

# University of Salford Sustainability Skills Survey 2023/2024

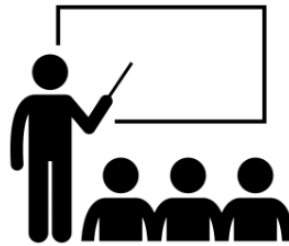
Key findings for University of Salford from the  
SOS-UK Sustainability Skills Survey 2023/2024

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## Executive Summary



**89% believe sustainable development is something which places of study/apprenticeships should actively incorporate and promote.**



**83% believe sustainable development is something which all courses in places of study/apprenticeships should actively incorporate and promote.**



**67% state that sustainable development is something which they would like to learn more about**

The 2023/2024 Sustainability Skills Survey reveals a strong recognition of the value of sustainable development among University of Salford students, with 89% of respondents believing that higher education institutions (HEIs) should actively incorporate and promote sustainability. The survey gathered responses from 269 students from the University of Salford, providing valuable insights into the perceptions and importance of sustainability in education and career choices.

Key findings indicate a strong influence of sustainability on student decision-making. 57% of respondents at Salford highlighted environmental sustainability as an important factor in decision making when selecting a university. This is 29% higher than the importance of nightlife to Salford students. 54% also viewed how seriously Salford takes global development issues as important in their choice of place to study. This shows how sustainability is a key factor for prospective students and enhances its appeal for enrolment.

The integration of sustainability into the curriculum was shown to be highly valued by respondents. 83% of respondents agreed that sustainable development is something which all courses in places of study/apprenticeships should actively incorporate and promote. Additionally, 74% of respondents reported encountering sustainability topics within their curriculum, and 63% provided comprehensive definitions of sustainable development, encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This reinforces the demand for sustainability coverage, as sustainable development is something that 67% of respondents would like to learn more about. This demonstrates that whilst not all respondents have been exposed to sustainability in their course, there is a strong demand for this in the curriculum.

Employment prospects reflect this commitment to sustainability, with 81% of respondents prioritising roles in organisations that make a difference in sustainability, and 76% willing to accept a lower salary to work for companies with stronger environmental and social records. This indicates a strong alignment between respondents' values and their career goals.

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Action towards sustainability positively influence respondent perceptions, with 80% stating they feel proud of the institution's efforts to limit its environmental impact. However, there is clear room for improvement as a lower number (73%) acknowledge these efforts, which suggests a need for greater visibility and increased communication of the university's sustainability initiatives. Lower perceptions of the Students' Union's actions were indicated, with 61% of respondents believing they take action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society.

## **Recommendations**

- A strategic focus on sustainability and sustainability achievements at Salford may increase student retention and attraction to leverage the evident appeal.
- Increased visibility of sustainability on campus, events such as open days and online platforms such as the student prospectus and social media.
- Enhanced employability links, such as heightened events during Green Careers Week, in addition to increased initiatives, and increased promotion of, and access to, ethical careers.
- Continue to embed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within the curriculum to close the gap between what respondents experience compared to what respondents would like to be covered.
- Collaboration with Salford SU to increase embedding and visibility of sustainable action in the Students' Union.

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## Introduction

At the University of Salford, we recognise our responsibility, and our opportunity, to have a positive impact on society. We have always played a leading role in improving the lives of our local communities, and today we take this challenge more seriously than ever. We want to be a sustainable university and make sure it is a central part of our story.

Our University strategy is based on collaboration which will enable us to do things differently, innovate, push boundaries, and ultimately enrich the lives of those around us. We are focused on four themes: Building prosperity and equity; developing creativity and innovation; enabling healthier living; and improving sustainability.

As a university, we have an opportunity to ensure that our graduates are empowered and equipped to tackle and cope with sustainability challenges, the importance of which will be reflected in our Education and Employability Strategy. Sustainability is relevant to all disciplines, and we want all of our students to see that they can make a positive difference in the world.

We also acknowledge our responsibility to address the direct negative impacts of our own operations.

Our vision is by embedding sustainability in all aspects of University life, we will enable our University community to create impactful positive change for society and environment. Our goals are:

- To create a Sustainable Campus
- To enable a Sustainable Impact beyond our campus
- To support Sustainable Communities

[Students Organising for Sustainability](#) (SOS-UK) are an education charity focusing on sustainability in a student context. They have asked students across HEIs every year since 2010 to feed back on their attitudes towards learning for sustainable development, via an online survey. This enables monitoring of sustainability perceptions over time, and thus gives insight for both individual and general HEI insights into student interest of sustainability, and the potential for meeting these interests if they are not already met.

The University of Salford actively promoted this survey in 2023, receiving 269 responses. It was promoted as a skills survey rather than sustainability-specific in order to capture as wide a range of opinions and experiences as possible. This allowed the organisation to monitor progress in positive perceptions towards sustainability and highlight where the interest in sustainability education has been met, in addition to areas for improvement.

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## Respondents

The 2023/2024 Skills Survey received 269 respondents from University of Salford. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these respondents across the four schools at the University of Salford. The majority (38%) of respondents were a part of the School of Health and Society. Salford Business School had the lowest respondent rate of 12%. 19% of respondents did not define their school.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents across different levels. The majority of respondents (39.3%) are in their first year of study, whilst the fewest number (1.1%) were in their 5<sup>th</sup> or above.

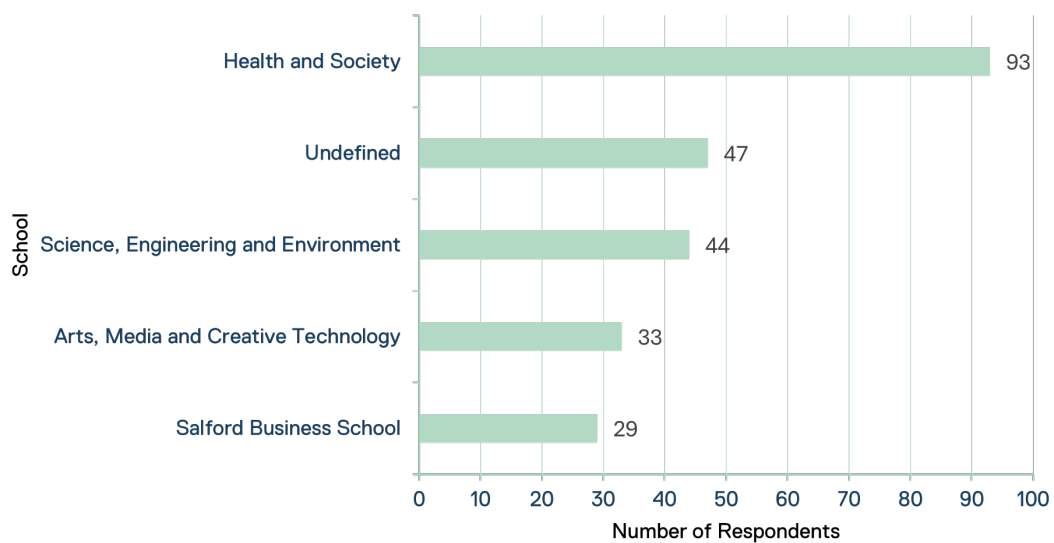


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents across the different schools at the University of Salford

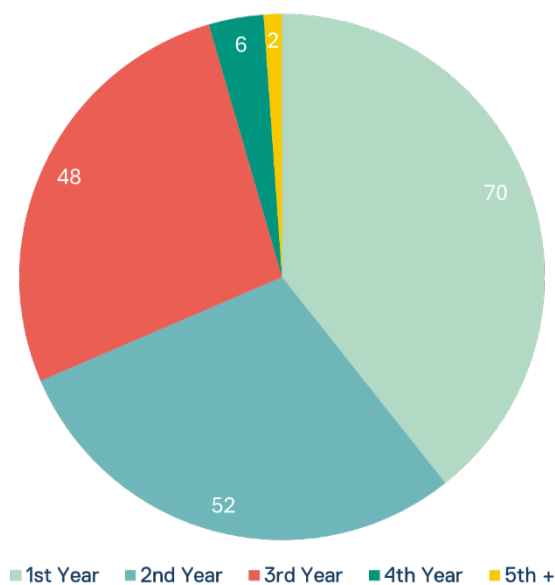


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents across years

## Factors Affecting Student Choice

Respondents were asked how they felt the importance of a range of factors were when considering both their place of study and their course.

Figure 3 shows a bar chart detailing the importance of a range of factors that influenced University of Salford respondents when selecting their place of further study. The most significant factor was shown to be the employment prospects after completing the course, with 90% of respondents stating this as important in their decision, demonstrating that respondents were primarily driven by career outcomes. Additionally, the high importance of teaching methods (88%) and entry requirements (84%) illustrates how respondents value both the access to and quality of their education.

The reputation of the institution in terms of commitment to global development and environmental issues were also important for over half of all respondents (57% environmental issues and 54% global development) featuring higher than the consideration of the place of study in league tables (51%) and position of the course in league tables (50%) and nightlife (29%).

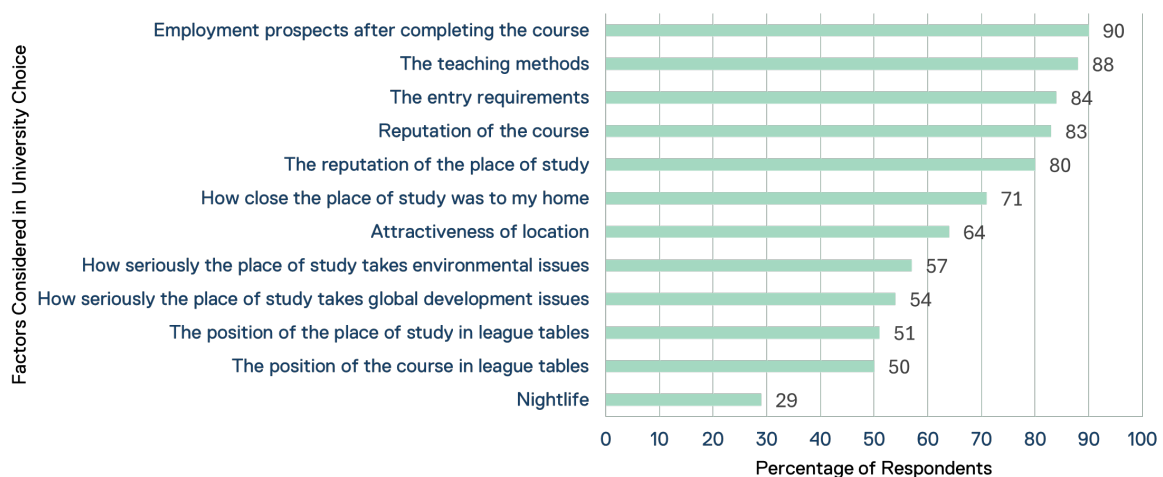


Figure 3. This shows the importance to respondents of various factors when choosing their place of study

When choosing their course (Figure 4), the largest proportion of respondents (48%) stated that they chose their course to gain qualifications, followed by 33% citing that they chose their course to improve their ability to make a difference to other people, an 18% increase since 2019. Furthermore, 18% of respondents stated that improving their ability to make a difference to the environment was also one of their top 3 reasons for choosing their course. This shows that University of Salford students are motivated by environmental and social sustainability concerns.

## Factors Respondents Considered When Choosing a Course



Figure 4. This shows the reasons respondents stated as important when choosing their course.

## How Respondents Feel their Course Impacts their Ability to Make a Difference to People or the Environment

Respondents were asked how they think the course they are currently studying will help them to improve their ability to make a difference to other people and/or the environment. There is a significant theme of enthusiasm for both personal and professional development, particularly in making positive contributions to society and the environment. Some respondents highlighted how their courses, including marine biology, environmental management and geography, are directly related to environmental sustainability. They expressed interest in using the skills they've learned to address environmental issues, reduce impacts, and educate others. For example, one respondent stated 'I am studying geography which is largely based around learning about the environment, environmental issues and how we can tackle them. I feel through my course I have become more educated which allows me to try to educate others'. This shows an alignment between choice of course and a commitment to positive environmental change.

Other respondents spoke of the social impacts of their studies, mostly in fields including psychology, counselling and public health. These respondents highlighted their passion for improving mental health resources, supporting vulnerable populations and improving overall quality of life.





## Understanding Sustainable Development

Respondents were asked about their understanding of the concept of sustainable development, 63% of respondents were able to provide a holistic definition of sustainability, with not just a focus on environmental sustainability. Some definitions were more personal, whilst others were very specific, demonstrating the application of sustainability both within a HE setting and outside of it.

One question aimed to gauge the value respondents place on acquiring sustainability-related skills, attributes, and knowledge during their time at the University of Salford, with 86% believing that using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people is important. This indicates a strong desire among respondents to incorporate sustainability into their education, reflecting a growing understanding of the increasing importance of sustainability in various fields and the desire to be prepared for future challenges.

### How Respondents Define Sustainable Development

Respondents were asked for written answers on what they understand the term ‘sustainable development’ to mean. The responses indicate a strong awareness of the three pillars of sustainability. 63% of respondents were able to provide accurate and comprehensive definitions. Many respondents highlighted the importance of meeting present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet theirs. For example, one respondent shared ‘development without damaging mother earth’ as their definition, and another stated ‘development that doesn’t negatively affect the future’. These responses emphasise how resources are finite and should be available for future use.

Additionally, some respondents highlight the integration of sustainable practices within various sectors, such as infrastructure and technology, suggesting that sustainable development requires a holistic approach, for example ‘to develop society through infrastructure, agriculture, technology, socially or economically using methods or materials that are sustainable meaning can continue to be used forever without damaging or depending on other resources. The recurring theme across responses is the necessity to progress and develop in ways that limit damage to the environment and society, closely aligning with the survey’s findings on the importance of sustainability in higher education. The word cloud in Figure 6 below, highlights some of the themes in respondents’ answers.



Figure 6. This shows a word cloud of the most frequently used words when asked what respondents understand the term ‘sustainable development’ to mean.

### Importance of Sustainability-related Skills, Knowledge, and Attributes

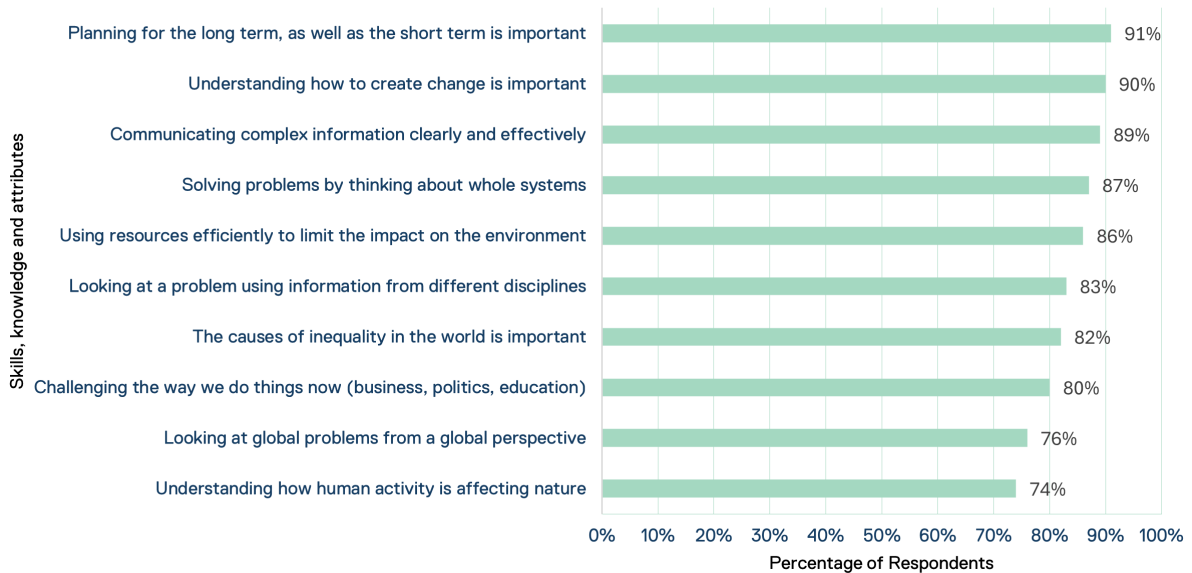


Figure 7. This shows a bar chart of how important respondents believe learning certain skills, attributes and knowledge to be

Figure 7 shows different factors respondents see as important to learn, the most prominent being planning for the long term, as well as the short term (91%). This was closely followed by 90% believing it is important to learn how to create change. Although the least important from these issues, understanding how human activity is affecting nature (74%) and looking at global problems from a global perspective (76%) are still important to respondents in their learning.

### Awareness of Topics Covered in the HEI Curriculum

Figure 8 below shows the percentage of respondents who have covered sustainability aspects in the curriculum, compared to the percentage of respondents who find it important to cover such topics.



Figure 8. This shows the awareness of topics covered in the curriculum compared to respondents that find these topics important.

Figure 8 illustrates the difference between how extensively certain skills and knowledge areas are believed by respondents to be covered in the curriculum, versus the perceived importance of them to respondents. 70% of respondents view sustainable development as something all teachers should be required to incorporate within their material, highlighting the need to analyse such factors. The coverage is represented by the lighter lower line, and the importance is represented by the darker top line. Most noticeably, there is a difference in coverage of ‘considering ethical issues linked to your subject’ with the lowest disparity of 25% between coverage and importance of this factor. The most significant difference between perceived coverage and importance was of ‘Using resources efficiently to limit the impact on the environment and other people’, for which 26% of respondents believed it to be covered, while 86% believe the topic to be important, resulting in a 60% difference. As the majority of respondents were in the School of Health and Society, this may reflect the lower coverage of the topic but does suggest the desire amongst respondents to cover sustainability topics irrespective of School or subject.

### Understanding Climate Change

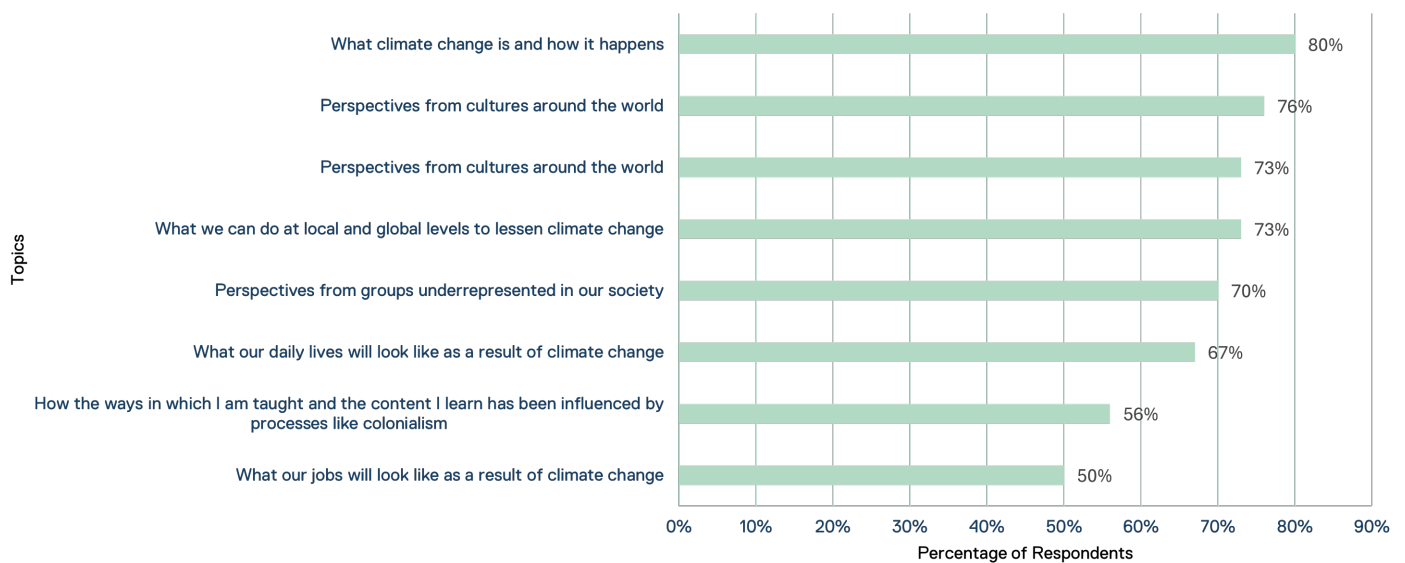


Figure 9. Bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agree they have learnt the topics outlined.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of respondents who agree that they have learnt certain topics through their time in education so far (not just at University). The highest percentage of agreement amongst respondents was for the percentage that agreed they have learnt what climate change is and how it happens. Similarly, 76% agreed that they have learnt about perspectives from cultures around the world. The lowest percentage was that 50% agreed they have learnt about what our jobs will look like as a result of climate change. This shows that while a significant majority of respondents feel confident in their understanding of the fundamental concepts of climate change and diverse cultural perspectives, there is a gap regarding how climate change may affect future employment. This indicates an additional need for education addressing the practical implications of climate change on daily life and career prospects, ensuring respondents are better prepared for the challenges of a changing world.

### Understanding the Role of Colonialism

Developing on Figure 9, respondents were asked about their knowledge of learning about colonialism. 56% of respondents agreed that they have learnt how the ways in which they are taught and the content they learn are influenced by processes such as colonialism. This is down 5% from 61% in 2022. 76% also agreed that they have learnt about perspectives from cultures around the world, whilst 70% have learnt about perspectives from groups underrepresented in our society. This indicates significant room for improvement to align with Salford's commitment to put Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the heart of everything we do.

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## Perception of Institution Goals

Respondents were asked about their connection to their institution based on its sustainability actions. A significant number of respondents (80%) indicated that knowing their place of study takes action to limit its negative impact on the environment and society would make them proud to be a student there. Whereas slightly fewer (73%) acknowledge that the University of Salford takes steps to mitigate its environmental impact.

Furthermore, even fewer (66%) of respondents feel that being a student at Salford encourages them to think and act to help the environment, and other people. This demonstrates that respondents value the University's commitment to sustainability, which enhances their perception of the institution. While the University of Salford's initiatives positively impact its reputation and attractiveness to prospective students, it is clear that there is room for the Students' Union to elevate its visibility and efforts in sustainability to match the University's impact.

Furthermore, 61% of respondents agreed that the Salford Students' Union takes action to limit the negative impact it has on the environment and society, whilst 17% didn't know. This indicates the need for signposting towards sustainability from the Students' Union, something which has begun in August 2024.

## What Actions Salford Could take to Improve its Performance on Sustainable Development

Respondents were asked an open-ended question on suggestions for actions they would like to see at Salford to improve its performance on sustainable development. Some example answers are shown below.

'None, I think the people here do a good job at making sure everyone reaches their goal regardless of any personal barriers.'

'Definitely more education about environmental issues in classes and modules'

'Increased opportunities for students/faculty to have input on discussions about sustainable development within the institution'

'They already do a large amount'

'Incorporating sustainability into the curriculum'

'I would like all of the courses in the university to cooperate this into their subject'

The responses show a desire amongst the student community for sustainability to be incorporated into the curriculum. This is something which is underway at Salford, with an ESD Officer role having been created. The role is focused on developing a University wide and strategic approach to ESD and managing participation in the SOS-UK programme Responsible Futures. Actions include launching an ESD Working Group, developing case studies of good ESD practice and providing support to colleagues to embed sustainability into their curricula

Furthermore, there is a want for student input in the context of sustainability. The Sustainability Office have established focus groups to understand student interest, understanding and motivations following this. These highlighted similar themes with students wanting to see further efforts to reducing single use plastics and containers, greater incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum, clothes recycling points and more sustainable food options. The University of Salford is currently part of the PlasticFreeGM pledge to take action to reduce avoidable single-use plastics across Greater Manchester.

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## Employment

Respondents were asked to demonstrate how sustainability may influence them outside of university, highlighting how the sustainability knowledge they have gained at the University of Salford influences career choices. 84% of respondents stated that a role that contributes to development within the local community is important, whilst 81% found it important to work within an organisation that makes a difference to sustainability. These high percentages indicate an awareness of the importance of bringing sustainability beyond HE.

76% would take a salary sacrifice to work for a company with a strong rather than poor environmental and social record, which reinforces these priorities, showing that sustainability is at the forefront when it comes to employability. This indicates a strong alignment between respondents' values and their actions. Furthermore, there has been a 13% increase in the respondents who see themselves in the environment and agriculture sector since 2019.

### How respondents rank the importance of different factors when considering job opportunities



Figure 10. Bar graph showing the percentage of respondents who agree how important, if at all, various factors will be when considering which jobs to apply for.

Respondents were asked whether they found various factors important when considering what jobs to apply for. In 2023/24, the most important factor was a good starting salary, with 86% finding this important. This was closely followed by 84% believing a role that contributes to development within the local community is important to consider when applying to a role. The least important factor was finding a job that matches the skills students already have, without additional training, at 70% agreement. These results follow similar trends to previous years as shown in figure 10, with a good starting salary being the most important factor in both 2019 and 2021, both with 86% agreement. Respondents also have an increase in agreement that they would consider it important to work in an organisation that makes a difference to social and environmental issues, with an 8% increase between 2019 and 2023.

### Organisations Respondents See Themselves In

Respondents were asked of the kind of organisation they see themselves working in once they have completed their course. Due to 38% of respondents being in the School of Health and Society, 35% stated they see themselves working in healthcare. The second most common organisation was 13% seeing themselves working in the business, consulting and management sector. 7% saw themselves in environment and agriculture. A full breakdown of these responses can be seen in figure 11.

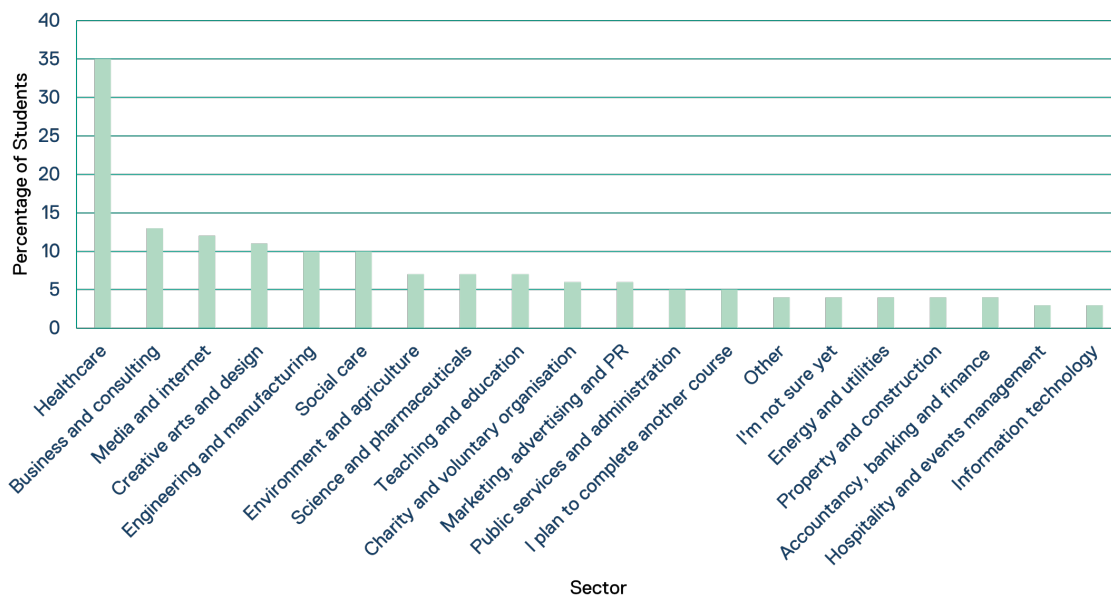


Figure 11. Bar graph showing the percentage of respondents who see themselves in different employment sectors.

Respondents were also asked if they would take a graduate position with a starting salary of £1000 lower than average in a company with a strong environmental and social record, to which 76% agreed that they would. This shows that a significant majority of respondents value ethical considerations and corporate responsibility when making career decisions, even if it means accepting a slightly lower starting salary. This preference highlights a trend among graduates who prioritise working for organisations that align with their personal values such as social impact, as shown by previous results including 84% believing a role that contributes to development within the local community is important to consider when applying to a role.

### Importance of Factors to Employers

Respondents were asked what they believe are factors important to employers. This helps to understand how student priorities may align with organisations.

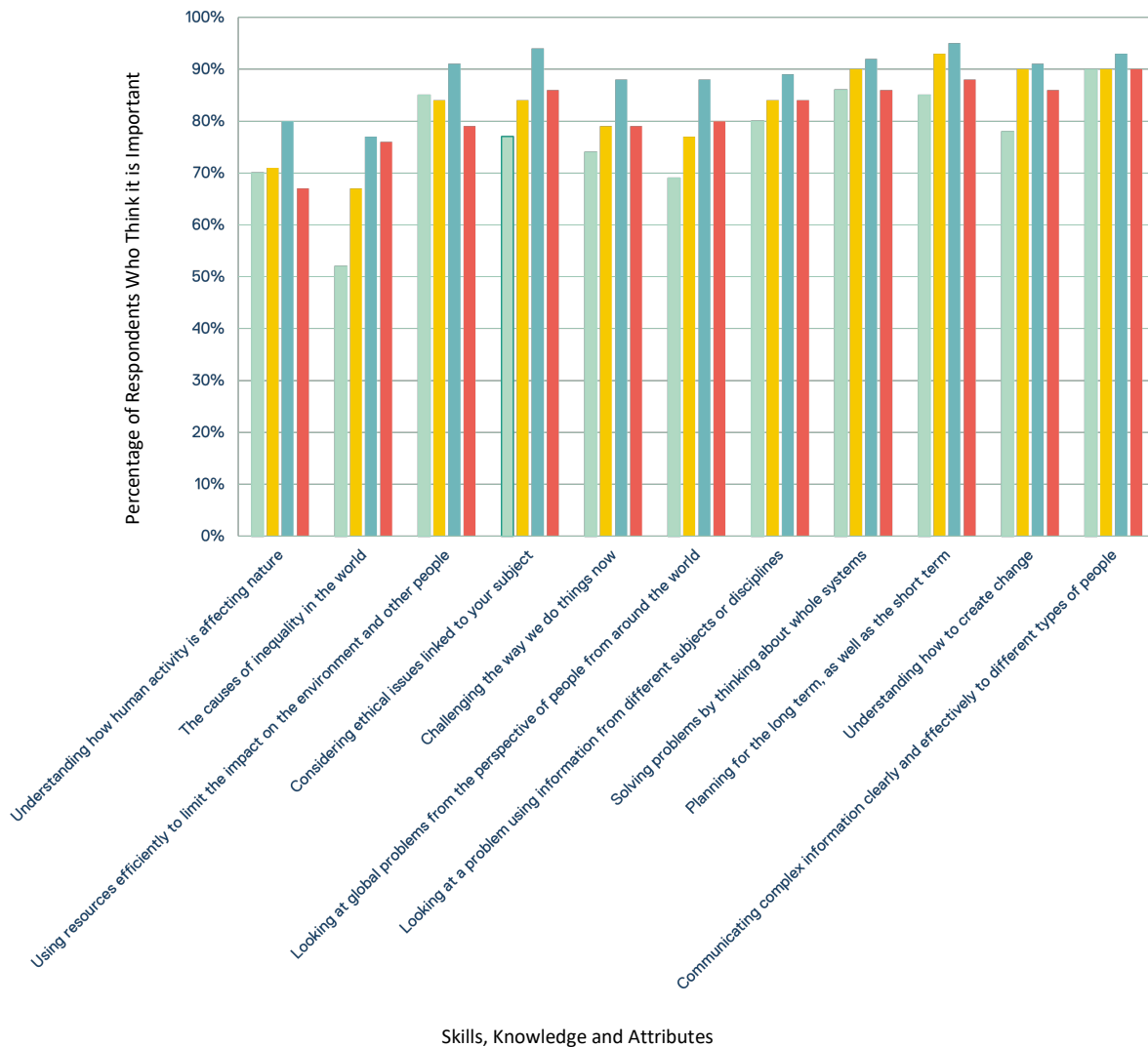


Figure 12. Bar graph showing the percentage of respondents who believe various attributes are important to future employers.

Whilst respondents’ values may be increasingly sustainability-oriented, perceptions of employers are not shifting accordingly. In 2023, ‘communicating complex information clearly and effectively to different types of people’ was seen to be of the most importance to employers, with 90% agreeing it is important. This has remained generally the same since 2019, with a brief increase to 93% in 2022. This was followed by 88% agreeing employers think it is important to understand the concept of planning for the long term, as well as the short term. All factors were seen as highly important to employers, with the lowest percentage at 67%, for understanding how human activity is affecting nature. This shows how social sustainability and knowledge exchange is viewed to be highly important, with environmental sustainability lower. Whilst this does not reflect ideologies of respondents, as shown by 74% agreeing that understanding how human activity is affecting nature is important generally, it does show that their perception of employers’ values does not match their own.

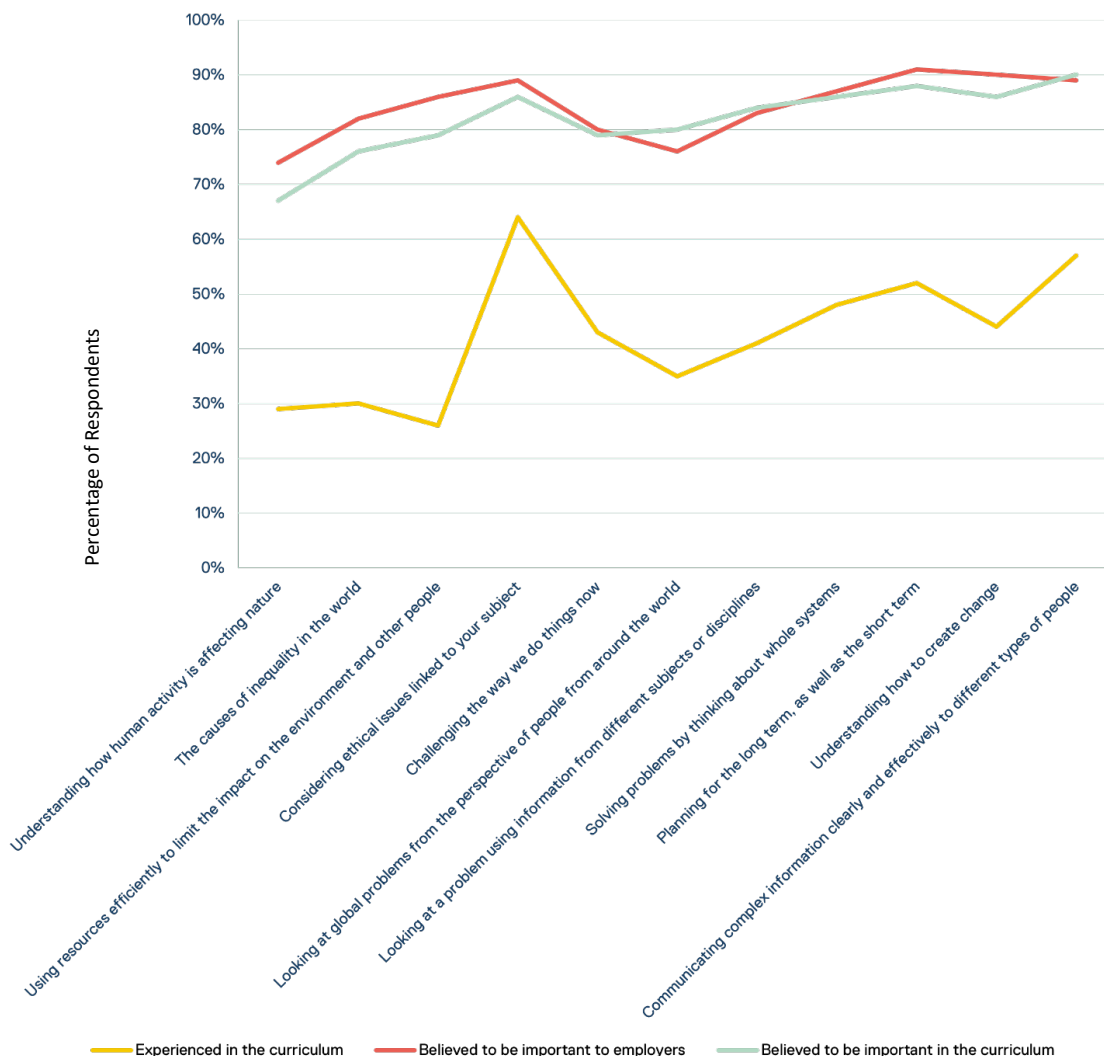


Figure 13. Line graph showing the percentage of respondents who believe various sustainability factors are important to future employers, compared to importance in the curriculum and whether students have experienced them in the curriculum.

Figure 13 illustrates the alignment, and lack of alignment, between respondent perceptions of sustainability factors in three key areas: their importance in the curriculum, their importance to employers, and the coverage these factors currently receive in the curriculum.

A consistent observation across most factors is that respondents recognise a high level of importance for employers, with the coral line representing this trend staying above 70% for nearly all categories. Interestingly, factors such as ‘understanding how human activity is affecting nature’ and ‘using resources efficiently to limit impact on the environment’ both top the chart in terms of perceived importance for employers and align closely with respondents' views on their importance within the curriculum. However, there is a significant divergence in where these are covered in the curriculum. This comparison highlights that while importance to respondents and their beliefs of importance to employers align closely, the gap between coverage needs to be reduced.

## Learning of Core Sustainability Issues

Respondents were asked of their learning of core sustainability issues within their courses. One question identified the specific issues respondents were aware of the curriculum covering, and the context in which these were taught. This determined the breadth of sustainability within the University of Salford curriculum. As this showed coverage across all topics, it indicates that Salford does have a comprehensive approach regarding sustainability and its integration in the curriculum, but there is scope to increase this even more, as respondents have previously highlighted that they would like to see this.

Another question assessed the personal impact of learning these core sustainability issues. It explored how learning has influenced attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and perspectives on employment. As 94% of respondents identified a personal impact, this indicates that actions taken by the University of Salford to enhance sustainability teaching within the curriculum has the opportunity to facilitate deeper understanding of sustainability, both within their personal lives and future careers. Together, these questions indicate that enhanced sustainability teaching within the curriculum has the opportunity to enable a lasting impact amongst the student population, leading to meaningful behavioural changes for the long-term.

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### Distribution of Issues Across Education Stages

Figure 14 shows what stage of education respondents were in when they learnt of key sustainability topics.

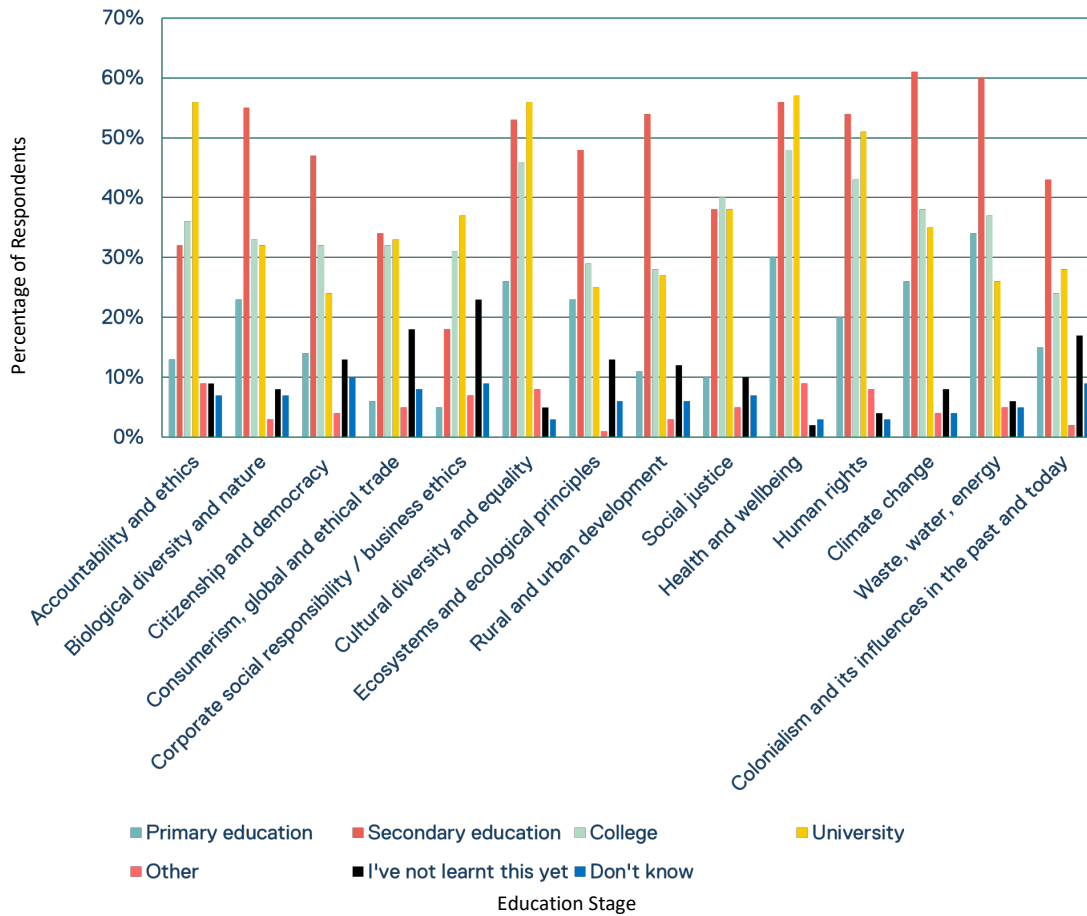


Figure 14. Bar graph showing the percentage of respondents who have covered different sustainability topics across education stages

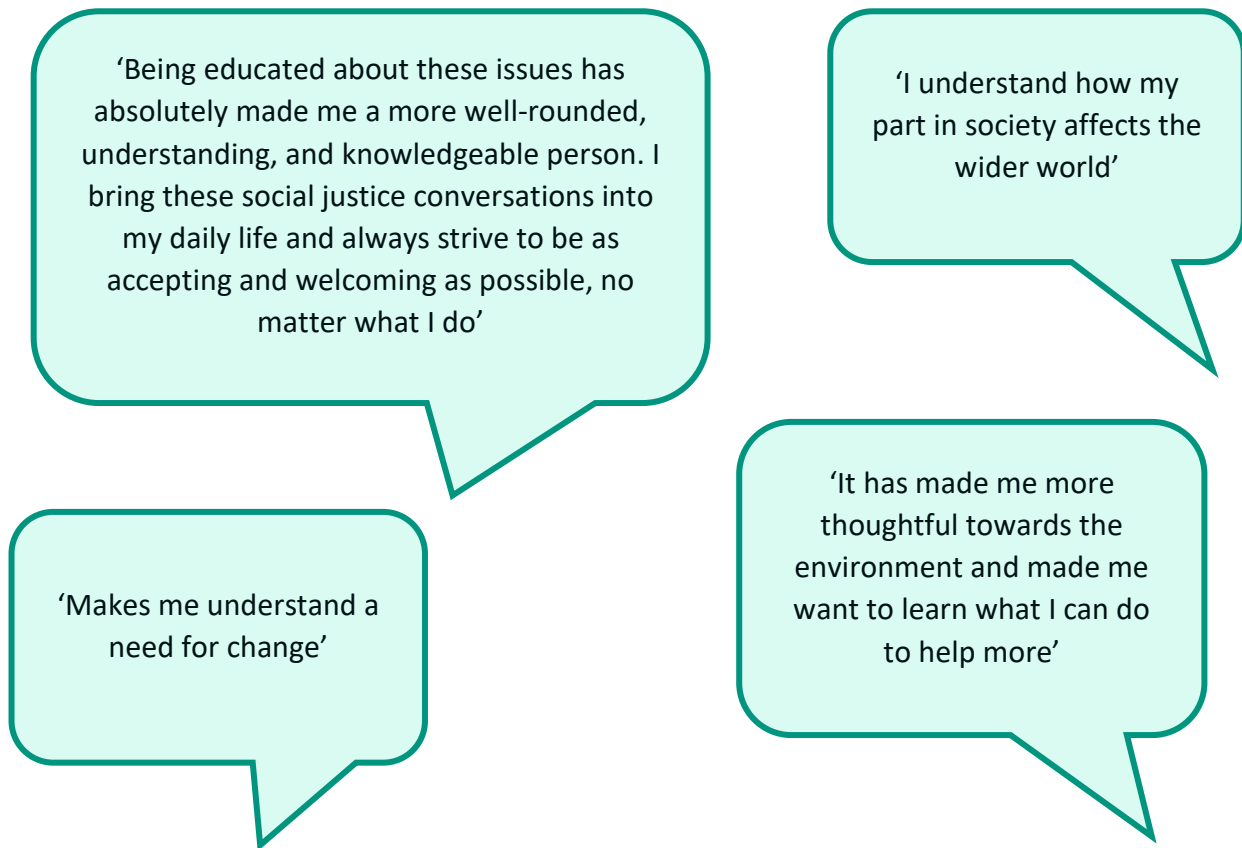
Figure 14 illustrates when respondents were exposed to key sustainability topics throughout their education, spanning from primary education to university. The majority of key sustainability topics are primarily introduced at the secondary education level. Topics such as climate change, human rights, social justice, and waste management are heavily covered during secondary education, with over 50% of respondents indicating that they first learned about these issues at this stage.

However, the data also suggests that university education plays a significant role in the deeper exploration of certain topics. For example, corporate social responsibility, cultural diversity and equity, and rural and urban development, see stronger emphasis at the university level. This suggests that university education is crucial for advanced or specialised understanding of these areas. On the other hand, there is a relatively low percentage of respondents indicating that they have learned about topics such as colonialism, and accountability and ethics, at any stage of their education, suggesting a potential area for improvement.





This shows a theme of understanding but has specifics focusing on environmental sustainability. Full quote examples can be seen below:



These highlight how learning about sustainability issues leads to profound personal and social awareness among respondents. The quotes emphasise that this education enables a deepened understanding of one's role in society, as seen in phrases such as 'I understand how my part in society affects the wider world' and 'Makes me understand a need for change'. The word cloud's emphasis on terms such as 'understanding', 'aware', and 'impact' reinforces the notion that respondents are not only gaining knowledge but are also becoming more thoughtful and conscientious individuals.

## How Students Prefer Sustainability to be Incorporated Into their Studies

Figure 16 shows respondent preference for learning methods in priority order.

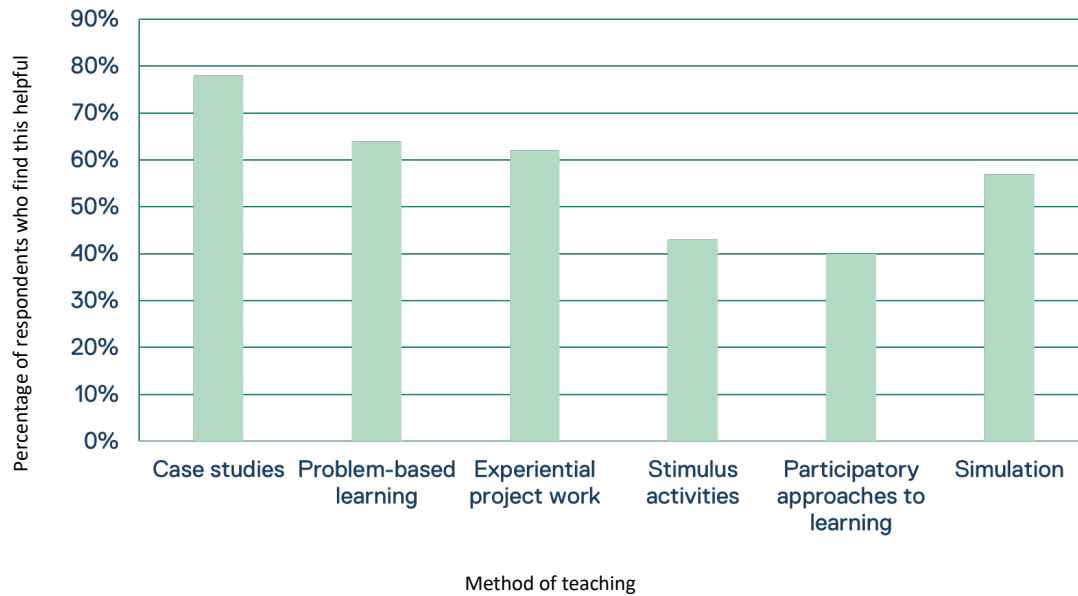


Figure 16. A bar graph showing the methods of teaching respondents find most helpful for sustainability education

Case studies are shown to be the most helpful for respondents, with 79% finding this method of teaching helpful, followed by problem-based learning at 75%. Respondents find simulation learning, such as activities and projects that simulate real-life situations including role plays, debating, mock trials and gaming, the least helpful at 56%. Figure 17 compares these percentages to the percentage of respondents who have experienced these methods of learning in their current course.

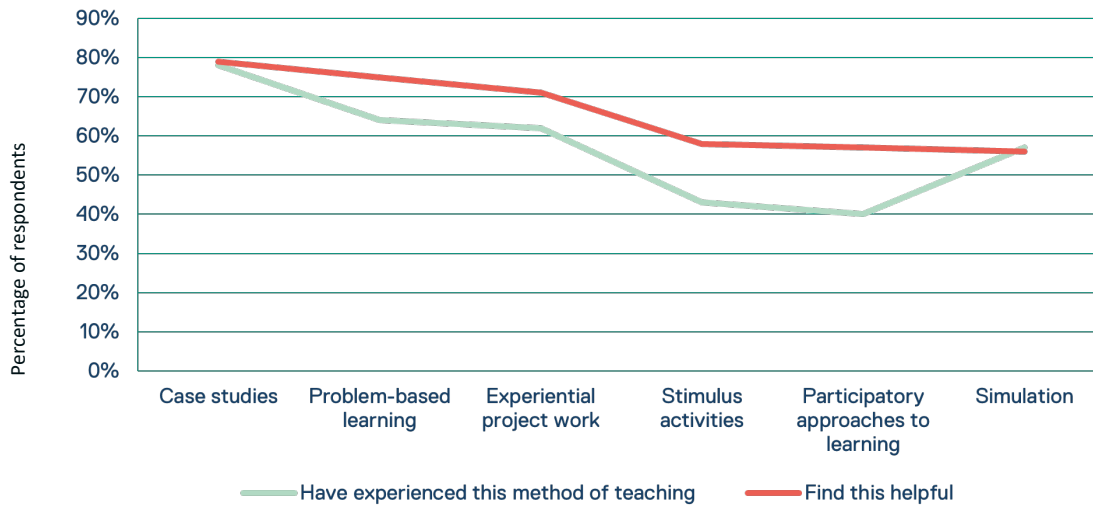


Figure 17. A line chart showing the comparison between what method of teaching respondents have experienced, compared to what they find most helpful.

Figure 17 shows a strong correlation between the methods of teaching respondents experience, compared to what they find helpful. Most importantly, the most helpful method for respondents is also the most frequently experienced. 79% of respondents find case study learning helpful, and 78% have experienced this method of teaching. The largest disparity was highlighted by participatory approaches to learning, with 57% finding this helpful and 17% fewer experiencing this method. Overall, this shows a strong alignment between respondents’ needs and what is provided in the curriculum.

Further information on the University of Salford Sustainability Office and its initiatives, including education for sustainable development, can be found here: [www.salford.ac.uk/environmental-sustainability](http://www.salford.ac.uk/environmental-sustainability)

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