

# Employer attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

Executive summary: Employers  
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# 1. Executive summary

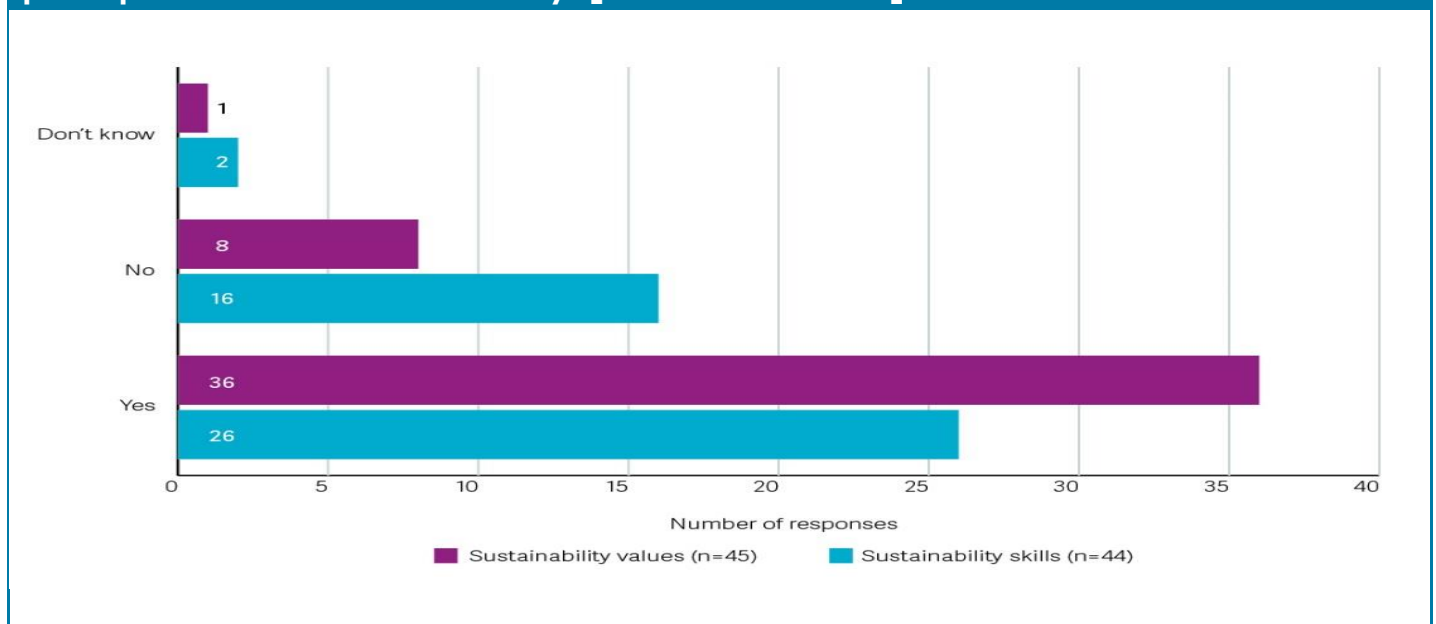
## 2. Employer attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development

Research into employers' attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development (SD) was conducted alongside the longitudinal student-facing research in 2014. The study, focused on experience of recent graduates, aimed to:

- understand employers' understanding of, and attitudes towards, sustainability issues;
- understand levels of identification of skills needs around sustainable development across sectors and varying characteristics;
- explore how and why skills for sustainability are relevant for organisational leaders, and for those involved in recruitment of recent graduates;
- gain insight into gaps in skills for sustainable development amongst recent graduates entering employment;
- identify the role that higher education can play in addressing skills gaps among graduates, but also in working with employers to identify skills needs and opportunities for skills development.

The research was conducted through an online survey promoted by a range of organisations including The Aldersgate Group, Change Agents UK and The Confederation of British Industry (CBI). A total of 79 responses were received from employers, of these 50 held a senior leadership role and 29 were involved in the recruitment of recent graduates.

**Figure 2.1 | Has your organisation identified the specific skills and values needed to participate in a sustainable economy? [SENIOR LEADERS]**



### 2.2 Key findings

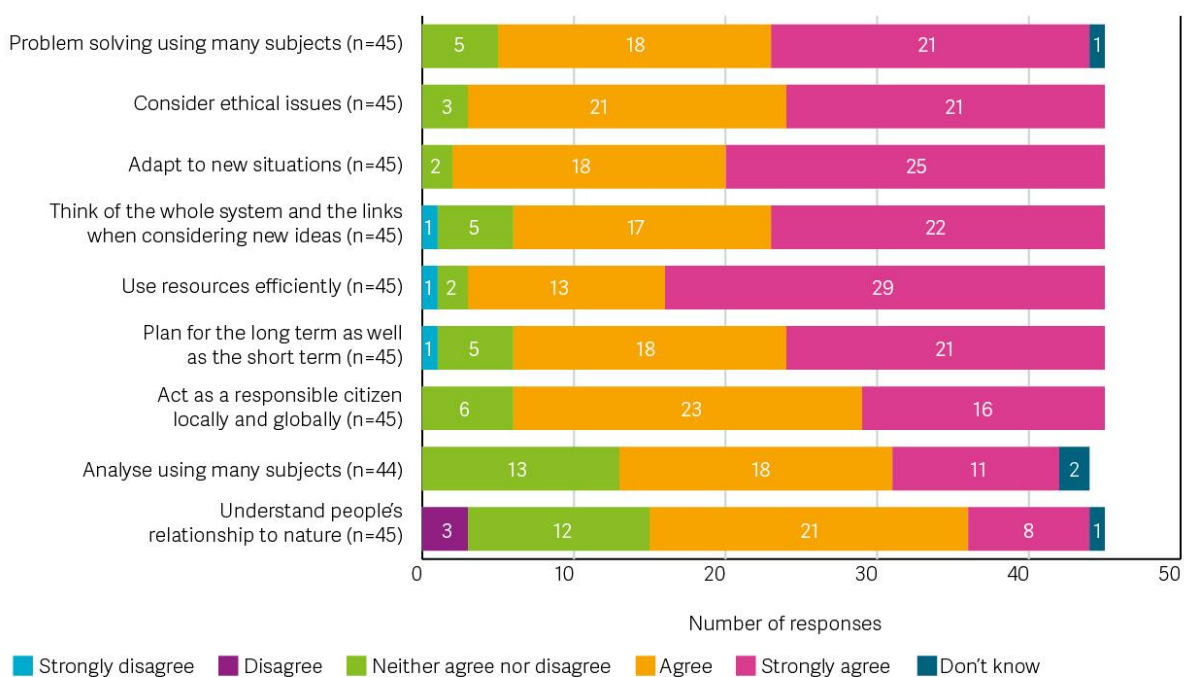
Respondents reflected a range of positions on a spectrum of engagement with sustainable development, with the majority making up the middle ground between pioneering early adopters and laggards. Some respondents identified uncertainties around the commercial benefits of acting on responsibilities to the environment and across the supply chain.

The research revealed a focus on identification and incorporation of sustainability values within organisational strategy and recruitment practices, rather than the skills needed by their organisation in order to deliver against these values. Although sample sizes are small, larger organisations appear more likely to report incorporation of sustainability values within their business strategies; however no differences were seen when looking at skills for sustainable development

Overall, employers believed the range of skills for sustainability to be important when considering the recruitment of recent graduates. Matching the situation seen in the accompanying student-facing research, employer respondents showed a similar lack of relevance of the ability to understand people’s relationship to nature potentially stemming from an ongoing separation of humans and nature across society as a whole<sup>1</sup>.

The ranking of sustainability skills in terms of their importance for their organisation revealed a focus on resource efficiency rather than sustainability as a complete concept.

**Figure 2.3 | To what extent do you agree or disagree that recruiting recent graduates with the following skills would enable your organisation to participate in a sustainable economy? [SENIOR LEADERS]**



## 2.4 Key findings

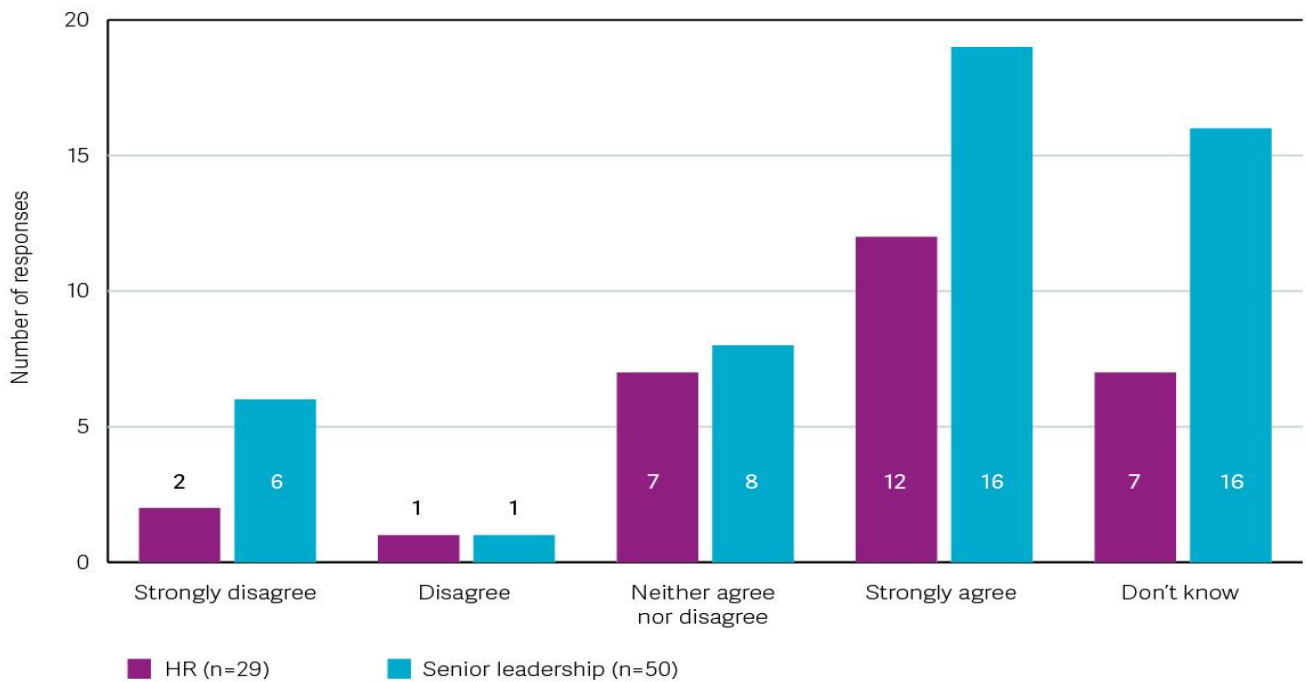
The majority of respondents are at least reasonably confident their organisation has the skills required to participate in a sustainable economy, however there are some concerns with one in five organisational leaders identifying significant skills gaps.

Despite this, on the whole respondents are satisfied with the skills demonstrated by recent graduates, although there are potential improvements to be made in terms of business and customer awareness. Respondents also exhibited uncertainty over recent graduates’ ability to understand people’s relationship to nature however results seen elsewhere show that this is likely to be part of a wider systemic issue.

Two-thirds of respondents are supportive of an obligation to develop students’ social and environmental skills during their time in higher education.

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian (accessed March 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/business-humanity-nature-reductionist-darwin>

**Figure 2.5 | To what extent do you agree with the following statement: universities/colleges should be obliged to develop students' social and environmental skills as part of their courses?**



## Recommendations

The focus on sustainability as a value demonstrates a need for organisations, along with business support bodies, to focus on identifying and developing the skills needed to deliver on these values, and achieve full participation in a sustainable economy.

This process should include a strong communication of sustainability in its fullest definition, aiding organisations to move beyond a concentration on resource efficiency.

Drawing on the strong support for developing graduates with social and environmental skills among business leaders, there is a role for organisations to engage with higher education to both provide opportunities for skills development for students, but also in identifying the role business can play in achieving sustainability.

## **2. This summary forms part of a series of short reports. Further detail on different aspects of the research can be found at:**

Executive summary: Student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

Summary 1: Existing skills – the influence of further education

Summary 2: Understanding attitudes and behaviours for sustainable development during higher education

Summary 3: Learning and using skills for sustainable development during higher education

Summary 4: Sustainability, skills and employability

Appendix 1: Methodology

Appendix 2: Desk review – student attitudes towards, and skills for sustainable development

Appendix 3: Desk review – employer attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development

Appendix 4: Student surveys

Appendix 5: Employer survey

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