

# WHAT DO STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN CONSIDER IMPORTANT FOR THEIR FUTURE?

Results and discussion of a National Union of Students survey



Lilian J. Trechsel, Stefan Häderli, Anne B. Zimmermann  
University of Bern

2020

*u<sup>b</sup>*

---

<sup>b</sup>  
**UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN**

**CDE**  
CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT  
AND ENVIRONMENT

**Publisher**

Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, with Bern Open Publishing (BOP)  
Mittelstrasse 43, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland  
www.cde.unibe.ch  
publications@cde.unibe.ch

© 2020, Lilian Julia Trechsel et al., CDE, University of Bern

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en> to find a copy of the License. If you want to use contents for commercial purposes, you must contact the authors to ask for permission.

This report was compiled within Project 7.9, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), of the University of Bern. Project 7.9 supports the Vice-Rectorate Quality in better incorporating Sustainable Development (SD) into teaching at the University. The project focuses both on the various links between individual disciplines and SD, as well as on interdisciplinary links, and supports the faculties and institutes in establishing these links and making them visible.

**Citation**

Trechsel, LJ; Häderli, S; Zimmermann, AB., University of Bern. 2020. *What do students of the University of Bern consider important for their future? Results and discussion of a National Union of Students survey*. Bern, Switzerland: Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, with Bern Open Publishing (BOP).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7892/boris.146118>

**Authors**

Lilian J. Trechsel, Stefan Häderli, Anne B. Zimmermann  
Contact: sustainability@cde.unibe.ch

**Translation**

Tina Hirschbuehl

**Design and layout**

Leonie Schmid, Lilian J. Trechsel

**Title page photo**

Trochez, L. (2017). *Brindar siempre lo mejor de ti*. Retrieved 29 July 2020 from [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com), open access.

**Availability**

A PDF of this publication is available at: [www.cde.unibe.ch](http://www.cde.unibe.ch)

DOI: 10.7892/boris.146168

# Contents

## Contents

1	Introduction	4
2	Background to the study	5
3	Sampling of the survey at the University of Bern	6
4	Results and Discussion	7
4.1	Environmental and social education	7
4.2	Knowledge of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	9
4.3	Implementation of sustainable development in general and in courses at the University of Bern	10
4.4	Activities of the University of Bern, student involvement, prospects for the future	12
5	Conclusions and possible implications at the University of Bern	14
6	References	16

# 1 Introduction

Since the end of 2018, young people around the world have taken to the streets in their thousands to secure a liveable future, calling on politicians and society to protect the climate. What do students of the University of Bern consider important for their future? The answer is unequivocal: 97% of respondents say climate change is a major concern. This is one of the results from a survey by the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) on *Student Perceptions of Sustainability in Higher Education*, which was also carried out at the University of Bern. The results confirm that society – and in this case, especially the students of the University of Bern – are aware of, and demanding action on, concerns related to sustainable development (SD). The University has already included these concerns in its Strategy 2021 (University of Bern, 2013) and is committed to embedding sustainability as a cross-cutting issue in all fields of activity (teaching, research, operations).

In the field of teaching, the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) performs key tasks on behalf of the Vice-Rectorate Quality. This includes conducting an annual monitoring of how the integration of SD is progressing in courses at the University of Bern. Conducting the NUS survey at the University of Bern represented a one-off opportunity for additional monitoring that was taken up by the university management.

The NUS survey was first carried out internationally in 2018 with students from Germany, France, Denmark, Cyprus, Bangladesh, and Australia. It showed that 91% of students would like to see SD actively included and promoted in their educational institution, and that 81% wished to learn more about SD. The survey also found that a quarter of students are unaware of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (NUS, 2018).

In 2019 the same survey was carried out at the University of Bern. The present report outlines the background to the study, shows some of its results, and is followed by a discussion. It ends with the conclusions and pathways to implementation.

## 2 Background to the study

Since the 2010/2011 academic year, the National Union of Students (NUS) has conducted regular surveys in the UK to determine how students perceive sustainable development (SD) in their studies and what demand there is for knowledge and action in the field of SD on their part. In 2018, the survey was expanded to include several international partners (in Germany, France, Denmark, Cyprus, Bangladesh, and Australia). In total, almost 3,300 students took part in the 2018 survey. Some of the partners belong to one educational institution; others represent several institutions.

In early 2019, the NUS asked the members of the COPERNICUS Alliance<sup>1</sup>, a network of European universities committed to sustainability, to encourage their students to participate in an international study. The initiative was supported at the University of Bern by the Vice-Rector for Quality (Prof. Dr. Silvia Schroer) and the Vice-Rector for Teaching (Prof. Dr. Bruno Moretti). The aim of the anonymous survey was to find out how students imagine their professional future after their studies, what SD-related competencies they would like to build up in their studies, and what significance they believe SD has for their university. The survey was advertised at the University of Bern through various channels (e-mail to all students, Facebook, Instagram) by the university's communications team. As a small incentive for participation, ten book vouchers worth CHF 50 each were raffled off.

---

<sup>1</sup> The University of Bern has been a member of the COPERNICUS Alliance since 2016.

### 3 Sampling of the survey at the University of Bern

On 25 March 2019, all students at the University of Bern were contacted with the request to participate in the NUS survey. A total of 754 students took part: 368 Bachelor's students (49%), 263 Master's students (35%), 113 doctoral students (15%), and ten people (1.3%) with other qualifications. According to enrolment figures for the 2019 autumn semester (HS19) of the University of Bern (University of Bern, 2019), the survey is a largely satisfactory representation of the distribution of students, especially at the bachelor's (HS 19: 42%) and doctoral (HS 19: 17%) levels. Master's students (HS 19: 25%) are slightly overrepresented and participants with other qualifications, primarily at the continuing education level (HS 19: 17%), are clearly underrepresented.

Survey participants comprised 497 women (66%), 242 men (32%), and 15 persons who defined their gender differently or who did not define their gender in the survey. While slightly more women (57%) than men are enrolled at the University of Bern, the gender distribution in the survey does not exactly match the current distribution of students (University of Bern, 2019). It is interesting to note that the international survey of the NUS, conducted for the first time in 2018, shows a similar ratio (59% women, 40% men), which means that here, too, significantly more women took part in the survey (NUS, 2018). The survey conducted by the University of Bern in the spring of 2019 involved people aged 18-67; the majority (94%) were aged between 19 and 39. Most of the respondents (85%) were Swiss, the other 15% (predominantly doctoral students) came from other countries.

The results of the survey from the different study levels show only minimal differences. The present report thus does not differentiate between bachelor's, master's, continuing education, and doctoral students.

Every sampling has certain limitations. The survey sample of 754 participants provides a general picture of student perceptions of SD-related issues, but it is not representative of all students at the University of Bern, as only 4% of all students took part.

## 4 Results and Discussion

This report focuses on the areas of education, the SDGs, and data on the University of Bern. For this purpose, almost all the quantitative data from the NUS survey are analysed, discussed, and concrete implications formulated in a conclusion (Chapter 5). The qualitative data are not dealt with in this report and will be analysed later.

### 4.1 Environmental and social education

The survey showed that students were mostly encouraged to take an interest in environmental and social issues in college (36%) and at university (36%) and also received information on these issues in class. A few (3%) had not yet learned anything specific in this area (see Fig.1).

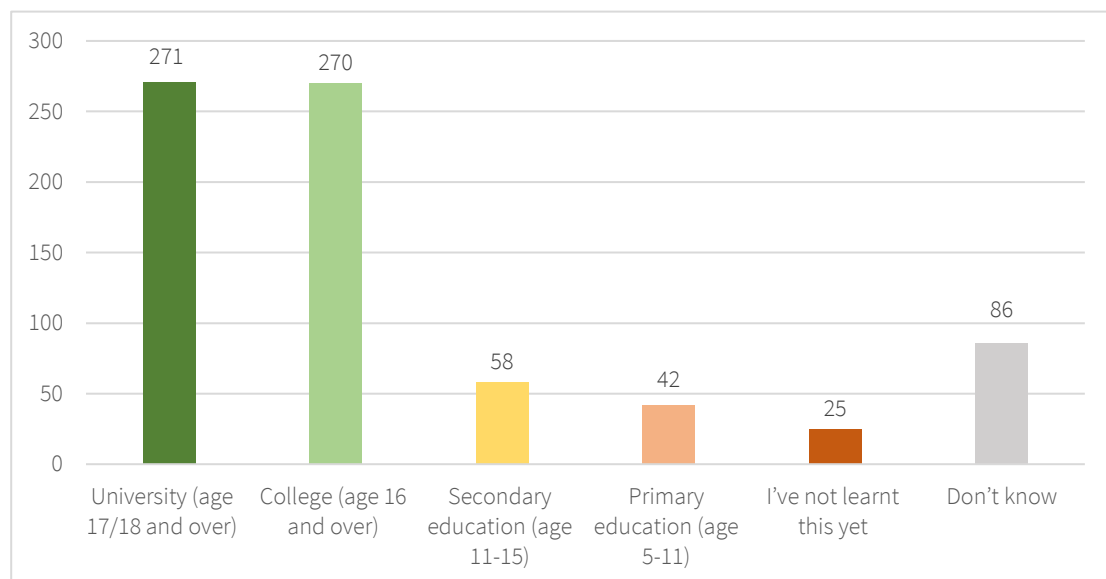


Fig 1. *Thinking about your time in education as a whole, what place where you have studied has encouraged you to think and act to help the environment and other people the most?*

The picture of how strongly university education can bring about changes in students' lifestyles and whether learning content can have a positive effect on the students' "world around them" is varied. According to Fig. 2, approximately one-third felt that their university education had such an influence, another third disagreed or strongly disagreed, and another third had no opinion on this or did not know. According to the survey (see Fig. 3), almost half (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that the learning content can have a positive impact on their lives. Approximately one-third (29%) did not agree or even strongly disagreed.

The relatively high proportion of students who answered "don't know" to the question in Fig. 1 can perhaps be explained by the fact that the students cannot imagine exactly how and why teaching should or could have an impact on their lives, although a large majority of those surveyed (94% agree or strongly agree) believe (see Fig. 4) that the university should definitely actively incorporate and promote sustainability.

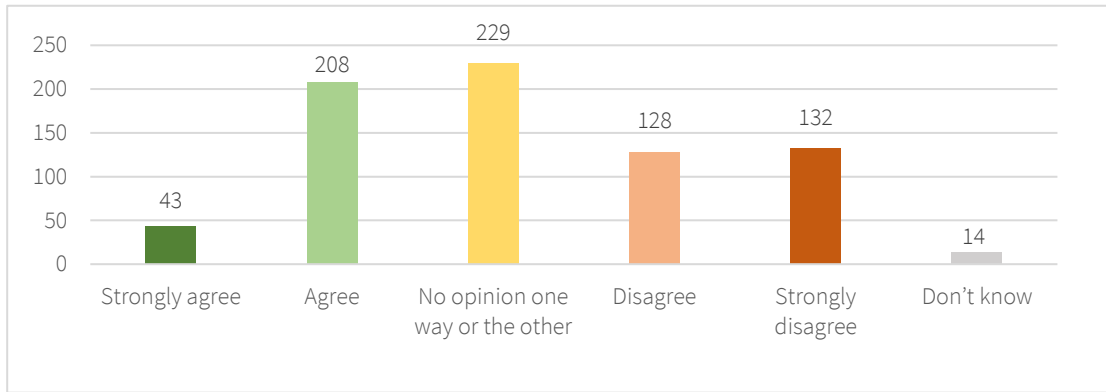


Fig. 2. My studies are helping me to learn how to make changes to my lifestyle to help the environment.

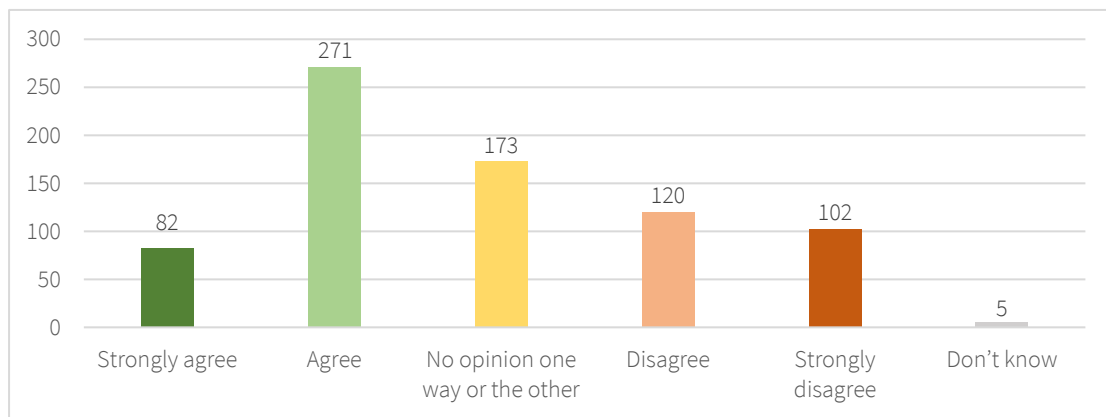


Fig. 3. My studies are helping me learn how I can have a positive impact on the world around me.

The students very clearly advocate the possible incorporation and promotion of SD at university level (see Fig. 4). A very large majority (94%) agree or even strongly agree with this. And a minority (3%) disagree or strongly disagree. Three people have no opinion on this or did not know.

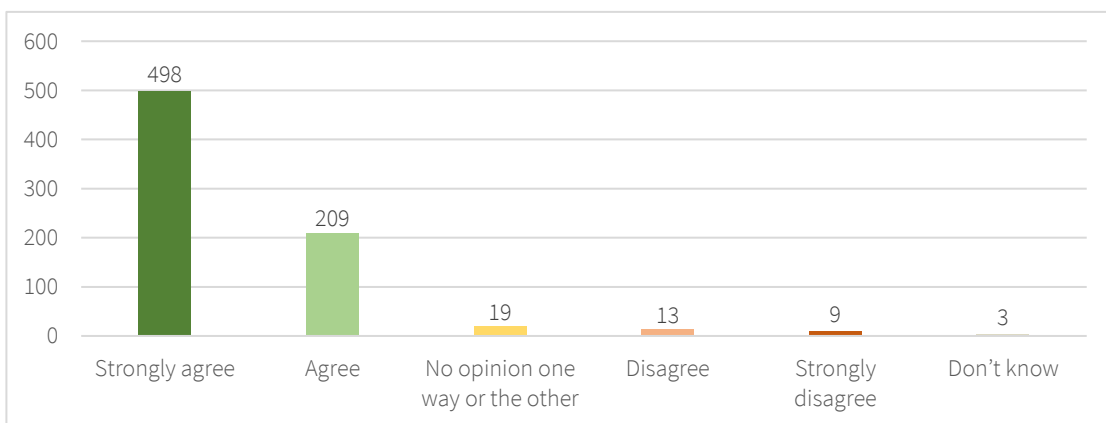


Fig. 4. Sustainable development is something which all universities/colleges should actively incorporate and promote.

According to the respondents, the SD-related topics dealt with during their time at school or during their studies were very diverse. The topics are listed in Fig. 5. As can be seen, climate change stands out as the most-addressed topic. This is similar to the findings of the Greenpeace



Sustainability Barometer of 2015, where climate change is also the number one environmental issue (Michelsen, Grunenberg, Mader, & Barth, 2015).

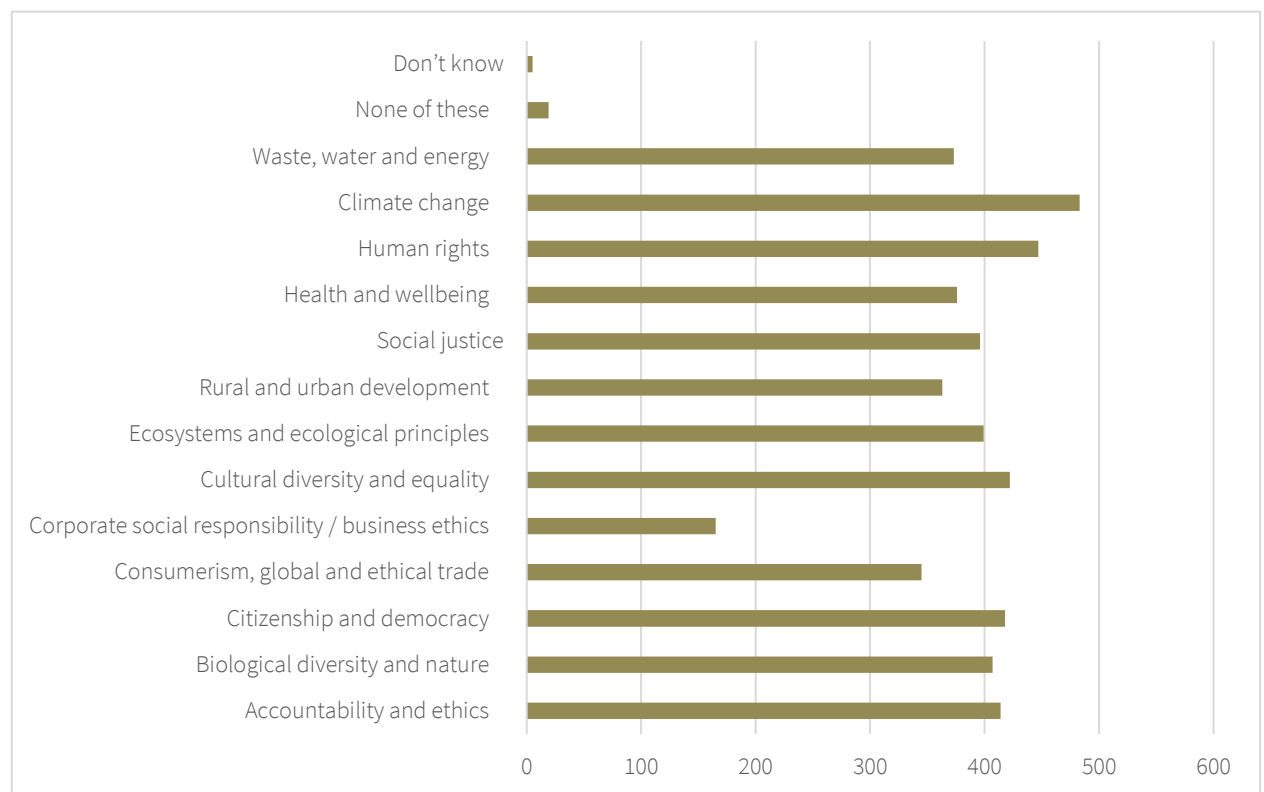


Fig. 5. Thinking of your time in education so far, which of the following issues been covered in the teaching?

These results clearly show that, for students, the university as an educational institution has an important contribution to make in the environmental and social field – and thus also in the field of sustainability. Some students stated that they had already come across learning contents that led to a possible change in their lifestyle. Others disagreed or did not know. Half of the students were aware that learning content taught at the university could have a positive effect on their lives. They are willing to integrate what they have learned into their everyday life. A clear sign in favour of including SD in all areas of activity is the wish that SD should be promoted and incorporated by the university.

#### 4.2 Knowledge of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Fig. 6 shows that almost half (45%) of the students have heard of the UN's SDGs and are familiar with their contents. About a third (31%) have heard of the SDGs but did not know what they're about. Just under another third (24%) have never heard of the SDGs or did not answer the question.

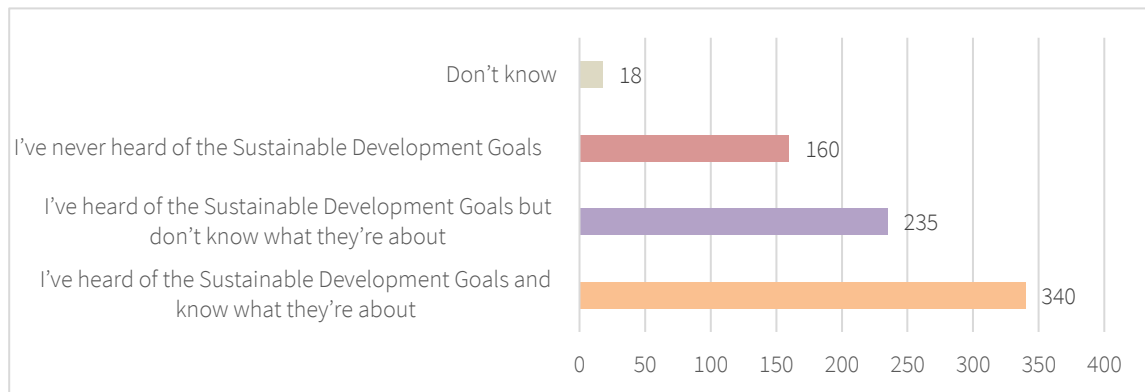


Fig. 6. Which of the following options describe what you know about the Sustainable Development Goals?

On the one hand, this shows that half of the students are familiar with the SDGs and are therefore aware of the importance of this global agenda. On the other, it shows that the other half do not know the SDGs or what they're about. Since SDGs are internationally negotiated and globally recognized goals, it is crucial that university graduates be aware of these goals and their contents. After all, graduates are important actors of the next generation, who will, among other things, take up important political positions. They are therefore the decision-makers of the future who have the power (and responsibility) to promote SD.

#### 4.3 Implementation of sustainable development in general and in courses at the University of Bern

According to the survey, a large majority (83%) of respondents would like to know more about sustainable development (see Fig. 7), ten percent did not have a strong opinion about it, and only a small proportion of respondents (6%) did not want to deepen their knowledge on SD.

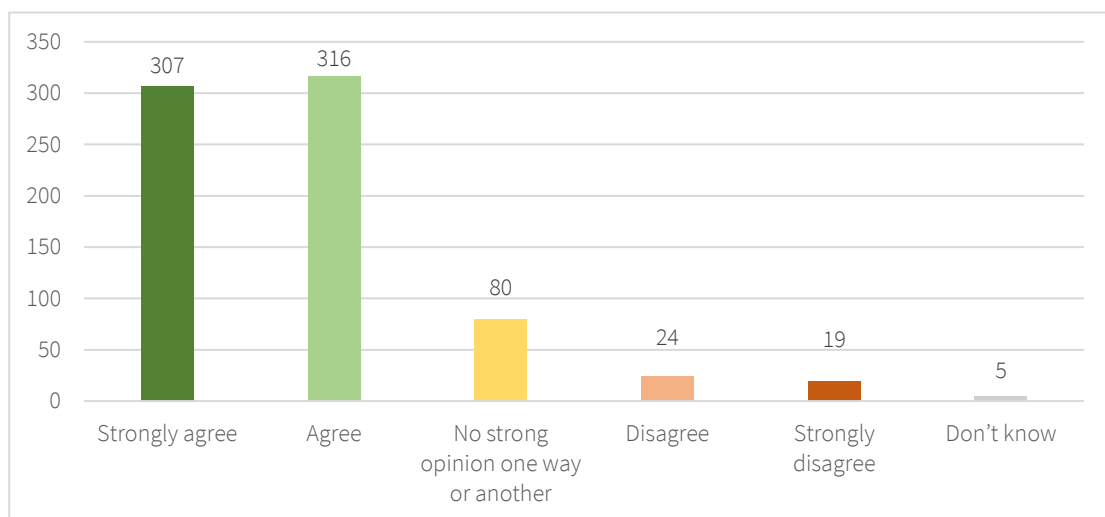


Fig. 7. Sustainable development is something which I would like to learn more about.

A total of 71% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that SD should be actively incorporated and promoted in all courses (see Fig. 8). Twelve per cent had no strong opinion on this and 15% did not want the subject to be incorporated into all courses.

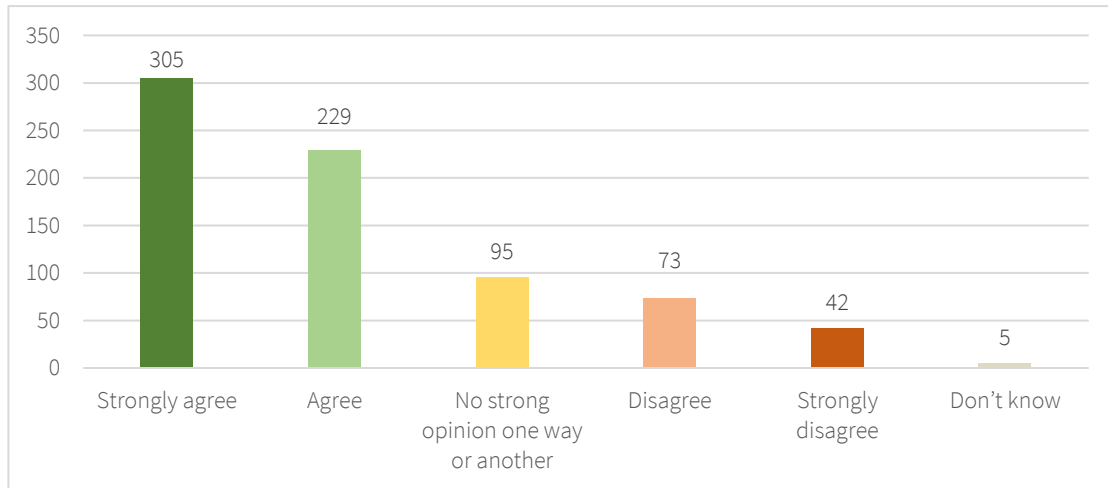


Fig. 8. Sustainable development is something which all courses should actively incorporate and promote.

Fig. 9 shows that, from the students' perspective, by spring 2019 hardly any SD-related content had been covered in courses at the University of Bern. A total of 60% of the respondents considered the topic of SD to be only slightly or not at all present in the courses, 21% as moderately present. Some 17% felt that SD was present in the courses to a high or very high degree; just under 2% did not know.

As CDE's 2018/2019 Monitoring Report for the Vice-Rectorate Quality shows, an increasing number of courses at the University of Bern address the topic of sustainability. In the 2018/2019 academic year, almost all (93%) mono or major bachelor's degree programmes explicitly included SD in their curriculum annexes, but the double lesson on SD per degree programme demanded by the Rectorate had been carried out in only 9 of 39 bachelor's degree programmes, i.e. in just under a quarter of programmes (Schmid, Zimmermann, Herweg, & Trechsel, 2019).

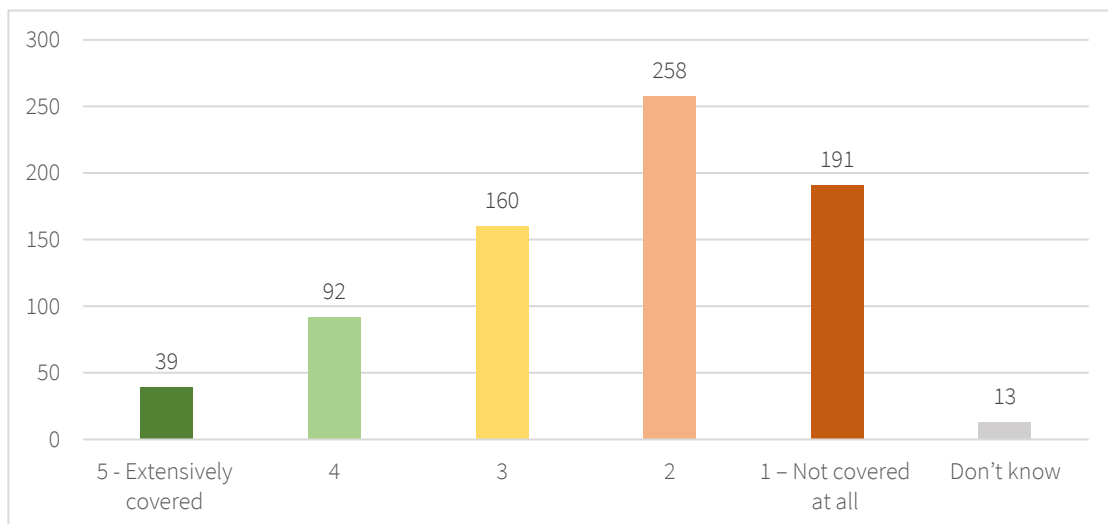


Fig. 9. To what extent has sustainable development been covered by your course?

Overall, the respondents stated that SD was not a major topic in the courses, but a clear majority (71%) expressed the wish that this topic be actively included and promoted in all courses. Many students (83%) want to learn more about SD.

#### 4.4 Activities of the University of Bern, student involvement, prospects for the future

Fig. 10 shows that 30% of the respondents found the University of Bern to be well or very well committed to limiting negative impacts on the environment and society. For 30% of the students, the commitment of the University of Bern is reasonably satisfactory, while 18% think that the University of Bern's commitment to SD is poor or very poor. As many as 22% did not know, which could indicate that many students are unaware of the university's sustainability-related activities in the field of environment and society.

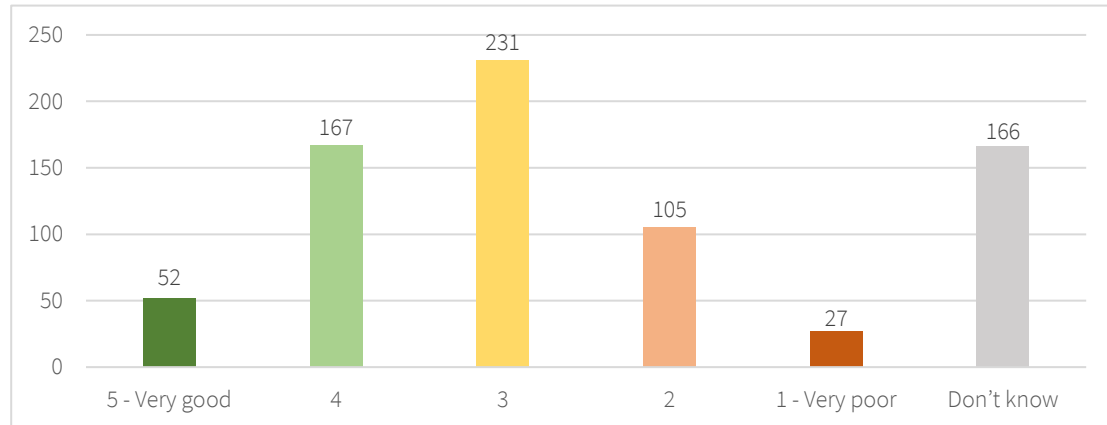


Fig. 10. *My university/college takes enough action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society.*

Similarly, 27% were unaware of the opportunities for students at the University of Bern to personally contribute to reducing negative impacts on the environment and on society (see Fig. 11). By contrast, 38% of those surveyed rated the opportunities for active participation as good or very good. A total of 22% felt that they had mediocre opportunities to participate in shaping the environment and society, and 13% felt that the opportunities for students to participate were poor or even very poor.

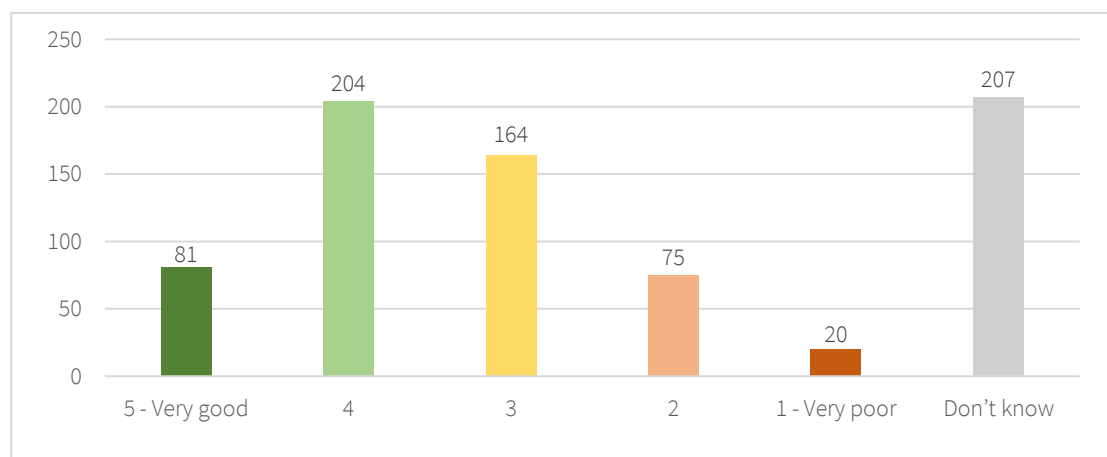


Fig. 11. *My university/college provides opportunities for students to get involved in action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society.*

Fig. 11 also shows that many of the respondents (27%) were unaware of opportunities for students at the University of Bern to get involved in reducing negative impacts on the

environment and society. However, some rated the steps taken on sustainability concerns by the University of Bern and the scope for student participation in shaping these as high or even very high. Here, an important starting point would be to increase the visibility of existing SD-related projects and action by the University of Bern, to enable students to learn more about these projects and thus gain more opportunities for impact.

In addition to reflecting on the current situation at the University of Bern, the students were also asked about how they imagined their professional future. Fig. 12 shows that for a small (5%) reduction in salary, the majority of students (over 80%) would choose employers with a good social and environmental record. If wages were to drop by 15% (see Fig. 13), just over half would still choose such employers.

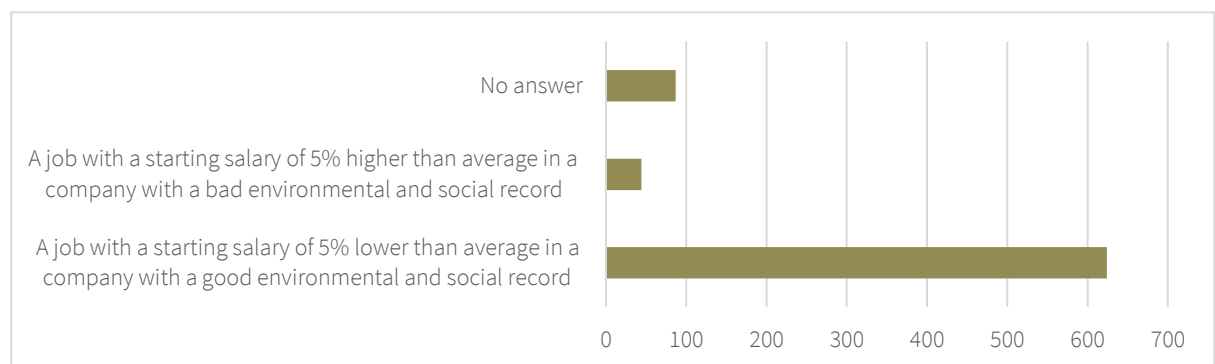


Fig. 12. Of the two choices presented above, assuming all factors are equal, in each case please tell us which option you would choose.

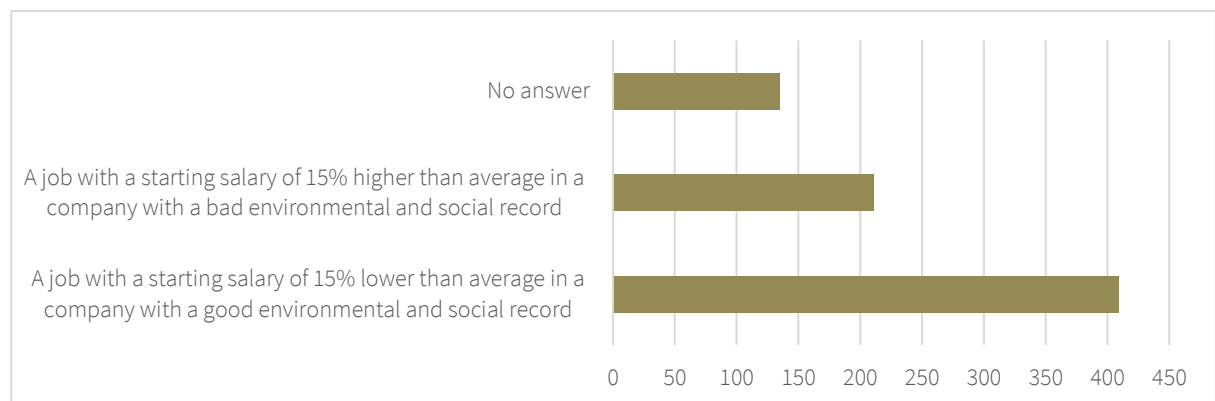


Fig. 13. Of the two choices presented above, assuming all factors are equal, in each case please tell us which option you would choose.

## 5 Conclusions and possible implications at the University of Bern

The survey conducted at the University of Bern by the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) shows the importance of sustainable development (SD) and the related wishes and demands of students at the University of Bern. A large proportion of the students (83%) would like to learn more about SD. This clearly shows that further efforts are needed in university teaching to strengthen this area and highlights the importance of the minimum requirement, set by the Rectorate, of a double lesson on SD (a compulsory two-hour course) in all subjects. In this double lesson, lecturers should demonstrate the significance of SD for their subject area and thereby familiarize students with the issue.

Many of the respondents (71%) say that topics related to SD should be incorporated into the courses. The "Promotion of Sustainable Development in Teaching" project grant offers lecturers the opportunity to do this, by providing them with funds to design, implement, and evaluate existing or new courses relevant to sustainability. This offer should be continued or ideally, expanded. Lecturers at the University of Bern should continue to have access to additional measures of the Vice-Rectorate Quality (individual counselling of lecturers by SD experts at the Centre for Development and Environment [CDE], an SD module of the CAS University Didactics, teaching materials, a reading list, an Education for SD [ESD] network, etc. An overview of these activities can be found at: [www.esd.unibe.ch](http://www.esd.unibe.ch)).

The survey indicates that half of the students are unaware of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or do not know what they're about. It should be an objective of the University of Bern that most, if not all, graduates are familiar with these goals, their content and significance. One focus could be the online "Sustainable Development" tutorial, which offers students an introduction to the topic and shows the importance of the SDGs. The tutorial should not replace the double lesson on SD (see above), but rather supplement it. A university-wide compulsory course for interdisciplinary topics (e.g. Research Integrity) could also be examined here. Furthermore, the survey results could be interpreted as a request for the university to position itself in regard to the SDGs and to declare this position, for example in the annual monitoring.

A quarter of all respondents have no clear idea, or no idea at all, of the University of Bern's activities in limiting negative impacts on the environment and society, or of the opportunities for students to participate. This is a clear indication that the current activities should be made more visible and made known to students. Here the platform for students of the University of Bern, "viSibly linkeD", supported by U-Change, has an important role to play (see [https://www.bne.unibe.ch/for\\_students/index\\_eng.html](https://www.bne.unibe.ch/for_students/index_eng.html)). This lack of visibility of the University of Bern's efforts towards SD calls for a university-wide SD communications strategy that pools and strengthens the activities around SD and conveys these more prominently.

A large majority (94%) of students would support the incorporation and promotion of SD at university level. It is important for students that their university is more involved in this. To this end, it would also be important to reward the commitment of those who do get involved (e.g. through their voluntary work in the sustainability club or the numerous activities during the students' sustainability week). Ways should therefore be found to recognize and promote this commitment as an achievement. This could be done, for example, by promoting project-oriented learning and rewarding project work with ECTS, if this makes sense within the study programme. Another possibility would be to award a certificate for student commitment. Such models have already been successfully introduced at some European universities (Aramburuzabala et al. 2019, Leal Filho et al. 2016).

The study shows a difference between what students expect from teaching (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8) and what they expect from the university as a whole (Fig. 10). One-third of those surveyed felt that the University of Bern was doing a good or very good job of limiting negative impacts on the environment and society, another third considered this to be reasonably adequate, while 18% considered the activities of the University of Bern to be too few or far too few.

The general tenor is clearer where teaching is concerned. The majority of students (71% of participants) agreed or strongly agreed that SD should be included and promoted in all courses actively. A smaller group (15%) does not want the subject matter to be incorporated into all courses. A majority (60%) of the respondents considered the topic of SD to be little or not at all present in the courses, while 21% considered it to be moderately present. A small proportion (17%) felt that SD was present in the courses to a high or very high degree. This is a clear call for lecturers to pay more attention to the subject of SD in teaching and in course design. Through teaching, lecturers maintain direct contact with students and trigger changes in the way students think and act; since the University of Bern is clearly committed to SD (University of Bern 2013), continuing to promote the incorporation of SD into teaching is an obvious way to proceed. Our current students later carry their ideas, knowledge, and perspectives into professional life. But they are already active citizens as students and the future is in their hands. They are the ones who can help shape the future and transform it towards SD.

The survey contains another important message that has an impact beyond the university. It shows that many students (80%) would choose to work for an employer with a good social and environmental record, even if this meant earning 5% less than with another company. At a 15% reduction in salary, half of them would still choose to work for a company that has a good social and environmental record. This shows that the current generation is willing to forgo certain monetary incentives in the interests of SD. As a university, it is essential to support students in this, as they are the driving force of the future.

## 6 References

- Aramburuzabala, P., McIlrath, L., & Opazo, H. (Eds.). (2019). *Embedding Service Learning in European Higher Education: Developing a Culture of Civic Engagement*. Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Leal Filho, W., Shiel, C., & Paço, A. (2016). Implementing and operationalising integrative approaches to sustainability in higher education: The role of project-oriented learning. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 133:126-135.  
doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.05.079
- Michelsen, G., Grunenberg, H., Mader, C., & Barth, M. (2015). *Nachhaltigkeit bewegt die jüngere Generation*. Bad Homburg, Germany: VAS-Verlag.
- National Union of Students of the United Kingdom [NUS]. (2018). *Student Perceptions of Sustainability in Higher Education. An International Survey*. Retrieved 19 August 2020, from <https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/resources/student-perceptions-of-sustainability-in-higher-education-an-international-survey>
- Schmid, L., Zimmermann, A. B., Herweg, K., & Trechsel, L. J. (2019). *Monitoring-Bericht zuhanden des Vizerektorats Qualität: Integration der nachhaltigen Entwicklung in der Lehre an der Universität Bern, akademisches Jahr 2018/2019*. Bern, Switzerland: Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, with Bern Open Publishing (BOP).
- Universität Bern (2013). *Strategie 2021, Stratégie 2021, Strategy 2021*. Bern, Switzerland. Retrieved 15 April 2020, from [http://www.rektorat.unibe.ch/unibe/rektorat/unistab/content/e362/e357554/UniBern\\_Strategie.pdf](http://www.rektorat.unibe.ch/unibe/rektorat/unistab/content/e362/e357554/UniBern_Strategie.pdf)
- Universität Bern (2019). *Studierendenzahlen Herbstsemester 2019*. Retrieved 15 April 2020, from [https://www.unibe.ch/universitaet/portraet/zahlen\\_\\_und\\_\\_fakten/studierende/index\\_\\_ger.html](https://www.unibe.ch/universitaet/portraet/zahlen__und__fakten/studierende/index__ger.html)