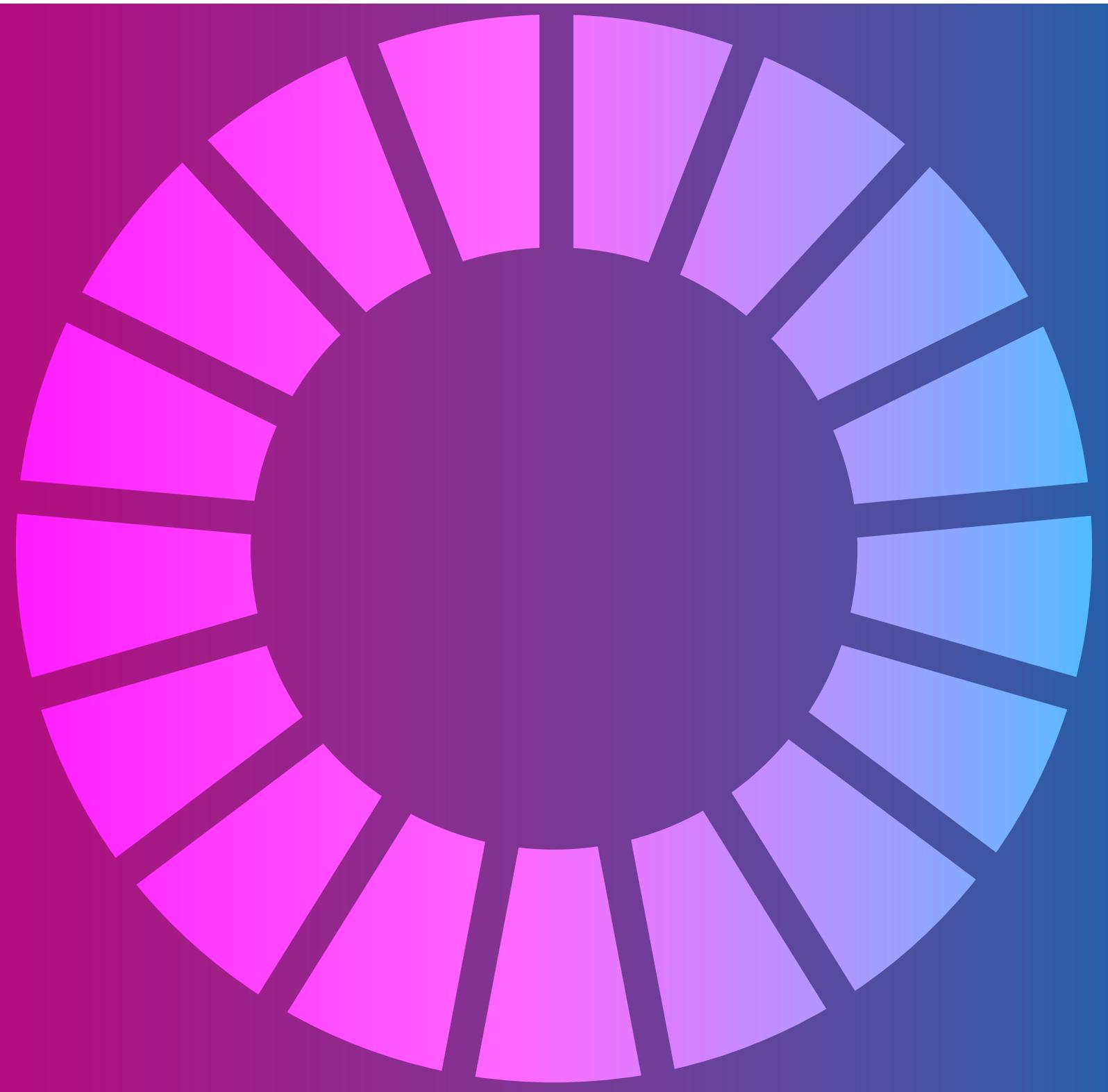


CONSULTANCY  
REPORT

# STUDENTS, SUSTAINABILITY, & STUDY CHOICES

MAY  
2021

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF  
2,000 PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS



STUDENT VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND AWARENESS OF SDGS

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN DECIDING WHICH UNIVERSITIES TO APPLY TO

STUDENT PRIORITIES REGARDING SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SDGS

VIEWS ABOUT THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN TERMS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

RESPONSE TO THE SURVEY BY 'HOME COUNTRY'  
AND INTENDED STUDY DESTINATION

CONTINENT	STUDENT 'HOME CONTINENT'	STUDENT INTENDED STUDY DESTINATION
Asia	38%	12%
Africa	20%	3%
Europe	17%	40%
North America	9%	32%
South America	4%	1%
Oceania	3%	7%

Base: 2,000 prospective students



**We so rarely hear from students themselves about exactly how much sustainability matters to them, and what they expect from their universities in terms of real-world impact.**

**It would be an understatement to say that there has been increased focus upon the way that universities improve the world around them over recent years. The public has perhaps never been more aware of the positive contributions made by universities than during the pandemic.**



This renewed public appreciation of such major contributions during the pandemic perhaps masks some of the more consistent, ongoing work delivered by institutions across the globe. Most of us in the sector have a strong appreciation for the diverse ways that universities have made the world a better place to live in. At THE we have long sought to celebrate these transformative impacts on societies and economies around the world.

Another trend in the HE landscape is increasing belief in the widely held truism that the sector is catering to an ever more sustainability-conscious and impact-minded student market. It does not take long to find headlines about Gen Z leading the pack in the sustainable development charge. Despite this, we rarely hear from students about how much sustainability matters to them and what they expect from universities in terms of real-world impact.

I am therefore delighted to present this fascinating THE Consultancy report, that focuses upon findings from a survey of 2,000 prospective international students, with respondents sourced from the Student Pulse panel, a new panel of prospective students from across the world. It is great to see the findings generated by this panel, and I'm excited to see its future uses. Our team asked prospective students about sustainability, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and how these views influence their study choices.

I am confident that this report contributes significantly to our understanding of student views about institutional impact and sustainability, as well as how these factors fit into student decision making. In giving volume to the student voice about such crucial topics, the research sheds new light onto stimulating yet well-worn ground. I am sure you will find the findings as interesting as I do.

**Phil Baty**  
CHIEF KNOWLEDGE OFFICER  
TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION

**80%** **69%**

of prospective students agreed that it is important for them to live their lives in a way that is consistent with being a sustainable citizen.

**OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS SAY THAT FOR THEIR FUTURE CAREER PROSPECTS IT WILL BE IMPORTANT FOR THEM TO DEMONSTRATE THEY HAVE DEVELOPED INTO A SUSTAINABILITY-MINDED CITIZEN.**

**75%**

of prospective students had heard of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**More than half of students had assessed potential institutions' commitment to diversity and inclusion when deciding where to study (57%).**

**47% OF STUDENTS ASSESSED IF UNIVERSITIES EXHIBIT ETHICAL CONDUCT AND 46% ASSESSED WHETHER THEY ARE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY WHEN DECIDING WHERE TO STUDY.**

For 9% of prospective students a university's commitment to, and reputation for, sustainability is the most important factor in deciding where to study.

**79%**

**OF STUDENTS BELIEVE THAT UNIVERSITIES HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN ACHIEVING THE SDGS.**

On average the top three priority SDGs for prospective students were: Quality Education (SDG 4), Climate Action (SDG 13) and Zero Hunger (SDG 2).

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

Universities are rightly proud of their positive impact at a local and global level and are increasingly vocal about these successes. Communicating the work they do regarding sustainability may become an important pillar of student recruitment going forward.

The work that universities do to tackle the world's biggest challenges, from poverty and gender inequality to the climate crisis, are a cornerstone of the sector and the way that it is perceived by outside audiences. It is clear that universities have made a real impact in their communities and around the world.

The socially conscious nature of Gen Z and the modern student has long been something that has been taken as a fact by organisations that work with these individuals as well as much of the media. The Times Higher Education Consultancy team recently conducted a survey of 2,000 prospective international students from their Student Pulse panel in order to explore how important sustainability actually is from a student perspective.

Our research demonstrates just how central sustainability is to students. Eight in ten students agreed that it is important for them to live their lives in a way that is consistent with being a sustainable citizen (80%). Most students also believed it was important for their future career prospects to demonstrate to employers that during their time at university they developed into a sustainability-minded citizen (69%).

75% of students were aware of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), breaking down to 29% who were aware with limited knowledge, 28% who were aware and had some knowledge and 18% who claimed to have a good level of knowledge about them. Having at least some knowledge of the SDGs was more common among current undergraduate and postgraduate students (48%) than among current high school students (40%), as well as among prospective international students (47%) than those planning to study domestically (35%).



**Students believed it was important for their career prospects to demonstrate to employers that while at university they developed into a sustainability-minded citizen (69%).**

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?



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)?



Base= all (2,000)

## THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN DECIDING WHICH UNIVERSITIES TO APPLY TO

Our research suggests that the sustainable credentials of universities will feature as one of the core factors that prospective students use when deciding where to study. As part of our survey, prospective students ranked various factors (including the quality of teaching, research and graduate prospects) in terms of how important they are when deciding where to study.

Unsurprisingly, an institution's teaching quality (average rank of 5.4, with higher figures reflecting greater importance) came out as the most important factor for students. Despite this, the importance of sustainability (average rank of 3.6) was clear: it was considered by students to be of similar importance to an institution's ranking in league tables (average rank of 3.7) and was higher in importance than the location of the university (average rank of 3.3) when deciding where to study. Its position among such traditionally pivotal factors that inform study choices underlines its importance to current and future generations of socially conscious students.

These findings are reinforced when considering student choice of the most important factor to decide where to study. 9% of respondents said that sustainability was the most important factor in determining their choice of institution, level with their employability prospects (also 9%) and the university's location (8%).

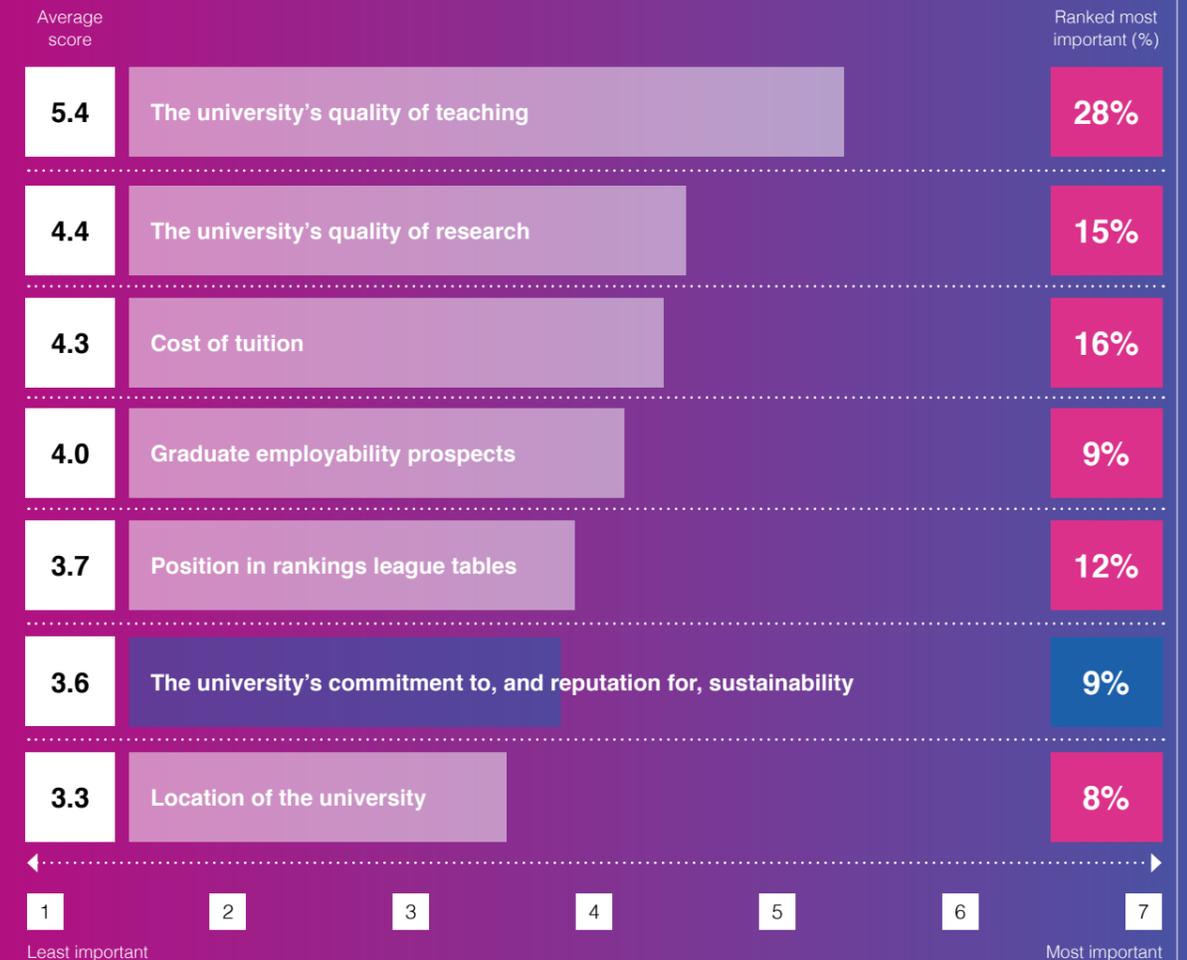
Students demonstrated the importance of sustainable development when describing the actions that they had taken to assess these credentials when deciding where to study. More than half of prospective students had assessed the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion (57%) and looked at THE's Impact Rankings (56%) while making study choices. Just under half had assessed if universities exhibit ethical conduct (47%) and if they were environmentally friendly (46%), while over a third had assessed their public commitment to the SDGs (36%).

Students care about sustainability and they care about their institution's commitment to it as well. Universities that wish to continue attracting the best students would be well advised to not only consider their commitment to sustainability, but also how they communicate these values to prospective students. ■



**Sustainability was noted as being more important than location for prospective students when deciding where to study.**

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 (2,000)

## STUDENT PRIORITIES REGARDING SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SDGs

Student priorities in terms of sustainability are widespread, although they value quality education (SDG 4), climate action (SDG 13) and no hunger (SDG 2) most of all.

We asked prospective students to pick their top three most important SDGs, and, reflecting the breadth of the challenges facing the world, students demonstrated that they value each of the UN's SDGs at least to some extent. Seven of the SDGs were picked in the top three by at least 20% of students, highlighting the variety of sustainability related issues that motivate students.

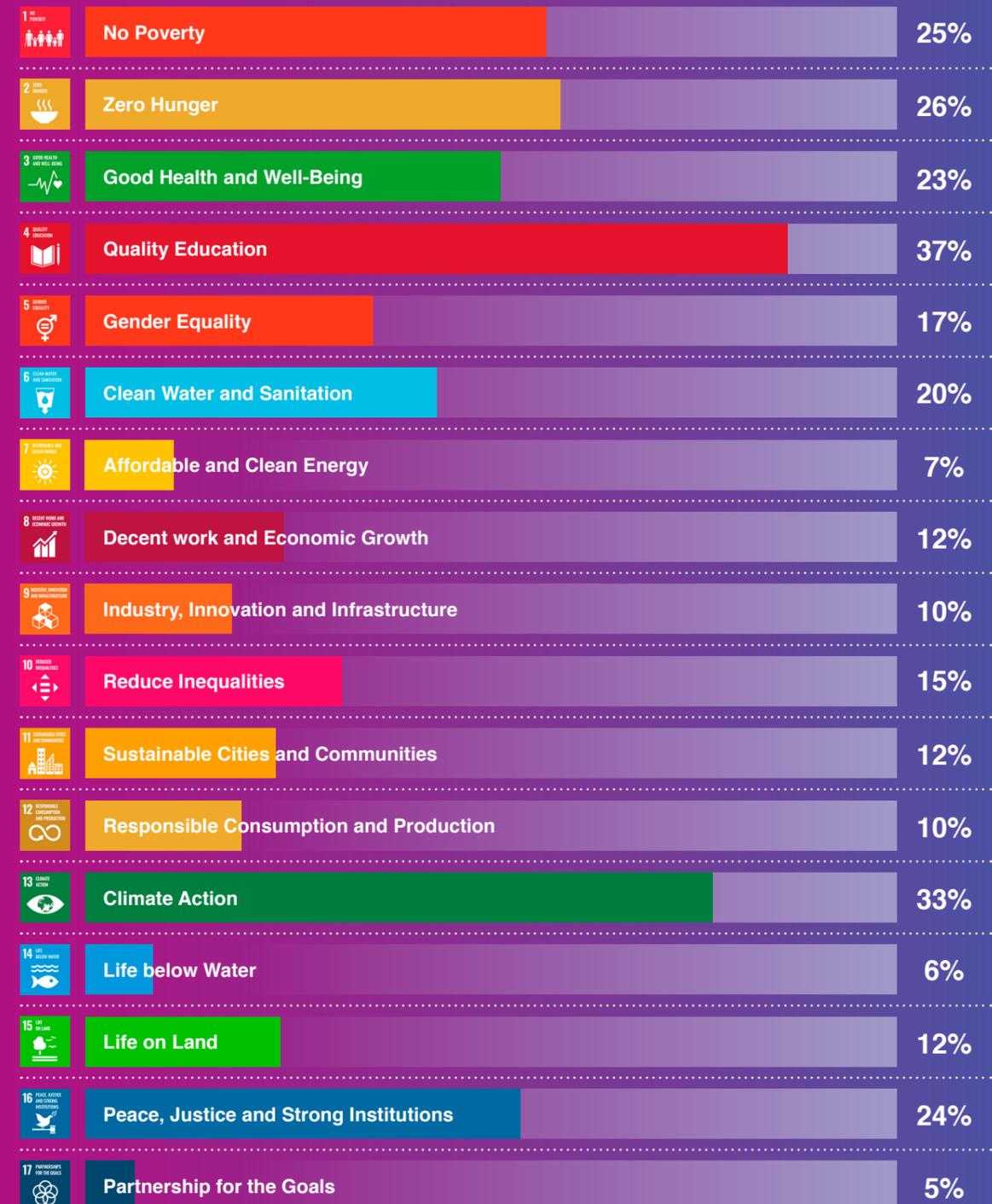
The most commonly prioritised SDG for students was Quality Education (SDG 4: 37%), while Climate Action (SDG 13: 33%) and Zero Hunger (SDG 2: 26%) rounded out the top 3 priorities for students. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16: 24%) and Good Health and Well-Being (23%) were also commonly prioritised by students.

There was some regional variation in the priority of SDGs registered by prospective students. While key SDGs tended to be shared across all regions, those that made the top three in some continents differed depending on where the student was from. Zero Hunger (SDG 2) made the top 3 among North American (29%) and Asian (25%) students, while No Poverty (SDG 1) was in the top 3 for South American (33%) and Oceanian (30%) students, and Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) placed in the top 3 among European (24%) students. African students demonstrated perhaps the most unique priorities, with Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3: 34%) and Peace and Justice (SDG 16: 31%) appearing in the top 3 priority SDGs for these students. ■



The most commonly prioritised SDG for students was Quality Education (SDG 4: 37%), while Climate Action (SDG 13: 33%) and Zero Hunger (SDG 2: 26%) rounded out the top three priorities for students.

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



Base= all (2,000)

## VIEWS ABOUT THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN TERMS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**Most students feel that universities have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs and believe that universities should foster the ethic of sustainability among their students.**

Four in five students indicated that they believe that universities have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs (79%). The same proportion of students agreed that it is important to them that they are able to live their day-to-day lives in a way that is consistent with the goals of sustainability (80%). Given the importance of sustainability for many students, the need for universities to have an impact on the sustainable development of their localities and the world seems clear, and the ability to demonstrate this is also key.

Students also feel that their universities have an obligation to foster an ethic of sustainability in their student body. Four in five students agreed that 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 (82%).

Finally, our research shows that a majority of students see sustainability and career prospects as inextricably linked. Around eight in ten students agreed that it is important for their future career prospects that they can demonstrate to employers that during their time at university they have developed into a sustainable citizen (69%).

These findings provide a clear indication of the level to which students feel that sustainable practices and development are key to the higher education landscape. ■



**Given the importance of sustainability for many students, the need for universities to have an impact on the sustainable development of their localities and the world seems clear, and the ability to demonstrate this is also key.**

**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?**

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

Overall agreement (%)



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



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



Base= all (2,000)

1 (Strongly disagree) 2 3 4 5 (Strongly agree)

# CONCLUSIONS: STUDENTS, SUSTAINABILITY, AND STUDY CHOICES

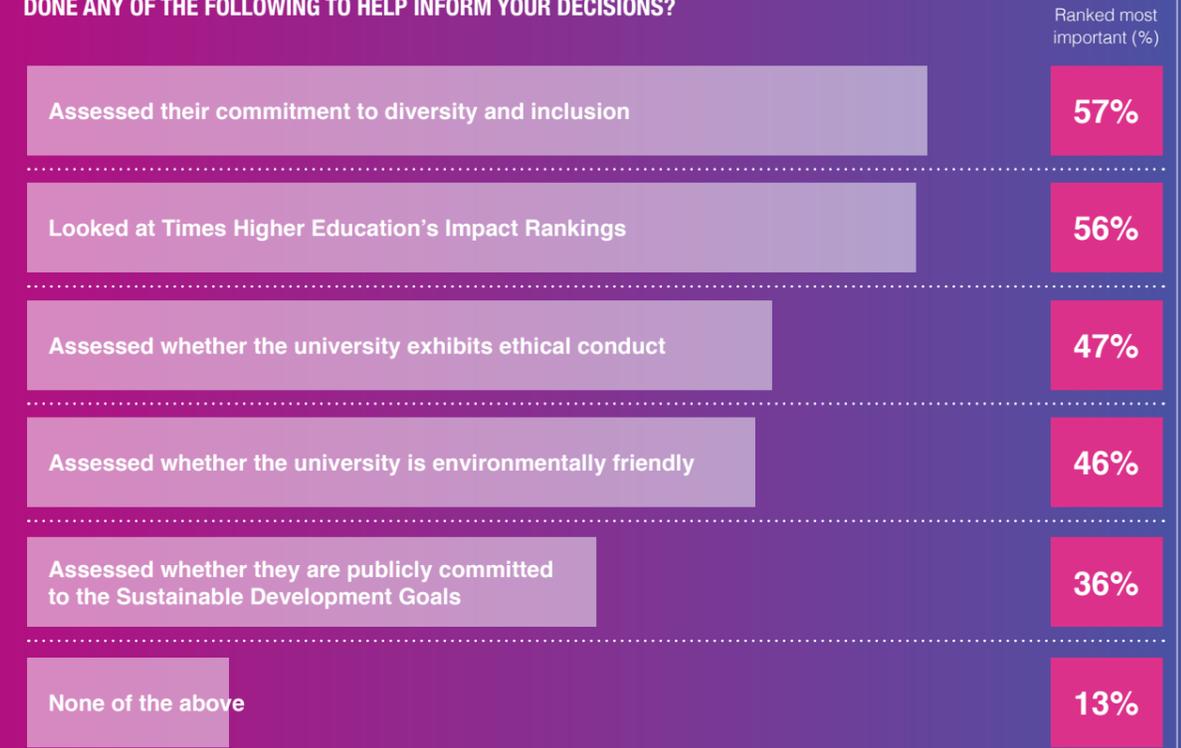
Our findings, generated via THE Student Pulse, provide a vital evidence base for the importance of sustainability to the process of international student decision making. 9% of prospective students stated that sustainability was the most important factor in determining their choice of institution, putting it level in their priorities with traditionally important factors such as employability prospects (also 9%) and the university's location (8%).

Students displayed a wide variety of SDGs that they saw as important, with education, climate action and food security ranking as the SDGs that resonate most closely with international students' values and ethical priorities. Universities and governments that wish to speak to student priorities would be well advised to consider the work that they do in these areas as key ways to speak to an increasingly sustainability-conscious student market. This is only bolstered by the strength of feeling among students regarding their belief that universities have an important role to play in delivering on the UN Goals.

Students also revealed that they often use sustainability as a factor when researching which universities to apply to. More than half of prospective international students assessed institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion (56%) and looked at the THE Impact Rankings (56%, albeit of a THE Student audience). Approaching half also assessed if the university exhibits ethical conduct (47%) and assessed whether it is environmentally friendly (46%), and more than a third assessed their public commitment to the SDGs (36%).

One key conclusion from our research with students is that students will form an increasingly key stakeholder group in all sustainable work for universities going forwards. As students come to demand more from their institutions in this regard, it will be important for universities to become more and more confident about communicating these achievements to prospective students. Our findings clearly demonstrate an appetite for information about SDG related activity in the international student community. ■

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



Base= all (2,000)

# Put your finger on the pulse

## Student Pulse: Unparalleled access to the international student community

THE Student Pulse represents an unrivalled research panel made up of students and prospective students from across the globe. Our panel provides unique access to a truly international research resource.

### Panel services tailored to your needs

The panel is managed by our experienced consultancy team, who offer bespoke services based upon the research needs of our clients. The consultancy team are experts in the field of Higher Education and student focused research, and their guidance, support and expertise are harnessed in all THE Student Pulse services.

### A global perspective

Our fast-expanding panel draws upon the experiences of students from every corner of the globe and from every level of the higher education experience. From Iceland to Tuvalu, and from current high school students to postgraduates, the composition of our panel means that we can cater to every requirement.

**THE STUDENT  
PULSE**

To learn more about our panel, or to discuss your bespoke research requirements, please contact the team on [consultancy@timeshighereducation.com](mailto:consultancy@timeshighereducation.com)

SUSTAINABILITY, AND STUDY CHOICES

CONTACTS

## METHODOLOGY

- Online survey of 2,000 prospective international students.
- Drawn from the THE Student Pulse panel, which is composed of users of the THE Student website or attendees at THE Student events.
- Survey of individuals from more than 130 different countries applying to more than 100 different countries around the world.
- Fieldwork conducted between 11th March and 20th March 2021.
- Survey administered, conducted and analysed by the THE Consultancy team.

## THE CONSULTANCY

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.

In 2021 we have also developed THE Student Pulse, 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.

Elizabeth Shepherd,  
Managing Director, THE Consultancy services

Mark Tweddle,  
Senior Higher Education Consultant

Lim Mei Mei  
Senior Higher Education Consultant

Sam Whittaker  
Higher Education Consultant

[consultancy@timeshighereducation.com](mailto:consultancy@timeshighereducation.com)

