



Aston SU Sustainability skills survey report

A summary of Aston students' opinions about sustainability

Report author: Aryaan Awais (Aston Student)

First draft created on 27th September 2023

SUMMARY REPORT CONTENTS

Section	Item of report	Page ##
1.	Executive Summary	3
2.	Introduction	4
2.1.	NUS and Sustainability	
2.2.	Aston SU and Sustainability	
3	Methodology and Results	5
3.1.	Survey comparison process	
3.2.	Potential comparison of survey questions	7
3.3.	Individual Reviews of Sustainability Skills Surveys	8
3.3.1.	2020 – 2021 data collection	
3.3.2.	2022 – 2023 data collection	12
3.4.	Spotlight Comparison: Annual survey data sets	16
4.	Conclusion	17
5.	Appendices	18
5.1.	APPENDIX A: Surveyed Aston student enrolment data	
5.2.	APPENDIX B: Place of study characteristics data	19
5.3.	APPENDIX C: Importance of sustainability in careers data	21

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Union of Students (NUS) recently surveyed a large cohort of students across a range of UK universities on their opinions to sustainability skills, including action and goals. Aston Students' Union (SU) is one of the UK universities asked in the cohort, and a subset of the survey results were answered from Aston University students. Two previous surveys of year ranges 2020-2021 and 2022-2023 were collected to process and analyse. Charts represented the survey data and were remastered for clarity.

Due to both surveys having different questions asked, a process was created to determine similar questions for analysis in terms of data and question format. Questions analysed were exclusive to the total survey count of only Aston students in each report.

From the remaining survey questions analysed, it was shown that in a length of two years:

- A decline in attendance in their place of study was found, but the most popular course to choose was Business and Administrative Studies, followed by Social Studies. These courses may align with the goal of expanding social skills.
- No change in opinion was found when asked about the end goals of each Aston student. Their importance was mostly placed on finding a stable job with a good salary, with emphasis on learning skills such as planning, communication and systems interaction.
- The best method of employing these skills is through attaining work experience or placements to boost opportunities.
- A substantial rise in attitude and opinion towards sustainability was found. Though the attitudes in personal contribution to sustainability remained the same for this generation, previous generations are expected to have similar responsibilities and upskill their courses, as well as actively promoting sustainability in their establishments.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. NUS & Sustainability

The National Union of Students UK (NUS) is an organisation dedicated to advocating student life at universities around the UK, improving aspects through campaigns such as free transportation, curbing living costs in student flats and the implementation of the youth demographic in election voting ^[1].

A subset of these campaigns resonates around the idea of sustainable development. Recently, the NUS has surveyed 413 students' views on this topic and found that more than 80% of UK students prefer their universities to promote or act on sustainability goals ^[2]. Other aspects reported on the survey involve social and environmental factors based on salaries, teaching courses, ethical responsibility and limiting negative externalities ^[2].

This report will compare the results of two sets of survey data, with the respective questionnaire based around these topics. Each key point will be summarised in visual data representative of NUS, along with comments on the survey comparison's limitations.

2.2. Aston SU and sustainability

Aston University's Student Union (SU) is an example of a students' Union that has aligned their goals with acting on sustainability, earning the Green Impact Students' Union (GISU) award for two consecutive years as awarded by the NUS ^[3]. The GISU award is considered proof of a university actively acting on the issues such as climate justice and social reform through team-based projects and advocacy campaigns ^[4].

Within Aston SU, the students' attitudes to these issues may change annually depending on external factors. This report will concentrate on the difference of these students' attitudes from a two-year gap on the survey data provided. The comparison will determine if sustainability is a continuing key thought among Aston students, thus providing more detail to NUS on interest in their campaign.

[1] "Campaigns," NUS UK, <https://www.nus.org.uk/campaigns> (accessed Sep. 25, 2023).

[2] "NUS Sustainability Skills Survey Results," The Students Union at UWE News RSS, <https://www.thestudentsunion.co.uk/news/article/6013/NUS-Sustainability-Skills-Survey-Results/> (accessed Sep. 25, 2023).

[3] "Sustainability," Aston SU, https://www.astonsu.com/your_su/sustainability/ (accessed Sep. 25, 2023).

[4] "Green Impact Students' Unions award - How it works," Green Impact Students Organising for Sustainability, <http://greenimpact.nus.org.uk/find-out-more-students-unions/> (accessed Sep. 25, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

3.1. Survey comparison process

These surveys assessed student attitudes to sustainability. Namely development issues, definitions, learning aspirations and employment prospects based on social and environmental topics. Though summarised and provided [here](#) annually, visual charts of the survey data were privately received.

The following survey data sets of these year ranges were collected:

- *Sustainability Skills Survey 2020 – 2021* (n = 8450 students, 624 Aston Students)
- *Sustainability Skills Survey 2022 – 2023* (n = 10385 students, 281 Aston Students)

The report aims to compare, represent and summarise the difference of Aston Students' attitudes to sustainability over a two-year gap. *Figure 1* below is the process to show how the data was transformed and compared:

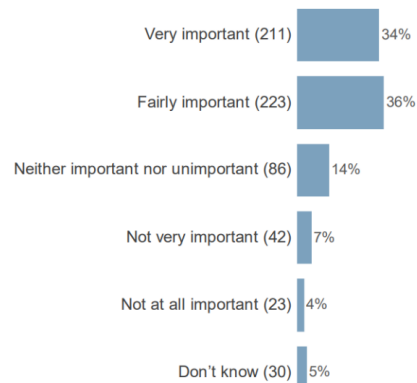
STAGE 1: Data Retention

- Visual charts of the survey data were received.
- Each question's survey results were logged in a spreadsheet, noting the similarities and differences in both question and data format.

STAGE 2: Data Representation

- All survey chart data in the spreadsheet have been remastered, with simplified titles and axes for visual clarity.
- Sum totals of each question's survey data were collected.

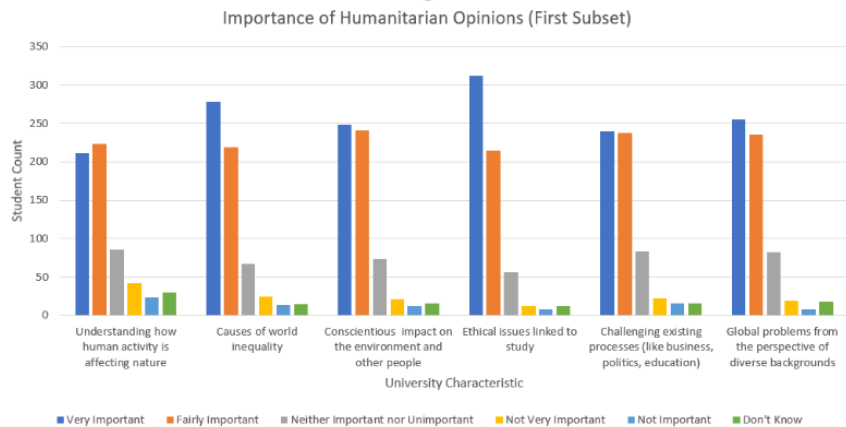
And how important to you individually that you learn these skills, attributes and knowledge during your time at your current place of study or apprenticeship?
Please select one for each option (Understanding how human activity is affecting nature)



HUMANITARIAN OPINIONS (Page 32 - 42)						
RATING SCALE	Understanding how human activity is affecting nature	Causes of world inequality	Conscientious impact on the environment and other people	Ethical issues linked to study	Challenging existing processes (like business, politics, education)	Global problems from the perspective of diverse backgrounds
Very Important	211	278	249	312	240	255
Fairly Important	223	219	241	215	238	235
Neither Important nor Unimportant	86	67	74	56	83	82
Not Very Important	42	24	21	13	22	19
Not Important	23	14	12	8	16	8
Don't Know	30	15	16	12	16	18
TOTAL COUNT	615	617	613	616	615	617

STAGE 3: Data Comparison I

- Survey questions of sum $n \geq 624$ in the 2020 - 2021 collection was excluded.
- Survey questions of sum $n \geq 281$ in the 2022 - 2023 collection was excluded.
- These did not represent Aston Students exclusively.
- Survey questions were only compared if the question format was the same.
- One-off questions will be mentioned, but not compared.



STAGE 4: Data Visualisation

- Original graphics were created to represent the data visually.
- Summaries are numerically provided.
- Remastered graphs are provided in the appendix.



STAGE 5: Data Comparison II

- A brief statement to determine the shift in attitudes from a comparison of the survey question.

**Establishment's impact
on sustainability**



FIGURE 1: Illustrated process of the survey data transformed and represented.

3.2. Potential comparison of survey questions

More than 40 different questions were proposed between the two surveys, with most of these questions overlapping each other. Table 1 below details the breakdown of the questions' topics asked in the survey, as well as questions excluded with a reason of denial:

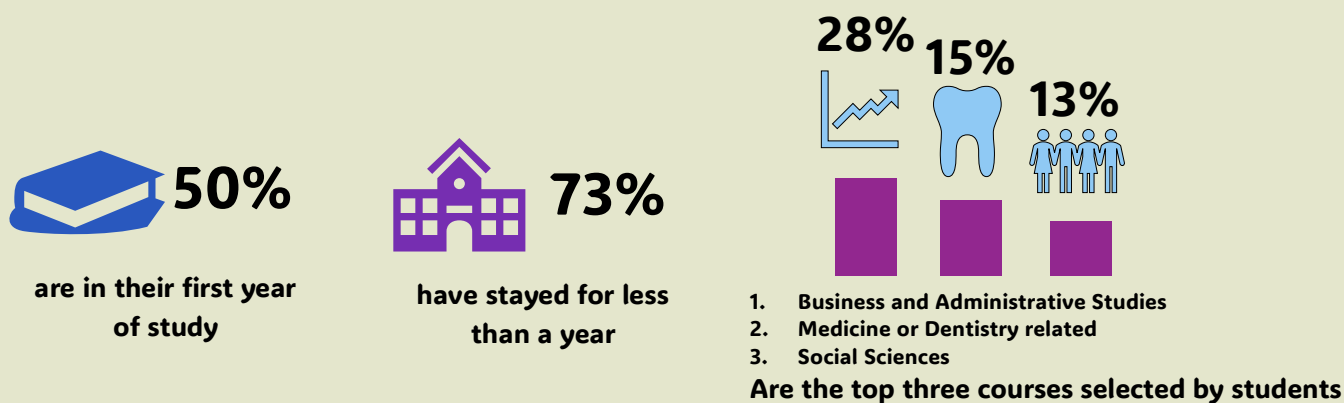
TABLE 1: Question similarities and differences between the two survey data sets

Survey Question (For Comparison)	Format	Available in survey?		Reason of denial
		2020 – 2021	2022 – 2023	
Type of course taken?	Choice-based			Missing Axes
Year of study?	Choice-Based			
Academic Years passed?	Choice-based			
Degree course of study?	Choice-based			
Region/Country working in?	Choice-based			Missing Data
Level and area of Apprenticeship?	Choice-based			Missing Data
Importance of university characteristics?	5-point Likert scale			
Reasons for taking the course	Choice-based			Over total Aston count
Opinion on how course may impact with sustainability goals	Qualitative response			Exclusive to one data collection
Clubs or societies joined?	Choice-based			Exclusive to one data set
Motivation to join club or society?	Choice-based			Exclusive to one data set
Accessibility on field trips	5-point Likert scale			Exclusive to one data set
Impact of skills, knowledge and attributes	Choice-based			Missing Axes
Importance of social and environmental issues in study	5-point Likert scale			
Course and apprenticeship integration methods for sustainability	5-Point Likert scale			
Opinions on learning development for sustainability	5-Point Likert scale			Exclusive to one data set
Importance of social and environmental issues to future employers?	5-Point Likert scale			
Importance of employment characteristics in sustainability careers	5-Point Likert scale			
Choice of employment situations	Two choices			Missing Axes
Plans after finishing course study?	Choice-based			Over total Aston count
Agreement of actions taken for sustainability	5-Point Likert scale			
Definition of “Sustainable Development” and reasons for learning it	Qualitative response			Not quantitative data for analysis
Issues covered in teaching and the experiences located in education	Choice-based			Over total Aston count
Issues affected daily lifestyle?	Qualitative response			Not quantitative data for analysis
Opinions of issues covered in learning experiences?	Choice-based			Exclusive to one data set
Personal influence on sustainability?	Choice-based			
Gender, ethnicity and (Inter)national student?	Choice-based			Not relevant

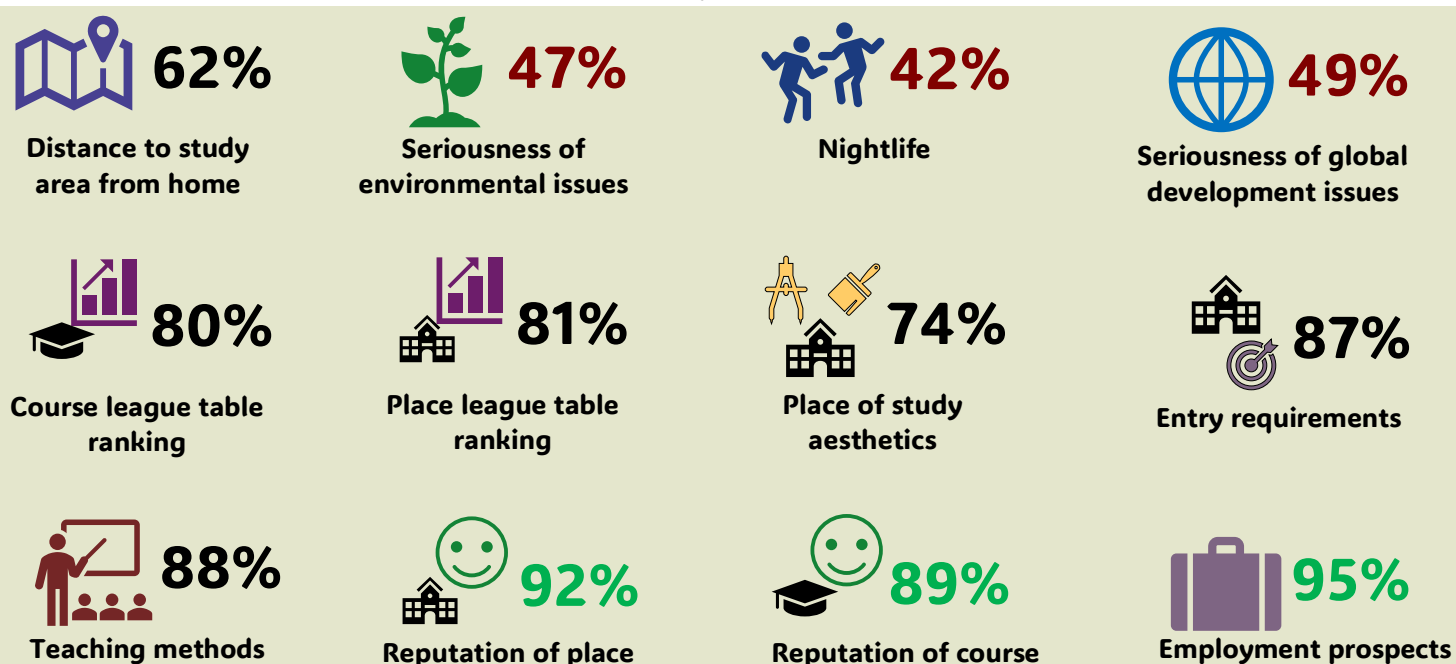
3.3. Individual reviews of sustainability skills surveys

3.3.1. 2020 – 2021 DATA COLLECTION

In each question, from the selection of 624 Aston students surveyed:



In terms of how important the place of study's characteristics is:



Surveyed students report that:

- Employment prospects
- Reputation of course
- Reputation of place

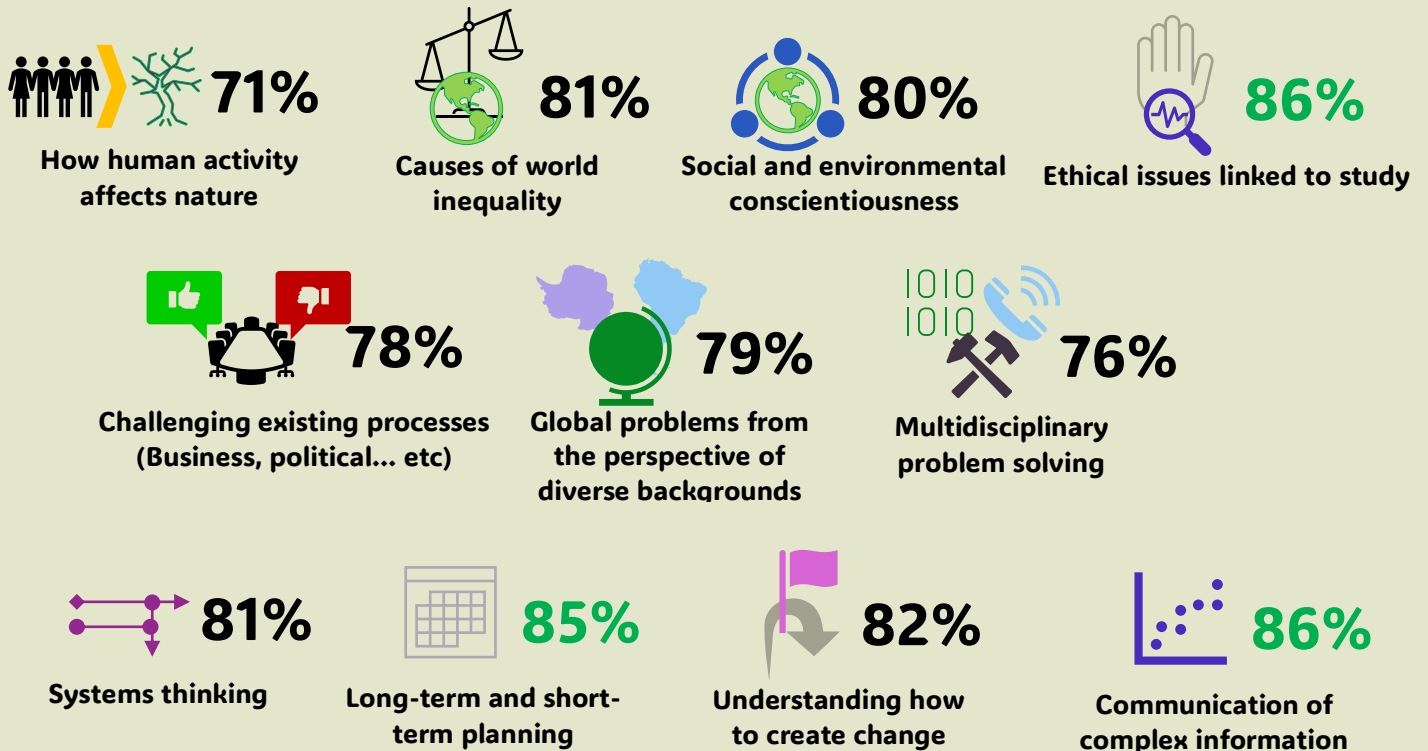
Were deemed (very) important when choosing a place to study.

Whereas:

- Seriousness of global development issues
- Seriousness of environmental issues
- Nightlife

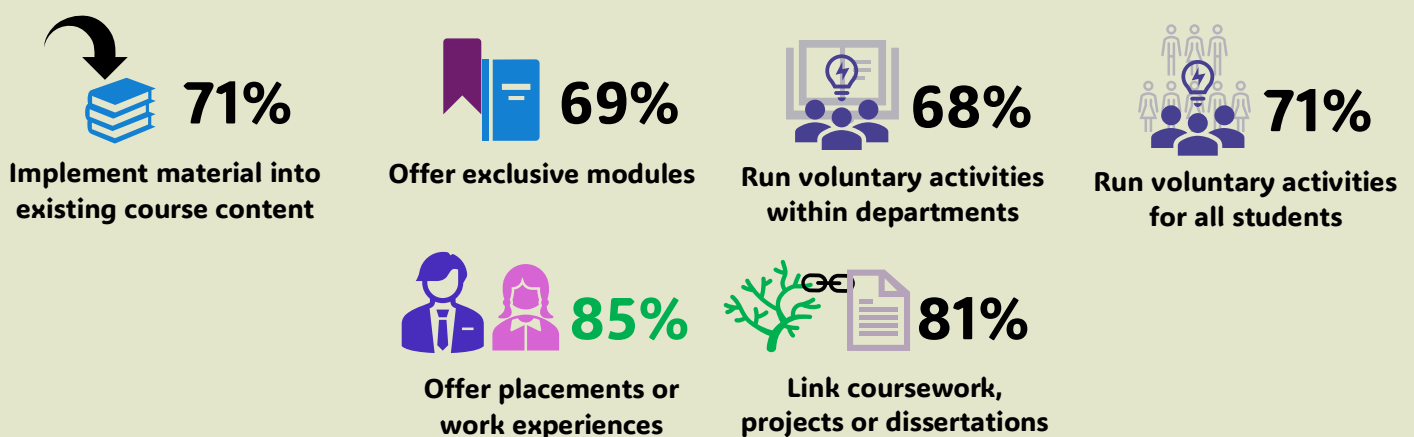
Were deemed (very) unimportant when choosing a place to study.

In terms of how important learning skills for how social and environmental issues appear in their studies:



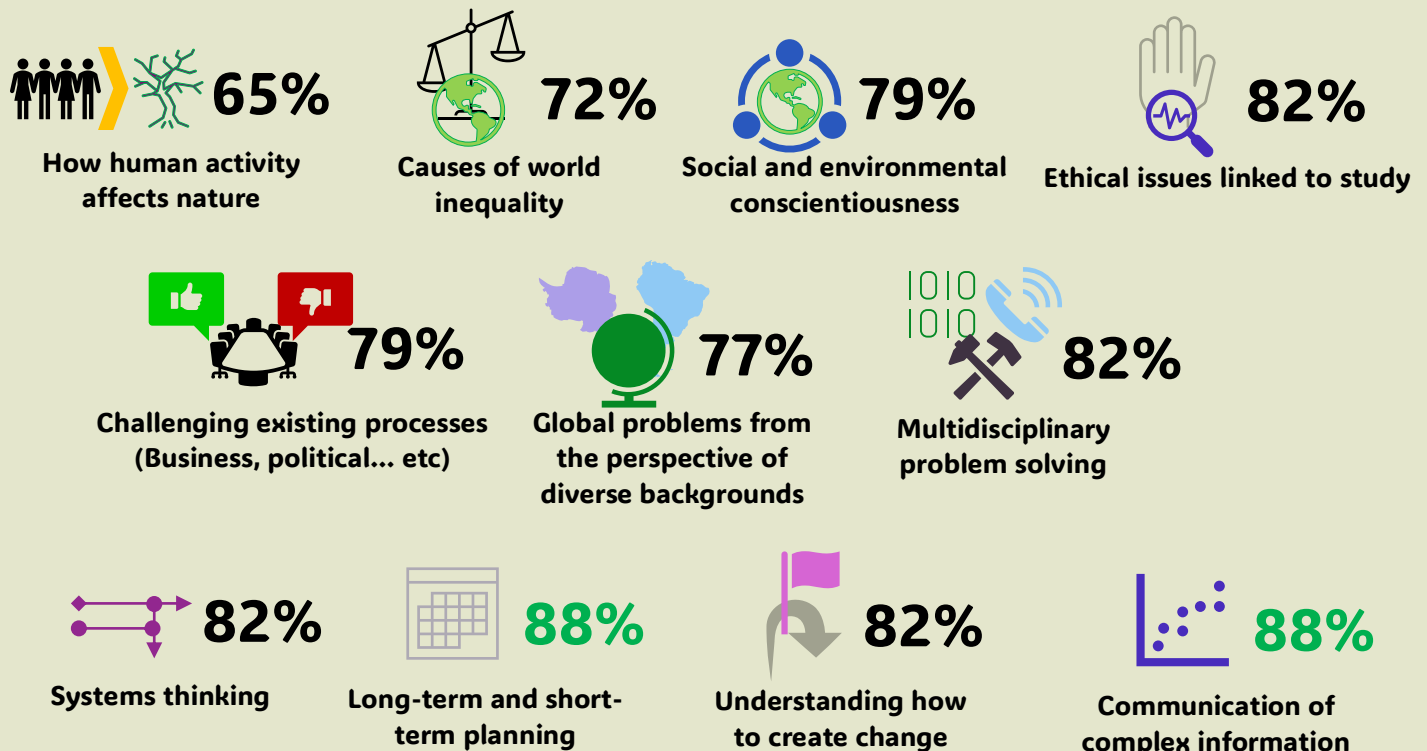
The most important skills, attributes and knowledge to solving social and environmental problems are planning in the long term, as well as the short term, communicating complex technical information and knowing ethics in studies.

In terms of integrating these skills into their course or apprenticeship, these methods are surveyed:



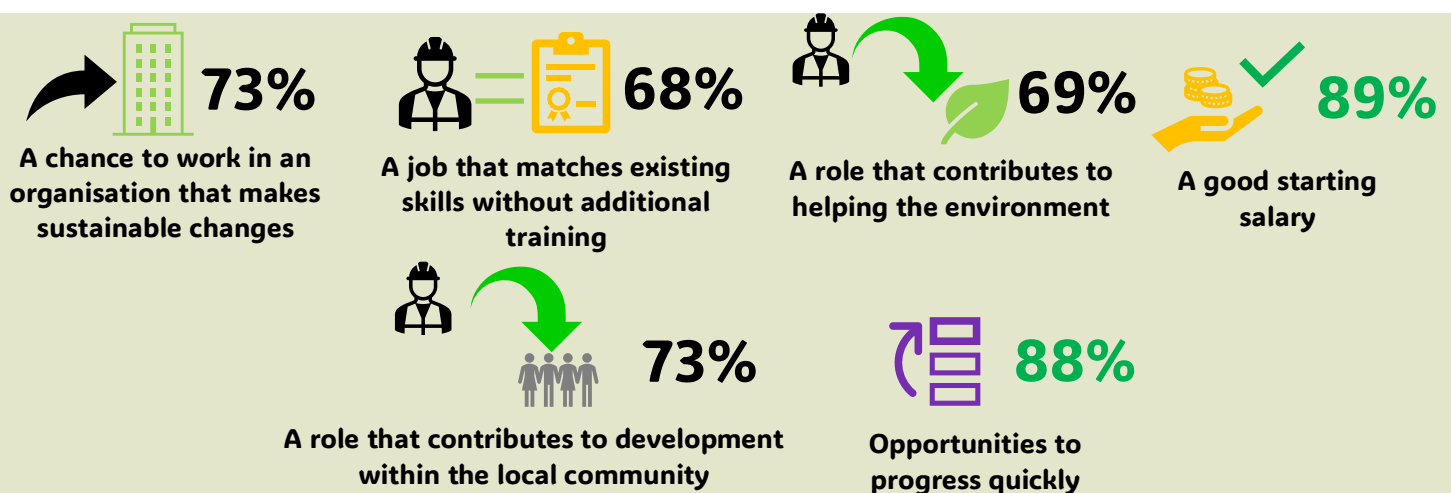
Offering placements or work experiences is the most favoured approach when understanding these issues.

In terms of how important these skills and attributes are to surveyed students' future employers:



Skills such as planning in the long term, as well as short term, as well as communicating complex technical information to clients are what surveyed students find the most important skills to their future employers.

In terms of how important surveyed students believe these factors are when pursuing employment:



A good starting salary and opportunities to progress quickly are what many surveyed students believe are important to search for in employment.

In terms of collective agreement with the surveyed students on these statements:

- **79%** of the survey total (strongly) agree that it is obligatory to develop social and environmental skills.
- **65%** agree that their place of study takes action to limit negative social and environmental externalities, with **64%** also agreeing that the student union does this as well.
- **51%** of the total are impartial or disagree that being a student at their place of study encourages thought and action on the environment.

In addition, when asked about aspects of sustainable development.

- **More than 75%** of the total (strongly) agree that sustainable development is something which their place of study should promote or actively encourage.
- **68%** agree that sustainable development should be incorporated into teacher training.
- **60%** agree that sustainable development is something they should learn more into.

Finally, looking into surveyed students' experiences in education, *Figure 2* shows the which locations of studies had influenced them from these statements:

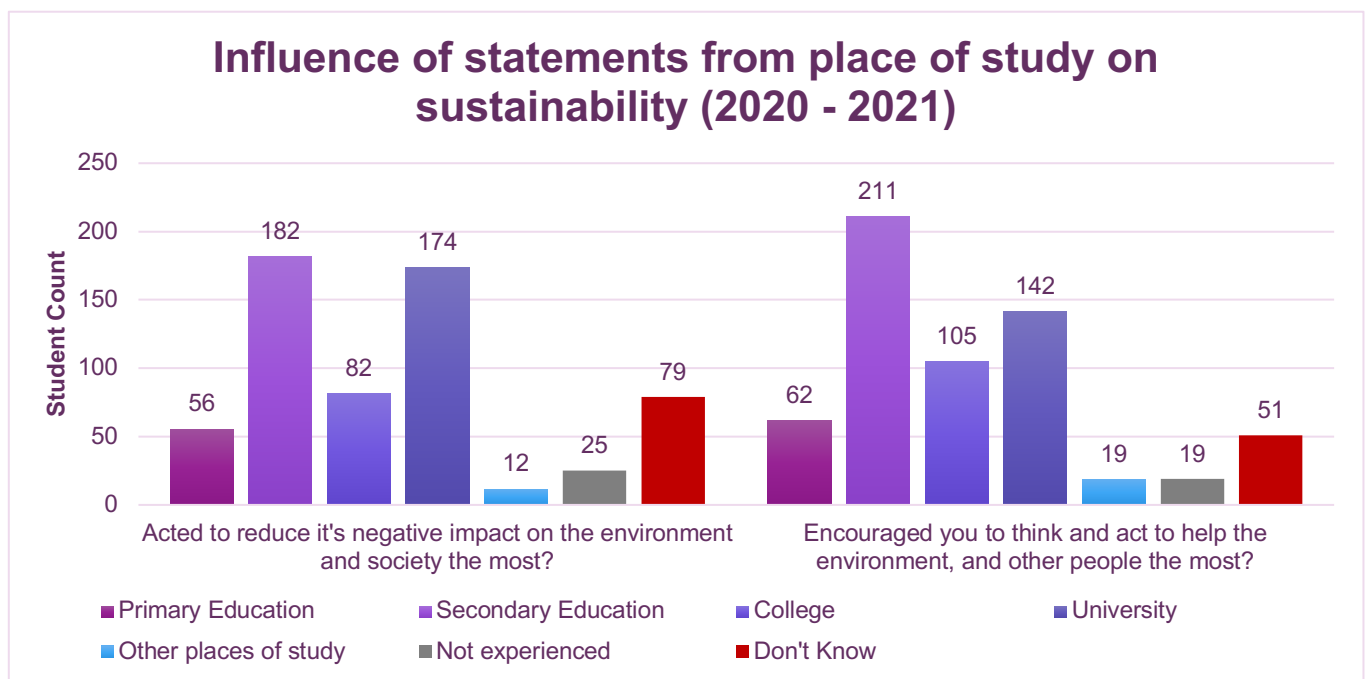


FIGURE 2: Chart showing the place of study that influenced their opinion on sustainability (2020 – 2021)

For the peak response in each case, **30%** of the total survey count say it was secondary education that influenced them to reduce negative impacts, whereas **35%** also say it was also secondary education that influenced them to think and act sustainably.

3.3.2. 2022 – 2023 DATA COLLECTION

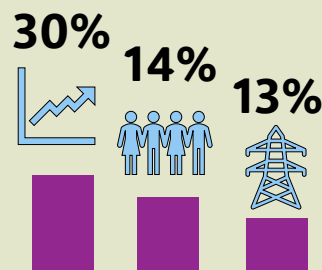
In each question, from the selection of 281 Aston students surveyed:



are in their first year
of study



have stayed for less
than a year



1. Business and Administrative Studies
2. Social Sciences
3. Engineering and Technology

Are the top three courses selected by students

In terms of how important the place of study's characteristics is:



Distance to study
area from home



Seriousness of
environmental issues



Nightlife



Seriousness of global
development issues



Course league table
ranking



Place league table
ranking



Place of study
aesthetics



Entry requirements



Teaching methods



Reputation of place



Reputation of course



Employment prospects

Surveyed students report that:

- Employment prospects
- Reputation of course
- Reputation of place

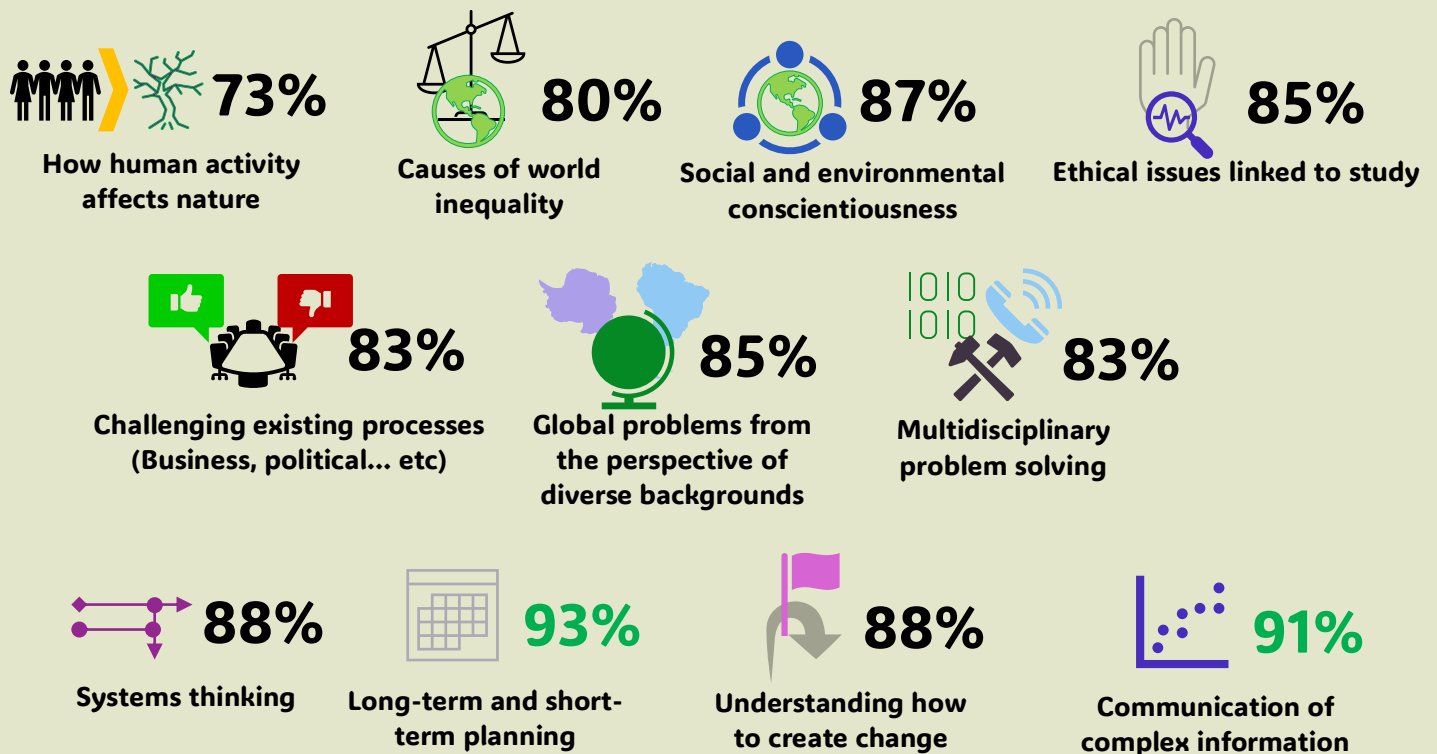
Were deemed (very) important when choosing a place to study.

Whereas:

- Seriousness of global development and environment issues
- Distance to study area from home
- Nightlife

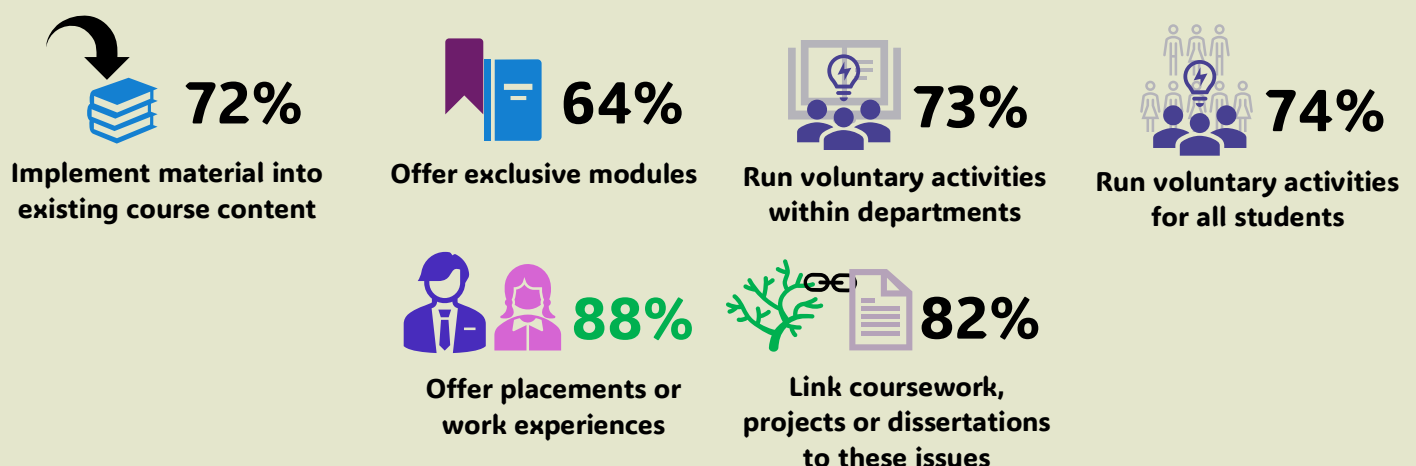
Were deemed (very) unimportant when choosing a place to study.

In terms of how important learning skills for how social and environmental issues appear in their studies:



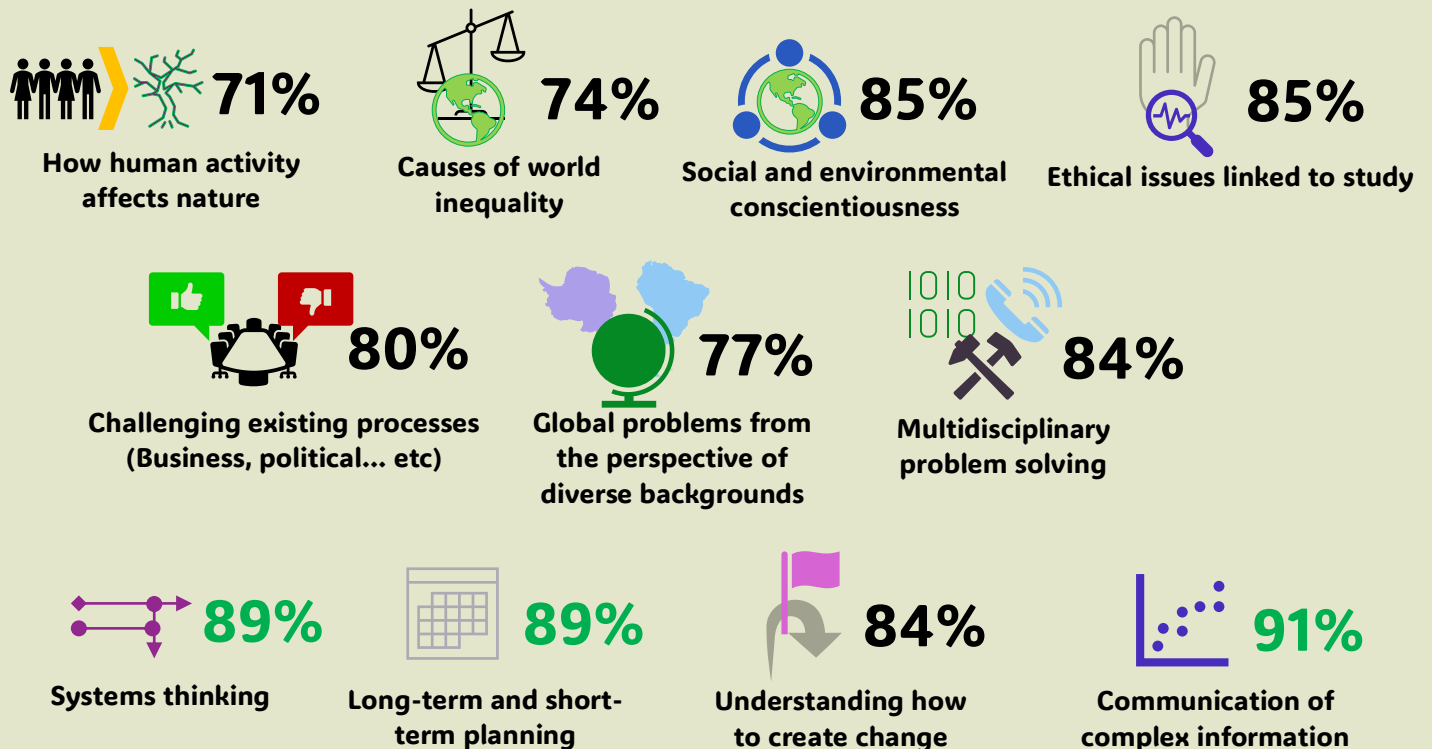
The most important skills, attributes and knowledge to solving social and environmental problems are planning in the long term, as well as the short term, communicating complex technical information for their studies.

In terms of relevance for integrating these skills into their course or apprenticeship, these methods are surveyed:



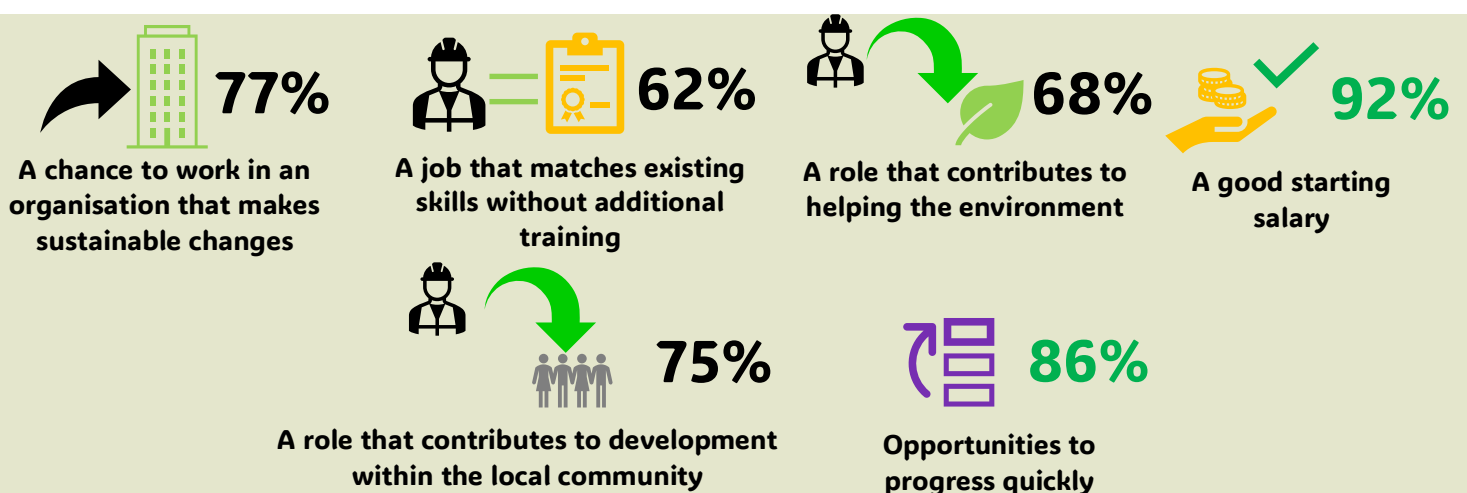
Offering placements or work experiences is the most favoured approach when understanding these issues.

In terms of how important these skills and attributes are to surveyed students' future employers:



Skills such as planning in the long term, as well as short term, as well as communicating complex technical information to clients and solving problems in terms of systems, connections and interactions are what surveyed students find the most important skills to their future employers.

In terms of how important surveyed students believe these factors are when pursuing employment:



A good starting salary and opportunities to progress quickly are what many surveys believe are important to search for in employment.

In terms of collective agreement with the surveyed students on these statements:

- **83%** of the survey total (strongly) agree that it is obligatory to develop social and environmental skills.
- **69%** agree that their place of study takes action to limit negative social and environmental externalities, with **70%** also agreeing that the student union does this as well.
- **60%** of the total agree that being a student at their place of study encourages thought and action on the environment. **72%** took pride in their place of study acting upon sustainable goals.

In addition, when asked about aspects of sustainable development.

- **More than 80%** of the total (strongly) agree that sustainable development is something which their place of study should promote or actively encourage.
- **71%** agree that sustainable development should be incorporated into teacher training.
- **66%** agree that sustainable development is something they should learn more into.

Finally, looking into surveyed students' experiences in education, *Figure 3* shows the which locations of studies had influenced them from these statements:

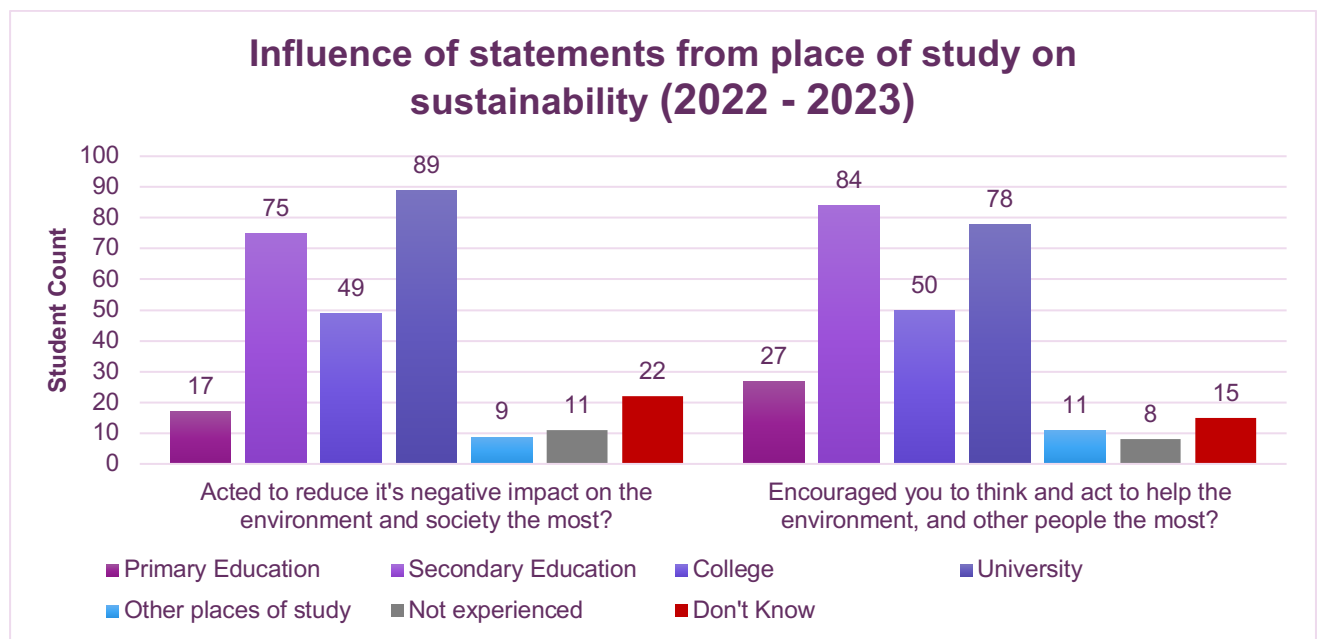


FIGURE 3: Chart showing the place of study that influenced their opinion on sustainability (2022 – 2023)

For the peak response in each case, **33%** of the total survey count say it was college that influenced them to reduce negative impacts, whereas **31%** say it was secondary education that influenced them to think and act sustainably.

3.4. Spotlight Comparison: Annual survey data sets

Between the two data sets, there have been moderate shifts in multiple aspects of sustainability when questioned in later years. Apart from dwindling Aston student count, Table 2 details these attitude shifts found between the comparison:

TABLE 2: Summary of attitude shifts from a comparison of two surveys.

Survey question/ sustainability aspect compared	Attitude shift	Comments
<u>Aston Student characteristics:</u>		
Place of study attendance	▼ 12% (Decline)	First year students are majority of survey total
Popularity of top course	▲ 2% (Rise)	Business and Administrative Studies is the top course
<u>Importance of place of study's characteristics:</u>		
Attitudes to top 3 attributes	— 1% (No change)	Employment prospects and reputation of course and place
Attitudes to bottom 3 attributes	▲ 5%	Nightlife, seriousness of environmental or social aspects and distance to place of study
<u>Importance of sustainability skills:</u>		
Attitudes to learning top sustainable skills	▲ 4%	Communicating complex information, planning and systems thinking
Opinion of integrating top skill into courses	▲ 3%	Providing work experiences or placements
<u>Importance of future employment:</u>		
Attitudes to learning top skills for employers	— 1%	Communicating complex information, planning and systems thinking
Opinion of most important employment attributes	— 1%	A good starting salary and opportunities to progress quickly
<u>Attitudes on sustainable development:</u>		
Attitudes to skill development	▲ 4%	
Awareness of establishments' impact to become more sustainable	▲ 5%	
Encouragement to act and think sustainably	— 1%	
Opinions on promoting sustainability in place of study	▲ 5%	
Opinions on upskilling teachers	▲ 3%	
Opinions on personal learning of topic	▲ 6%	

For the survey total, the sharp decline in attendance may be influenced by online learning and lectures. Influence from the university's marketing may determine the popularity of picking Business and Administrative Studies.

Indifferences to some of these aspects may be explained by the goal of each average student: To be employed in a good job that covers their financial problems. Management jobs may have considerably higher starting income than technical jobs, hence these top-rated skills are useful for these job searches.

The rise in awareness of sustainability may arrive from current climate goals and policies announced in mainstream. The term "sustainability" could be used a keyword to create a secondary goal on each job, with matching actions and thoughts to be expected from many students and staff members. Altogether, the job prospects of sustainable business development and management may be the ideal position students would aim for in their time at their place of study.

4. CONCLUSION

This report collected and compared two sets of survey data over a two-year gap, potentially starting from September 2020 and 2022 respectively. The survey data in question referred to the NUS and the students' attitudes on sustainability skills. Through a process to filter out survey questions by similarity, format and survey total count, five categories of survey questions were compared. Each of the data results had been summarised in similar graphical fashion to NUS, with original graphs remastered for clarity.

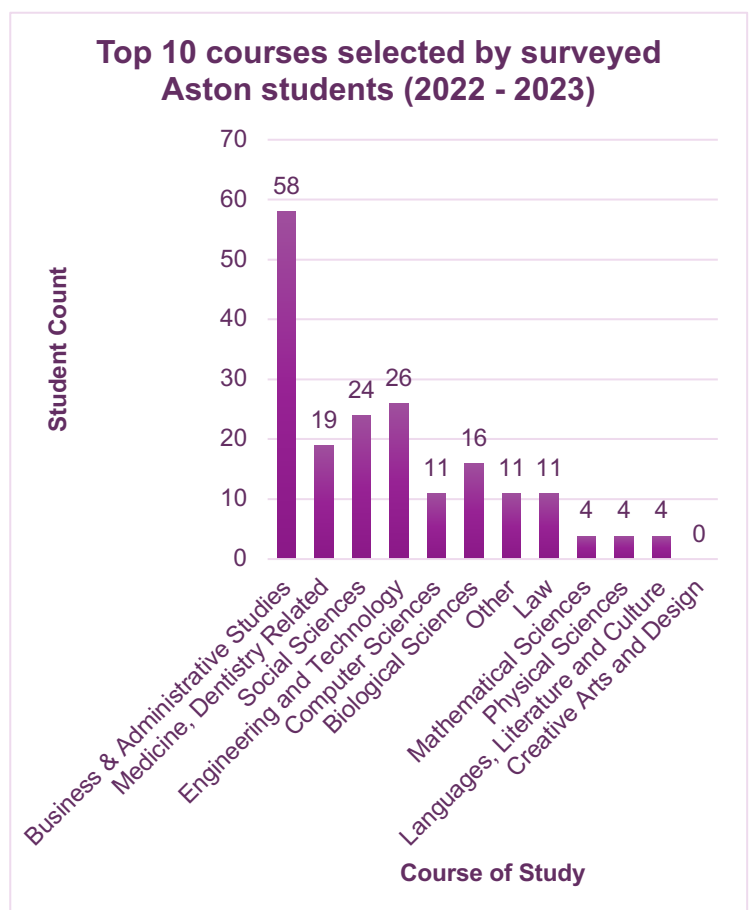
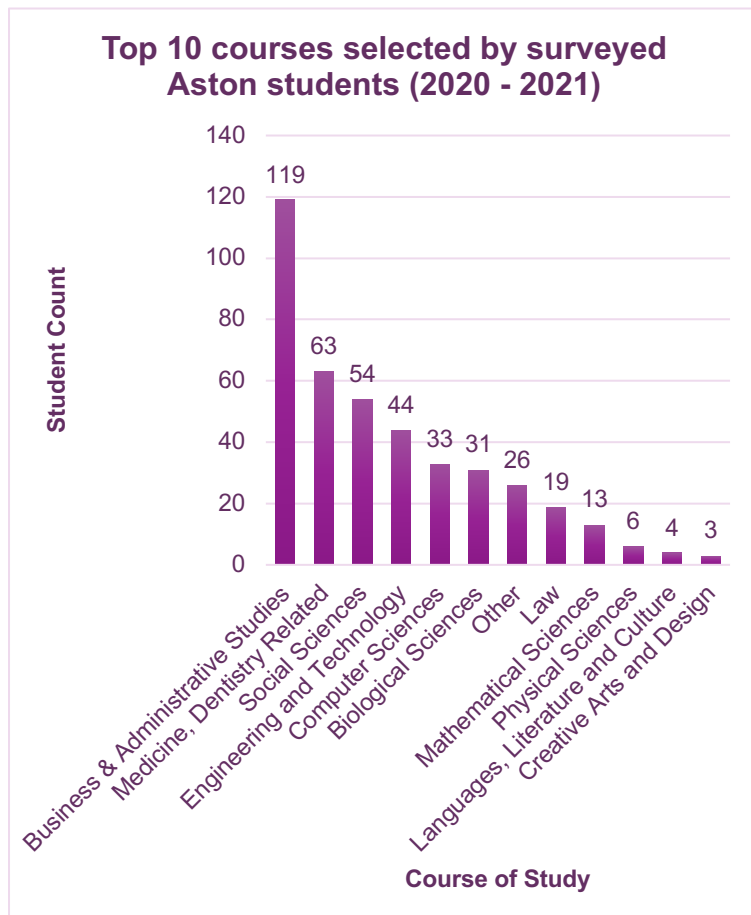
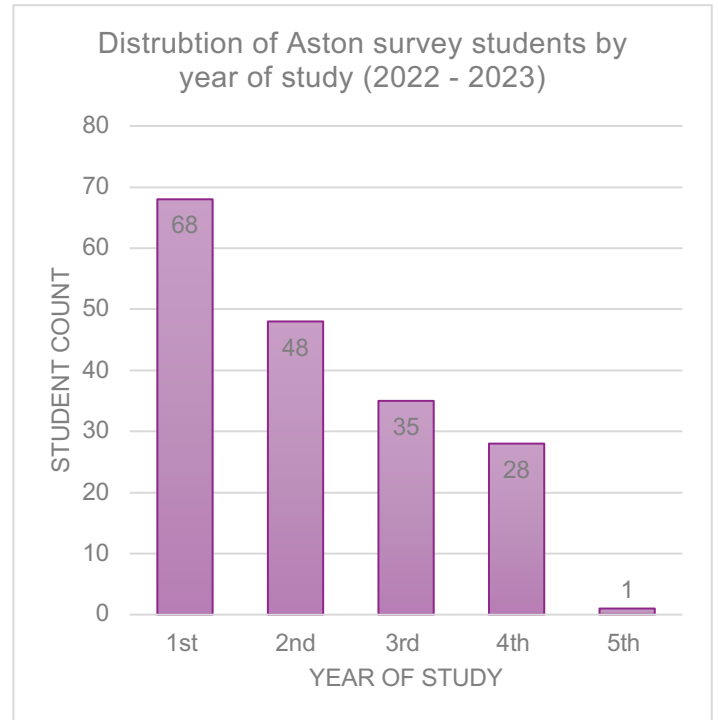
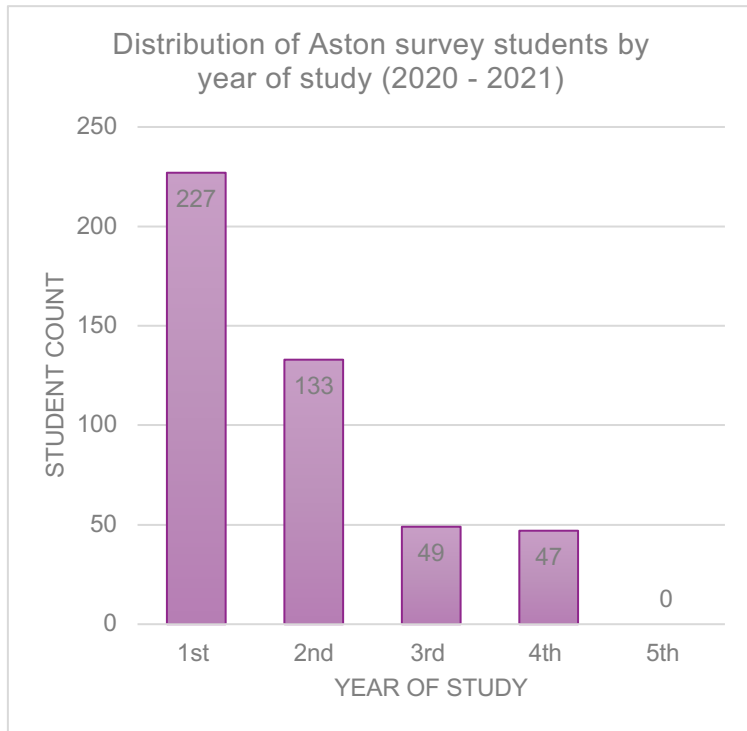
Popularity of the top course (Business and Administrative Studies) may be determined from the university's marketing displaying success stories. The addition of online lectures may contribute to the attendance decline.

Overall, there are two factors that are becoming increasingly important for students in their future careers: The importance of sustainable issues in projects, and the necessary skills required to solve these problems. For career choices, the ideal position involves management or development of a sustainable business in the long-term. For acquiring sustainability skills, students remain indifferent on being encouraged to think or act sustainably, but place importance on collecting skills from staff and employers.

Improvements in the analysis could be made by collecting more data between the two-year gap to confirm the positive shift in attitudes, as well as comparing more survey questions of similar wording. Qualitative analysis of some of the survey questions may benefit in understanding more keywords, particularly when asked about their targets in incorporating a sustainable lifestyle.

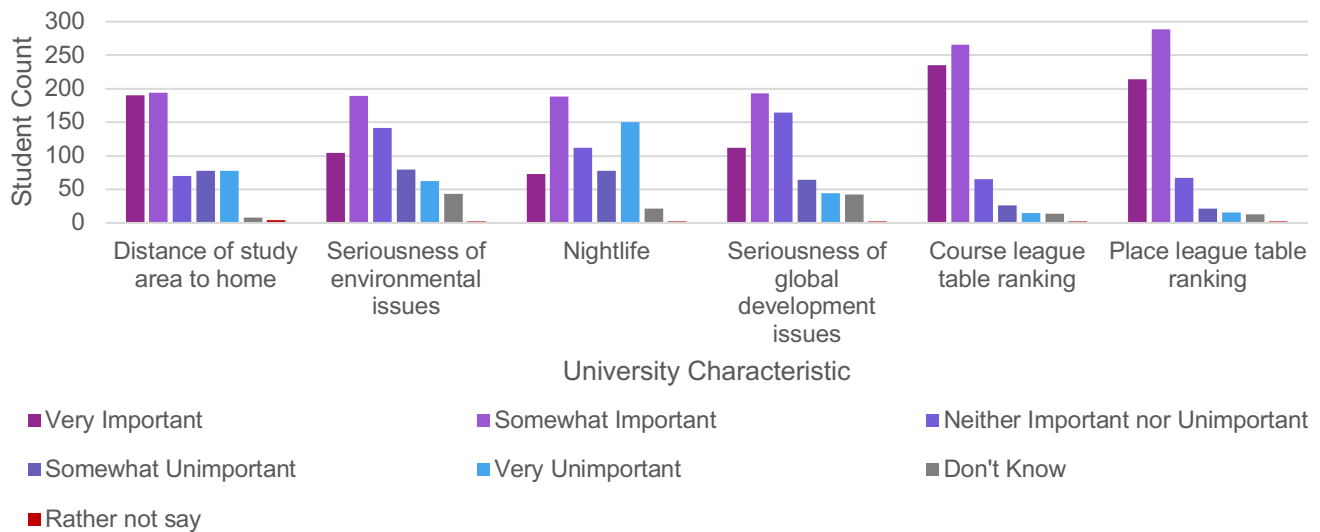
5. APPENDICES

5.1. Appendix A: Surveyed Aston student enrolment data

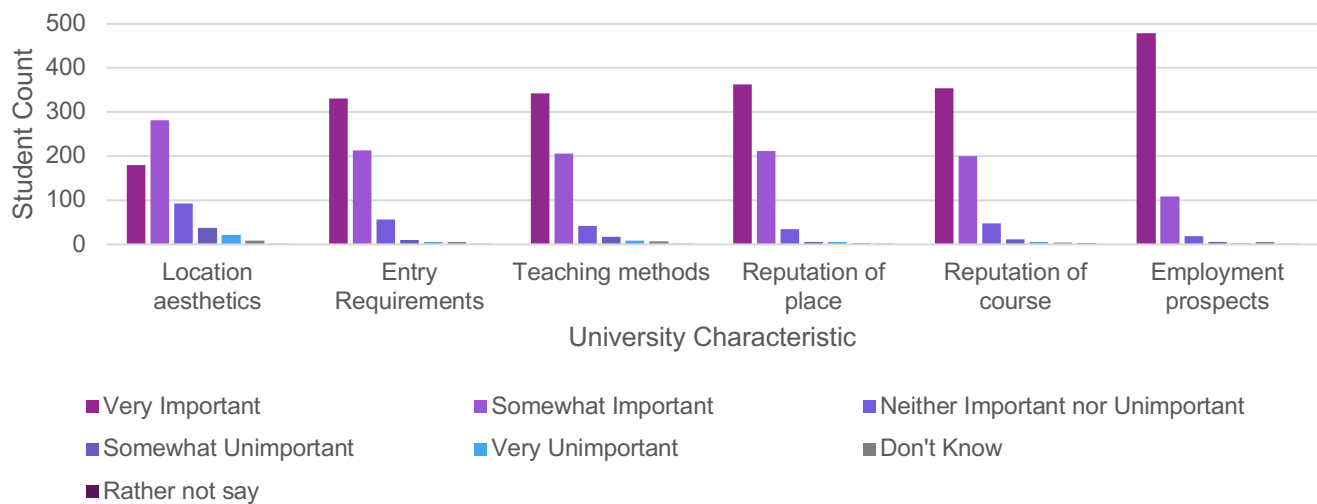


5.2. Appendix B: Place of study characteristics data

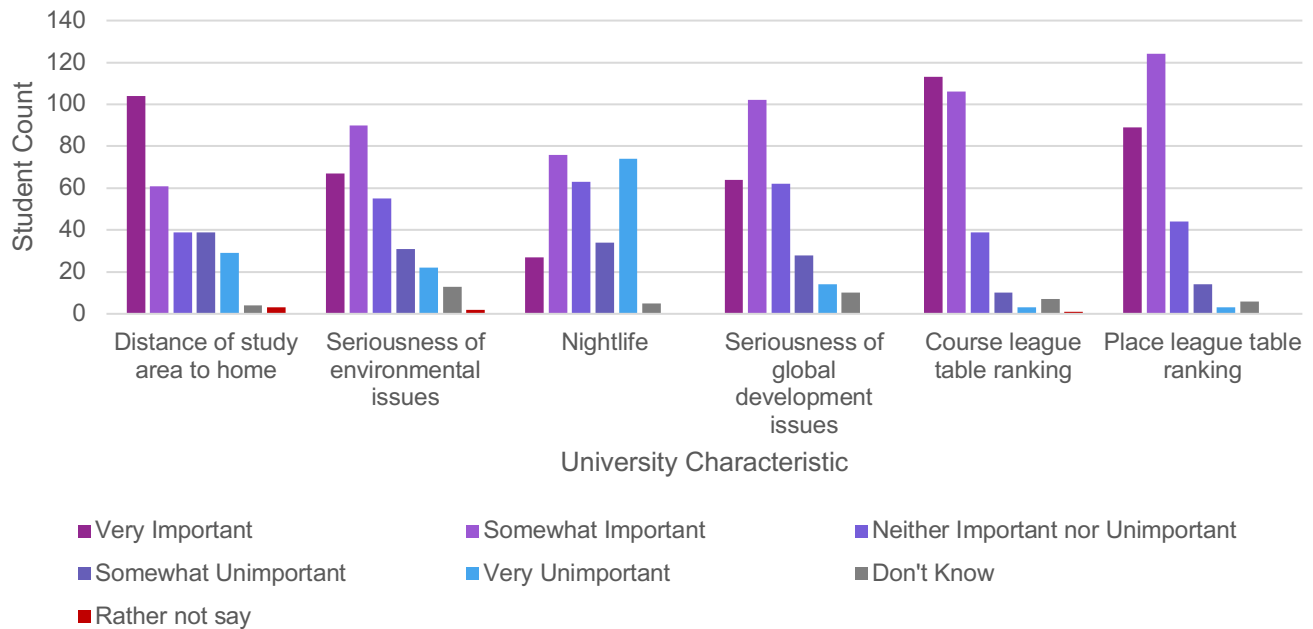
Importance of place of study's characteristics (First Subset)
(2020 - 2021)



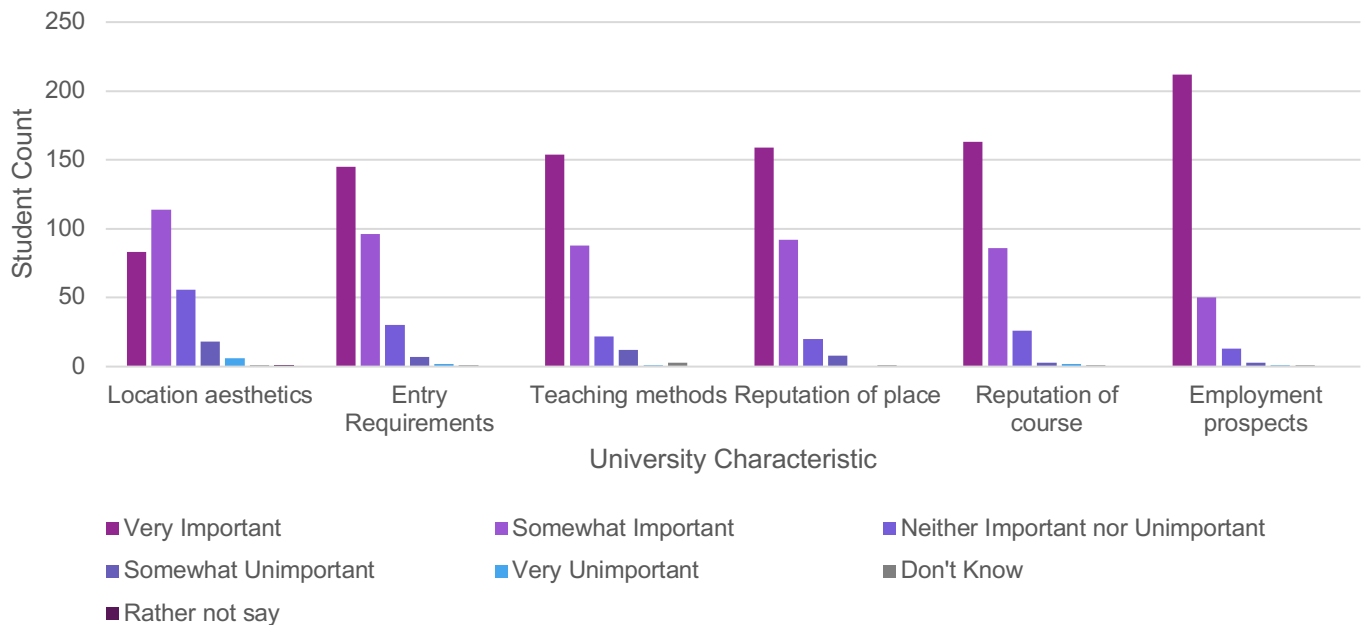
Importance of place of study's characteristics (Second Subset)
(2020 - 2021)



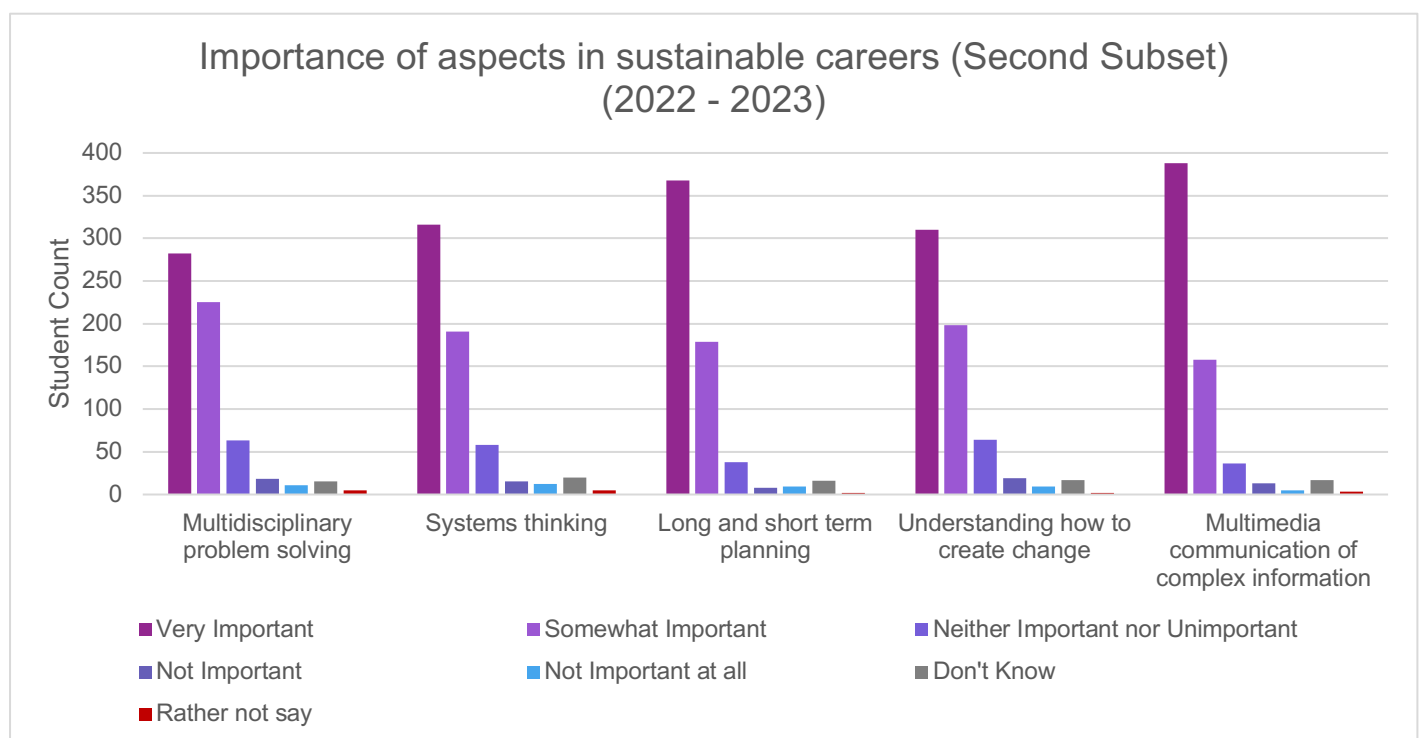
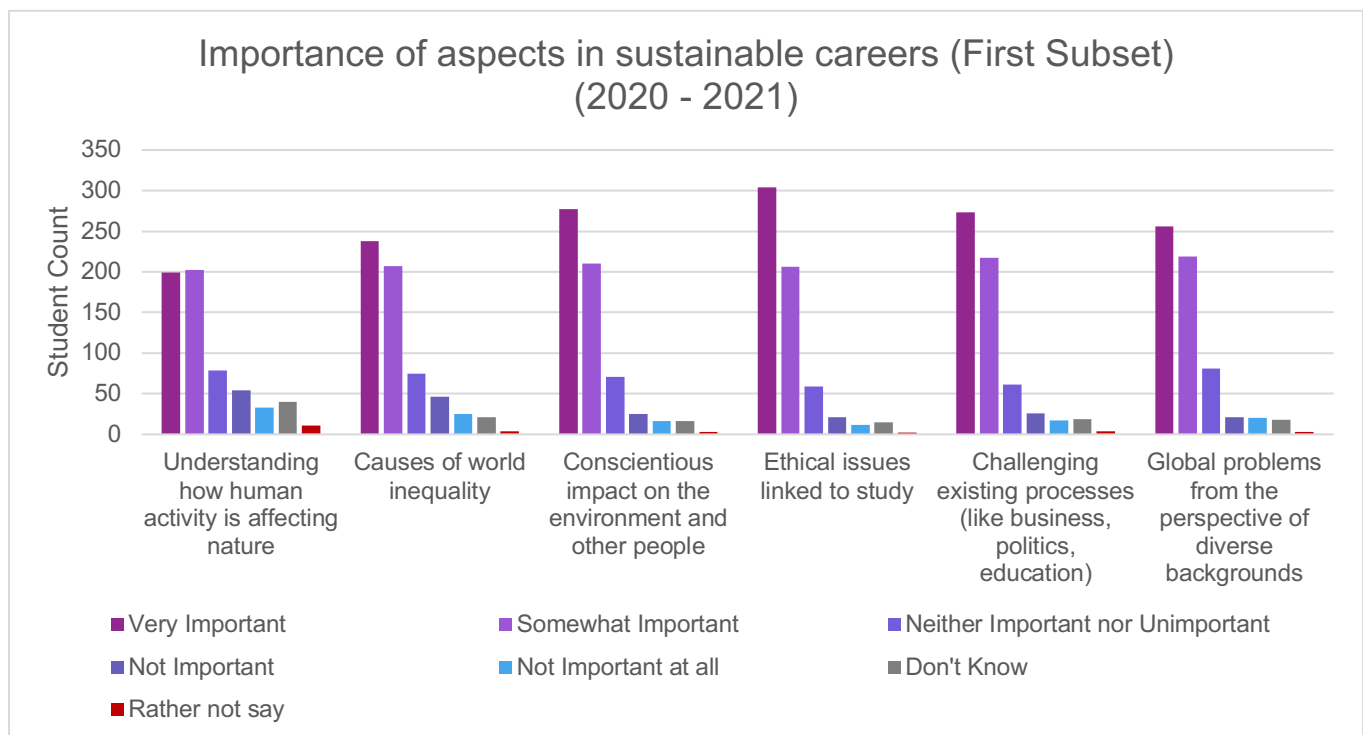
Importance of place of study's characteristics (First Subset)
(2022 - 2023)



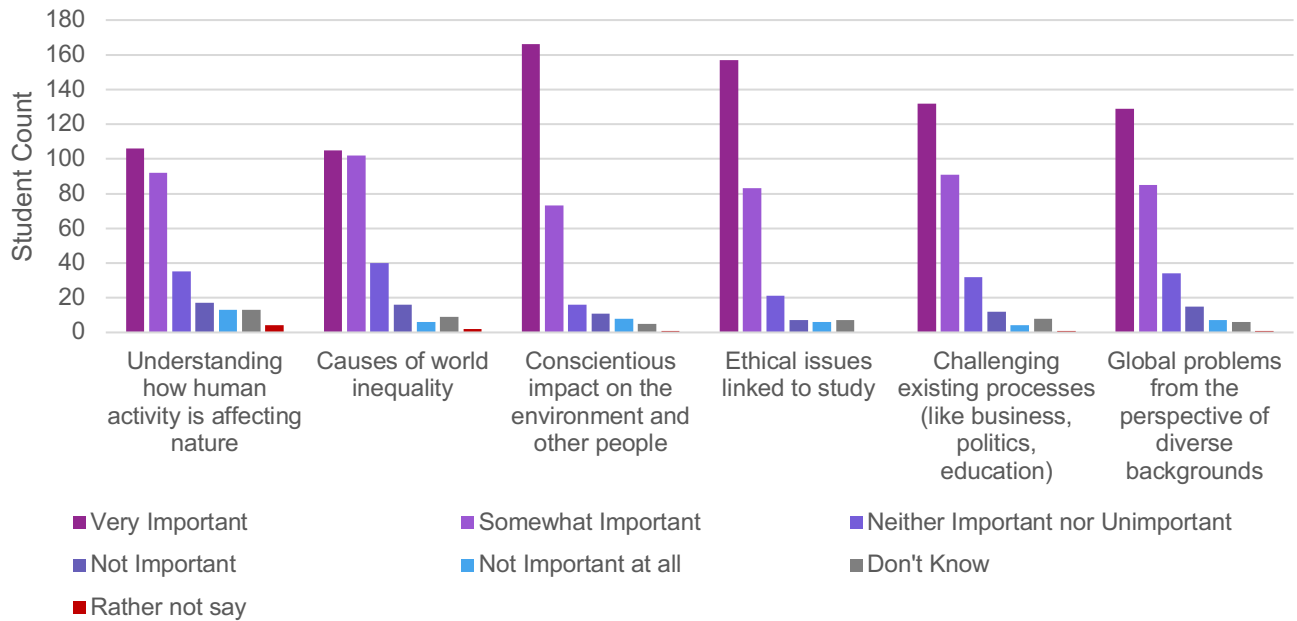
Importance of place of study's characteristics (Second Subset)
(2022 - 2023)



5.3. Appendix C: Importance of sustainability in careers data



Importance of aspects in sustainable careers (First Subset)
(2022 - 2023)



Importance of aspects in sustainable careers (Second Subset)
(2022 - 2023)

