

Green Campuses

Exploring students' perceptions of
university environmental policies



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Generation Greta

Children and teenagers have been dubbed the 'Greta Thunberg generation' because they are demanding more action on climate change and environmental issues.[1]

Children in various countries, including the UK, skipped school to join global protests for climate action in 2019[2]. This awareness has continued to grow as the COVID-19 pandemic forced behavioural changes that seemingly cleared the skies of pollution and made green communal spaces more important than ever[3].

Prospective students are starting to apply to university with memories of the pandemic and its environmental impact etched in their minds.



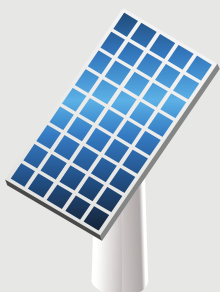
Back in 2007, as part of this growing environmental awareness, a network of student campaign groups called People & Planet created a university league table rating universities on their environmental and ethical performance.[4] People & Planet's league table has gained traction since its publication in The Guardian[5], and now more green rankings are appearing online to help prospective students choose a university[6,7].

It is becoming increasingly important for universities pushing their own sustainability agendas to connect with their students and understand what makes a university green in their eyes.

We wanted to find out what makes students perceive some universities as green and how universities can make their sustainability initiatives more visible and appealing. To do this, Shift Sustainability conducted an online survey towards the end of 2020 with 1,055 university students studying in the UK.*

The time is now

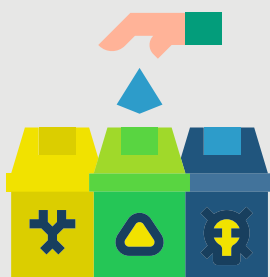
96% of students indicated a desire to see some environmental action taken by their university, reflecting the undeniable environmental commitment of the younger generation.



Students wanted to see **on-campus changes**, including solar energy installations (31%), energy-saving lighting (22%) and the use of locally sourced food (21%).



Activism and campaigning were also viewed as important. Students wanted to see universities raising awareness and funds for environmental issues (23%).



Students wanted to see **initiatives facilitating behavioural change**, such as recycling schemes (29%) water refill stations (26%), green transport options (21%), support of second-hand clothing sales (18%), and more meat-free food options (18%). Personal agency is clearly important for students when it comes to becoming greener, and universities could utilise this in their strategies.

* Including international students studying at a UK university (58 respondents / 5% of the sample).



18% of students wanted campus gardens and allotments, which may reflect the connection between **green spaces** and mental health that has become more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.^[8]

Out of sight, out of mind

Despite students wanting to see sustainable initiatives from their university, they had low awareness of what actions were currently being taken. We asked students what environmental initiatives their universities were currently running, to understand their knowledge and perceptions of current policies.

Open responses indicated low awareness, **with the majority stating they were unaware of any initiatives or were unsure.*** However, the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted this result because the focus has been elsewhere for the last academic year, while many students have been unable to walk around campus and see posters or receive fliers.

45% of students were unaware of any green initiatives from their university



* Out of a sample of 623 responses, 45% said they were unaware and 17% said they were unsure

Let's recap. Students wanted to see: on-campus changes, activism, behavioural change initiatives, and more green spaces. But were students aware of any initiatives that matched their hopes? Out of a sample of 623 open responses:

- **Awareness was low for changes to the campus**, with a few recognising the installation of solar panels on buildings (2%), efforts to become paperless (1%) and saving electricity (1%).
- **Students were mostly aware of recycling schemes** (10%), with initiatives described in responses including: placing recycling bins around the campus, selling items made out of recycled material, and encouraging recycling in halls of residence.
- **There was limited awareness of other behavioural change initiatives** (2% or less), such as: light sensors and turning-off-light campaigns (2%), providing water refill stations (1%), increasing bike storage and lanes (1%), and selling and promoting reusable items including cups, bottles and straws (1%).
- **There was minimal reference to activism** in the form of raising environmental awareness via posters and events (1%) and by having sustainability modules, societies and educational opportunities (2%).
- **Only 1% mentioned green space and campus garden initiatives.**

There is clearly a gap between what students want and what they perceive their university to be doing to tackle environmental issues.



31% of students wanted to see solar panels. Only 2% saw them at their university.

Green universities

Environmental action is a growing concern for those preparing to apply to university. **Sustainability university rankings** have emerged from websites such as 'Save the Student'[6] and 'Top universities'[7], while institutions like Manchester Metropolitan University have used the results of People & Planet's ranking to promote themselves[9].

The lists take into account a range of actions, including carbon management, worker rights, waste & recycling, green travel initiatives, and many more.



To understand student perceptions of green universities, we asked our sample which three universities they thought were most environmentally conscious. We coded 509 text responses into categories and, of those responses, 40% said they didn't know. This low awareness reveals an **opportunity for universities to get ahead of the curve and establish themselves as environmental leaders to attract prospective students.**

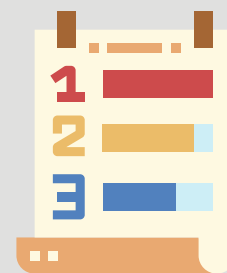
The table below shows the top 10 universities that our sample considered environmentally conscious. The percentage refers to how many students included that university in their top three. The right-hand column shows where the university came on the 2019 People & Planet league table, which classifies universities into First class (coloured blue), 2:1 (light pink), 2:2 (dark pink), Third class or Failed, depending on their score.

University of Cambridge	11%	2:2 = 67th
University of Oxford	9%	2:1 = 45th
University of Bristol	8%	First class = 11th
University of Nottingham	6%	2:2 = 75th
University of Manchester	6%	2:1 = 59th
Manchester Metropolitan University	5%	First class = 2nd
University of Leeds	5%	First class = 22nd
University College London	4%	2:1 = 37th
University of Brighton	3%	First class = 25th
Nottingham Trent University	3%	First class = 3rd

Out of our sample of 509 student responses:

- The University of Cambridge (11%) and University of Oxford (9%) came top, but this result must be taken with caution because they are **generally top-of-mind universities in the UK** and, as seen in the table, they were in the middle of the People & Planet ranking.
- **Universities featuring highly across all sustainability university rankings[6,7]** were perceived to be green by sampled students, including: The University of Bristol (8%), Manchester Metropolitan University (4%), and Nottingham Trent University (3%). The University of Leeds (4%) and University of Brighton (3%) were also chosen regularly, and all appear as 'first class' universities on People & Planet's ranking.[4]

Whilst students recognised some universities who appear highly on league tables, the results show that students don't have a fully informed sense of which universities are green. Notably, the University of Gloucestershire, which came first on People & Planet's league table[4], was not in the top 10 environmentally conscious universities chosen by surveyed students.



There is room for universities to move into this awareness gap and become known as green leaders.



Interestingly, students weren't just putting the name of the university they currently attend, which may reflect a low awareness of their own university's environmental initiatives.

Students living in the North West of England when home from university were more likely to put the University of Manchester, while students living in Scotland were more likely to put the University of Edinburgh – suggesting that students may be more knowledgeable about universities closer to home.

Seeing green

Outlined below are some of the universities that score well on sustainability rankings and were perceived to be green by surveyed students. We have looked at what sustainability initiatives they are currently taking, to indicate the sort of action that might be noticed by students:



The University of Cambridge leads on sustainability research through their Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership – working with businesses to develop solutions for a sustainable economy[10].



The University of Oxford has a sustainability team to oversee projects such as increasing the biodiversity on campus through bee hotels, and setting up a fund for small and medium-size projects to reduce their water waste[11].



The University of Nottingham has many ways for students to get involved with sustainability and develops clever ways to incentivise them. For example, they hold 'student switch offs', a competition to encourage halls of residence to save energy/water and recycle. The hall of residence who saves and recycles the most wins a prize at the end of the year, which is often lots of ice cream[12].



Manchester Metropolitan University is currently second on People & Planet's league table and prides itself on its sustainability goals and initiatives[4]. They have opportunities for student involvement, such as becoming a sustainability representative for their halls of residence, as well as university-wide commitments, such as becoming a zero-carbon university by 2038 through their carbon management plan[13].



Nottingham Trent
University

Nottingham Trent University integrated the UN Sustainable Development Goals into its curricula in 2016 and has since aligned much of its research to addressing the environmental, economic and social aspects of the goals. They have many different sustainability initiatives across the university – for example, food at their main catering outlets is seasonal, local and ethically sourced^[14].

We have also explored students' perceptions of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in our '[Minds of the Future](#)' white paper.

How to get noticed

Market your environmental strategies

Despite a consensus that they want their universities to become greener, **students have low awareness of green initiatives**. Universities should market their environmental strategies to students to grow interest and encourage participation. A great place to start would be publicising any current policies around: green spaces, environmental activism, structural changes to the campus, or how the university is helping students change their behaviour. Students wanted to see solar energy installations, energy-saving lighting, locally sourced food, campus gardens and allotments, and campaigns raising awareness and funds for environmental issues. If you currently have these in place, it's time to promote them.



Change behaviours

Students want **on-campus facilities and opportunities** to make sustainable choices, which can have a big environmental impact if it changes long-term behaviour. Students also tended to be more aware of initiatives to which they could contribute, such as recycling. Introducing or marketing facilities such as water refill stations, recycling points, and vegan and vegetarian school meal options, could bolster your reputation as a green university, whilst making your strategies more successful through student involvement.

Keep innovating to stand out

Topping green university league tables isn't enough to get noticed by students. Universities need to be **active in areas that are important and visible to their students**. A good example is the University of Nottingham, which has opportunities to make the campus more sustainable and develop workplace skills through a student volunteering scheme around practical biodiversity and landscaping projects^[15]. Creating competitions and introducing incentives can also increase student engagement in sustainability and raise awareness, e.g. students at Manchester Metropolitan University can become sustainability ambassadors and earn credits and prizes^[16].

Find your purpose and lead the charge

Ready yourself for the 'Greta Thunberg generation' and make your university a leader in sustainability. With only a handful of universities currently recognised by students for their environmental initiatives, there is **space to become an established green institution**. Materiality assessments are a great way to prioritise key environmental and social areas that are impactful and relevant to your university. Input from a range of stakeholders, including the student body, can help to inform effective sustainability strategies that are good for the planet and could help attract prospective students who are searching for green universities.



If you are interested in conducting sustainability research or a materiality assessment, or want to speak to one of our experts, please email Senior Research Manager elsie.lauchlan@shift-insight.co.uk or call 0207 253 8959.

About Shift Insight

Since 2002, we have grown to become a leading research consultancy – originally focused on education, but then expanding into the complementary areas of Membership and Sustainability, alongside Learning.

Shift Sustainability are experts in market research, consultation and materiality assessments, enabling us to identify and address global and local challenges. In this age of shifting mindsets and competing priorities, where success comes to those who listen and adapt, we give organisations the evidence and insight they need to make a real impact.

To find out more about us, including our other public-facing research reports, please visit our website: shift-sustainability.co.uk.

Professional ethics

We are long-term members of both the Market Research Society and European Society for Opinion and Market Research. We are also registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and inform them of any personal information held. Our researchers fully abide by:

- The Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR
- The ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research
- The MRS Code of Conduct.

In addition, we are proud to be a Certified B Corporation™ – one of only a few agencies to have gained this recognition. B Corps are for-profit companies that use the power of business to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy. They meet the highest verified standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability.



References

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