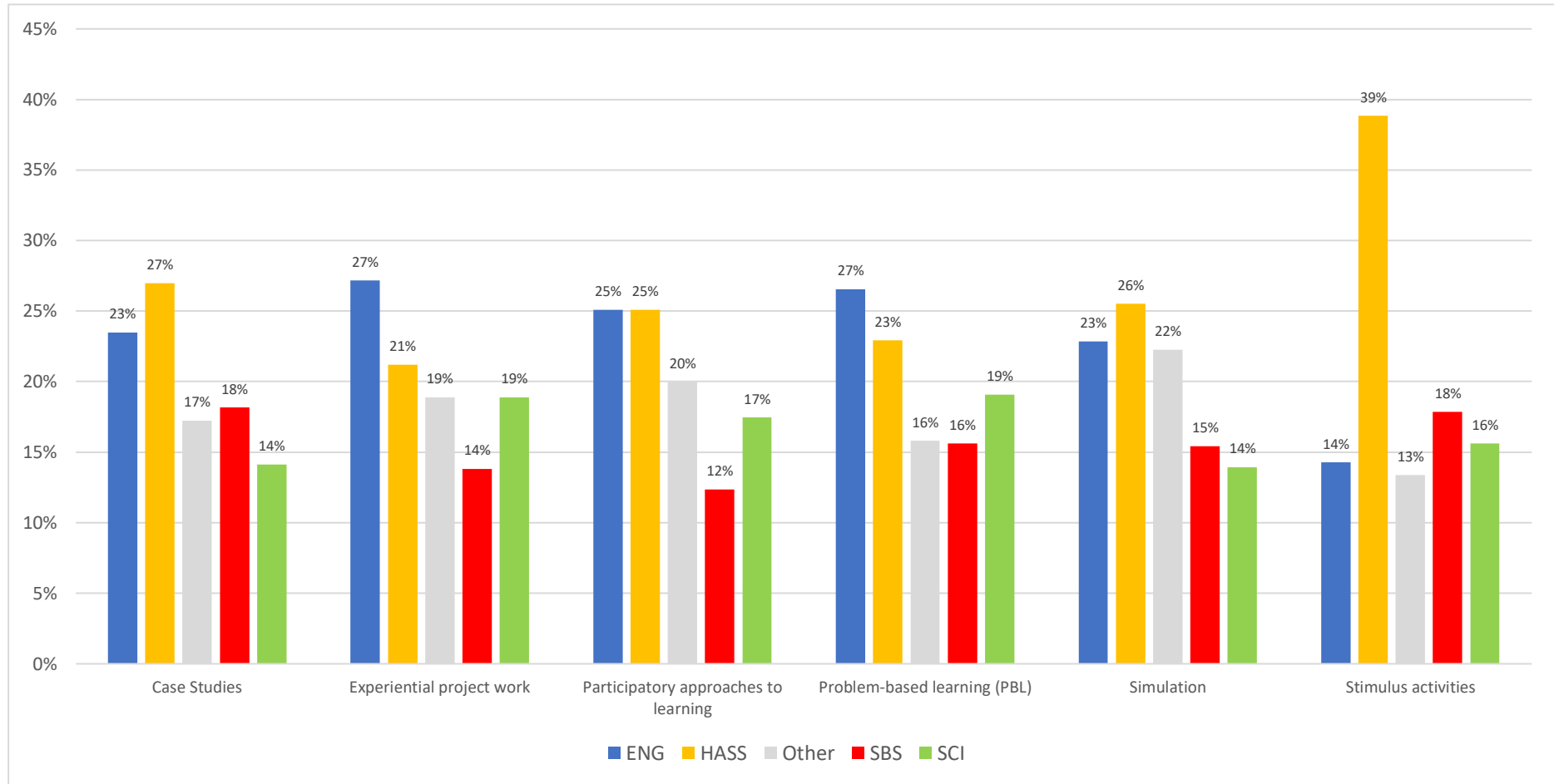


Figure A2: Student’s recognition of Ways of Learning they have ‘experienced’ during their studies at the given faculties

A. Faculty breakdown for all Strathclyde respondents including both UG and PG study levels

Ways of learning for each faculty sum up to a 100% of student responses for the said way of learning (ex. 100% of 72% for Case studies, etc as in Figure 10).



B. Breakdown of Strathclyde students' responses per faculty and study level

PG and UG data per faculty sum up to a 100% of student responses for each Way of Learning (ex.100% of the 72% for Case studies, etc as in Figure 10).

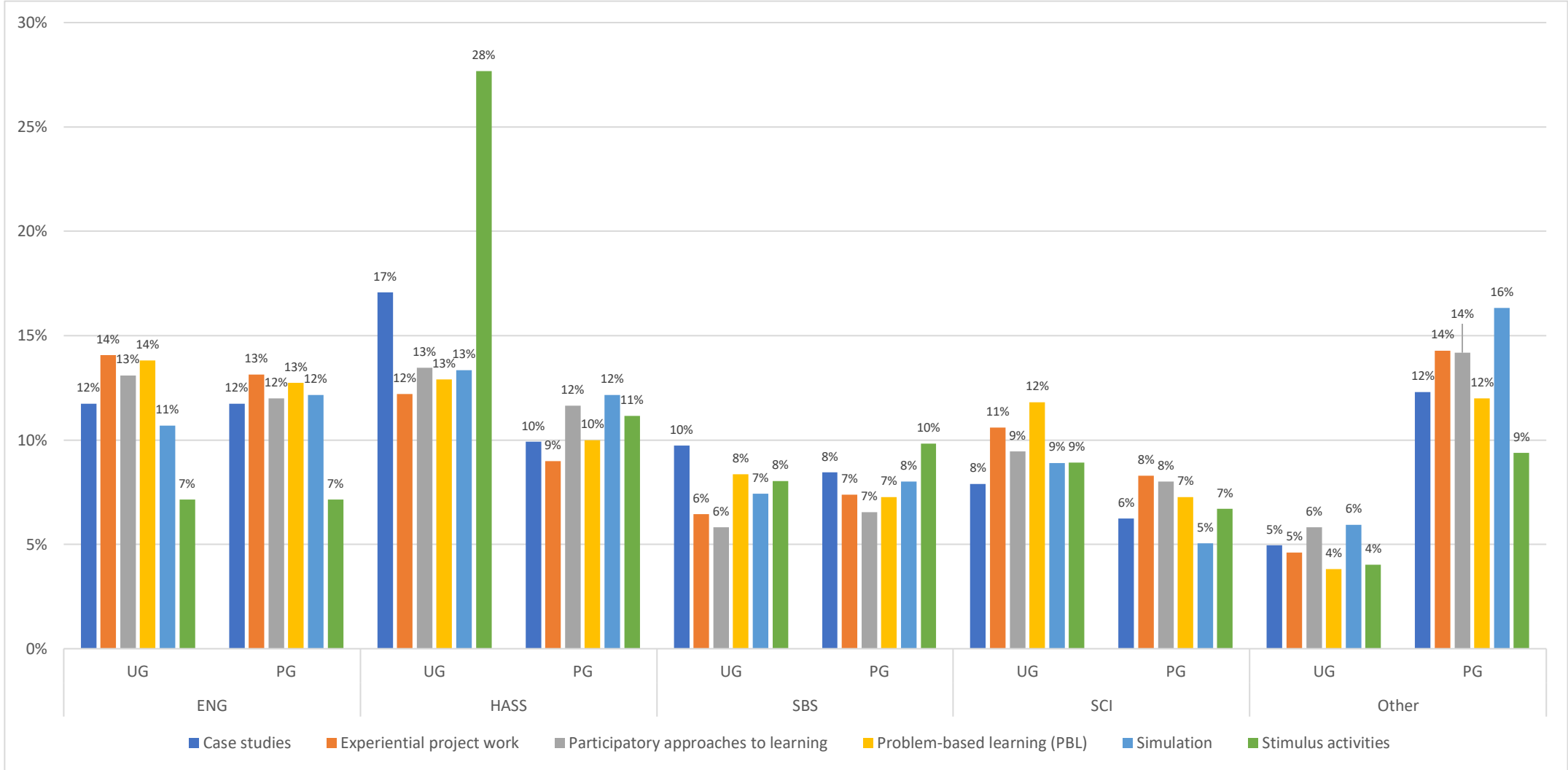
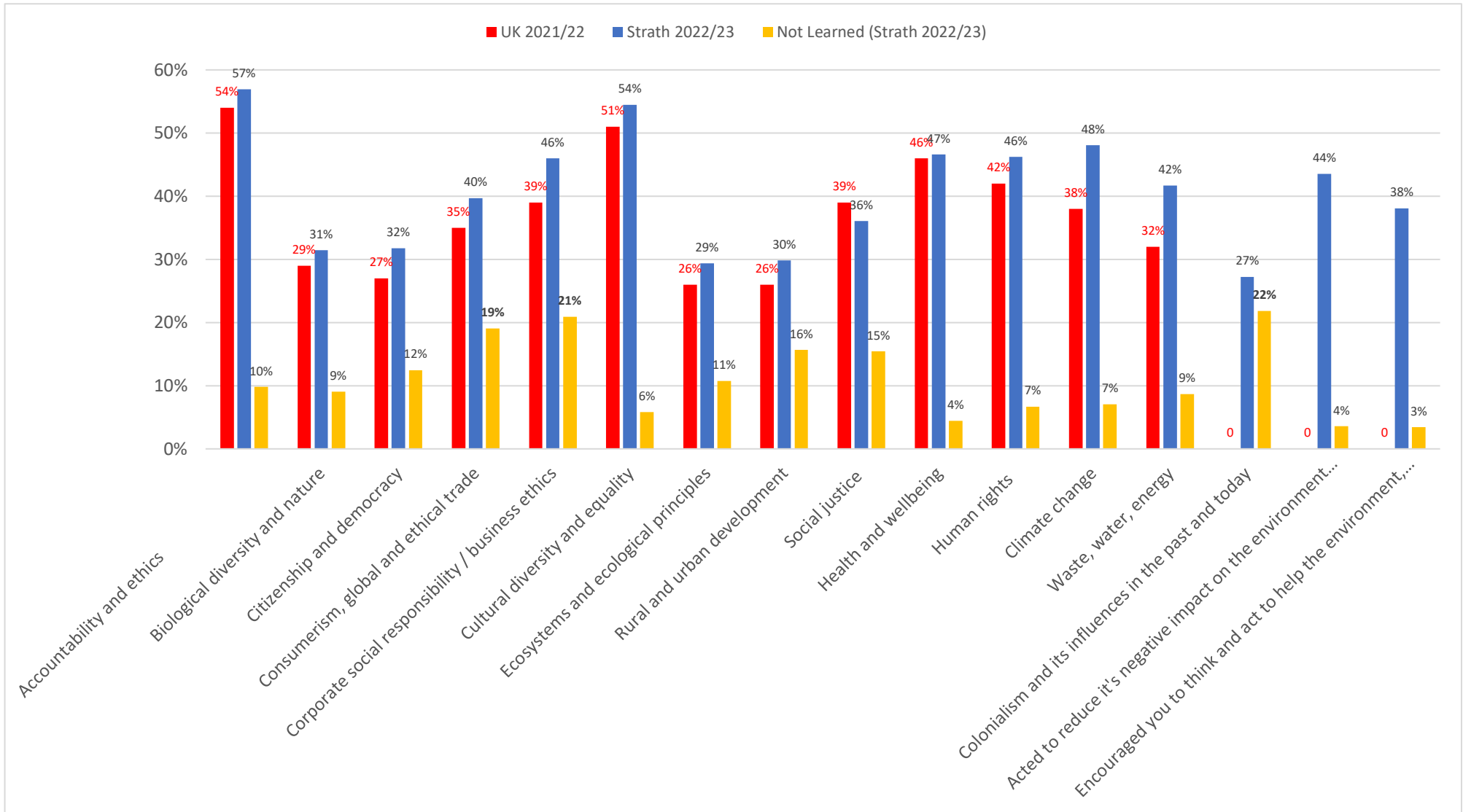
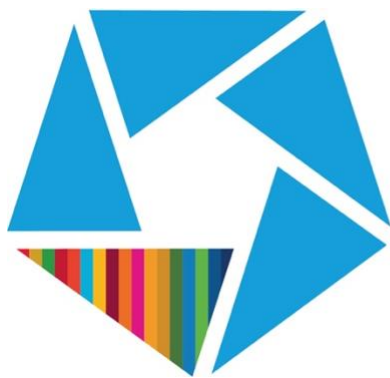


Figure A3: Students' perception of Sustainability-related topics they've learned at university-level plotted against students' stated lack of learning about the said topic.





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