

# Students, Staff and Sustainability

A report into the perceptions, attitudes and interest  
towards sustainability at Manchester Metropolitan  
University

# Contents

<b>About the report.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Contact us.....	3
<b>Student perceptions.....</b>	<b>4</b>
University enrolment survey.....	4
Understanding the issues.....	4
Perception of Manchester Met.....	5
Importance of environmental sustainability.....	5
Summary of student responses.....	6
About the Manchester student enrolment survey.....	6
<b>Staff perceptions.....</b>	<b>7</b>
University staff travel and sustainability survey.....	7
Perception of Manchester Met.....	7
Importance and understanding of sustainability.....	7
Sustainable Development Goals.....	8
Learning and research.....	8
Professional development.....	9
Leadership for environmental sustainability.....	9
Motivation for environmental sustainability.....	10
Summary of staff responses.....	10
About the staff travel and sustainability survey.....	11
Responsible Futures Survey.....	11
<b>NUS Sustainability Skills Survey.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Key findings.....	13
About the survey.....	13



# ABOUT THE REPORT

This report presents some of our key findings from undertaking a range of staff and student survey activities to further understand perceptions of sustainability, expectations of the University as a sustainable institution, and learning experiences received as part of the curriculum, or, as part of the University's professional development offering.



## Contact us

For further information about this research please contact the Manchester Metropolitan University Environment Team.



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# STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

## University enrolment survey

As part of the student enrolment process, since 2013-14 the University have asked all students about the importance they place on sustainability, whether they perceive Manchester Met to be an environmentally sustainable University, and whether they feel they are learning about issues relating to sustainable development as part of their University experience.

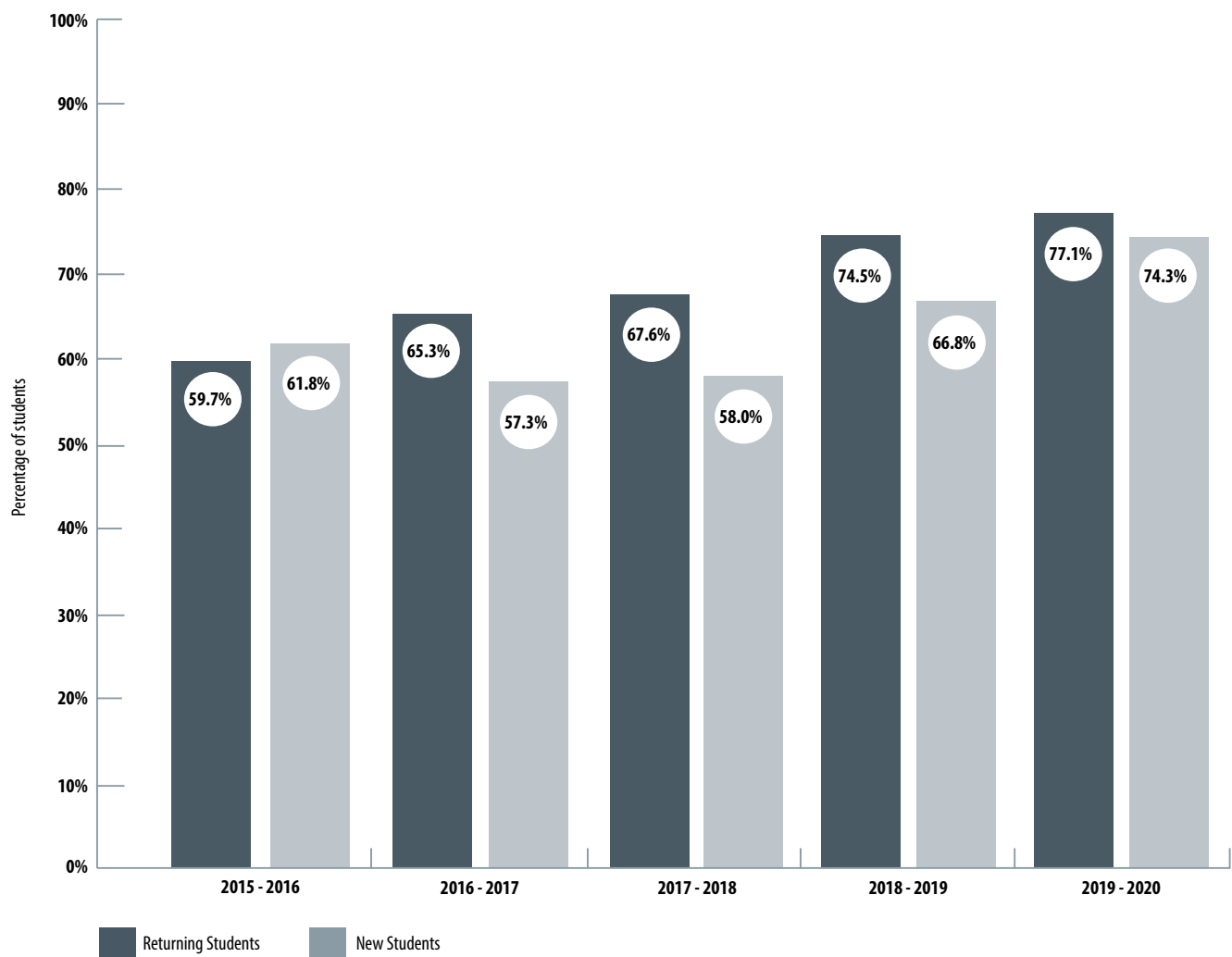
## Understanding the issues

With so many opportunities to learn about sustainable development across the University, 77.1% (2019-2020) of returning students tell us they are gaining skills and knowledge to help them understand key global sustainable development issues. We monitor returning student responses, as this group are able to reflect on

whether they actually receive learning (in any format, formal or informal) to help understand the issues whilst studying at Manchester Met. The proportion of returning students who respond that they are gaining sustainability skills and knowledge has gradually increased since 2015, demonstrating the impact and extent of our education for sustainable development related activities, and how effectively sustainability is embedded in life at Manchester Met.

We ask our new students a slightly different question to understand whether they are interested in gaining the skills and knowledge to help understand global sustainable development issues. Although levels of interest from new students are slightly lower, there is a comparative increase since 2015.

Student understanding of and interest in understanding key global sustainable development issues



Enrolment question:

New students: Are you interested in gaining the skills and knowledge to help understand global sustainable development issues?

Returning students: Are you gaining the skills and knowledge to help understand global sustainable development issues?

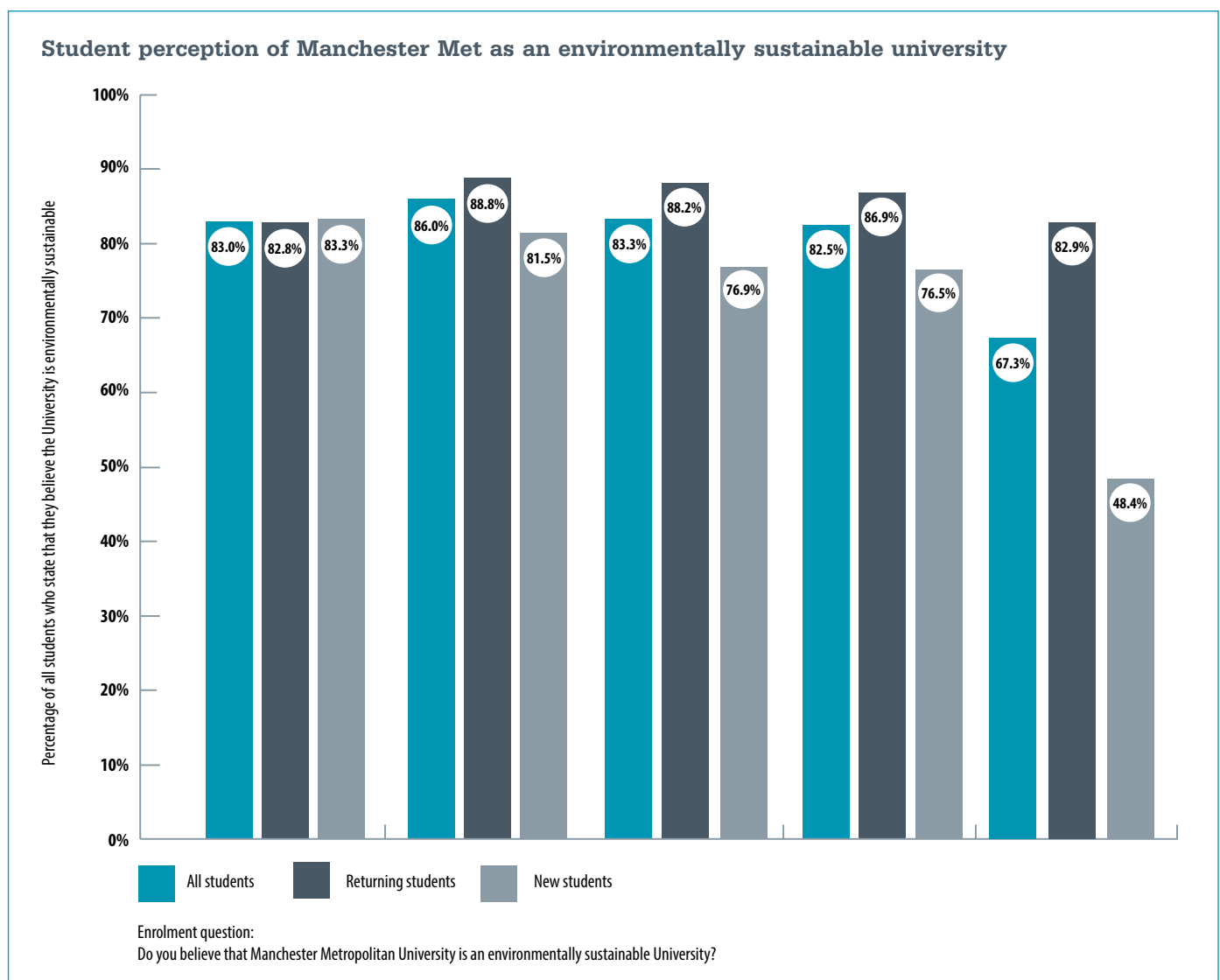
## Perception of Manchester Met

Understanding whether students perceive Manchester Metropolitan University to be environmentally sustainable is important to us. Most recently, 67.3% (2018-19) of students agreed or strongly agreed that the University is environmentally sustainable. This represents a significant decrease when compared to the previous year (2017-18: 82.5%) and could reflect a change in attitudes and awareness of sustainability issues – particularly given public consciousness of the climate crisis, global activism and the increasing frequency of adverse climatic events.

When analysed further, the decrease in perception of Manchester Met as a sustainable University occurs amongst the new student cohort (48.4% in 2018-19 compared with 76.5% in 2017-18 agree that Manchester Met is environmentally sustainable). This could

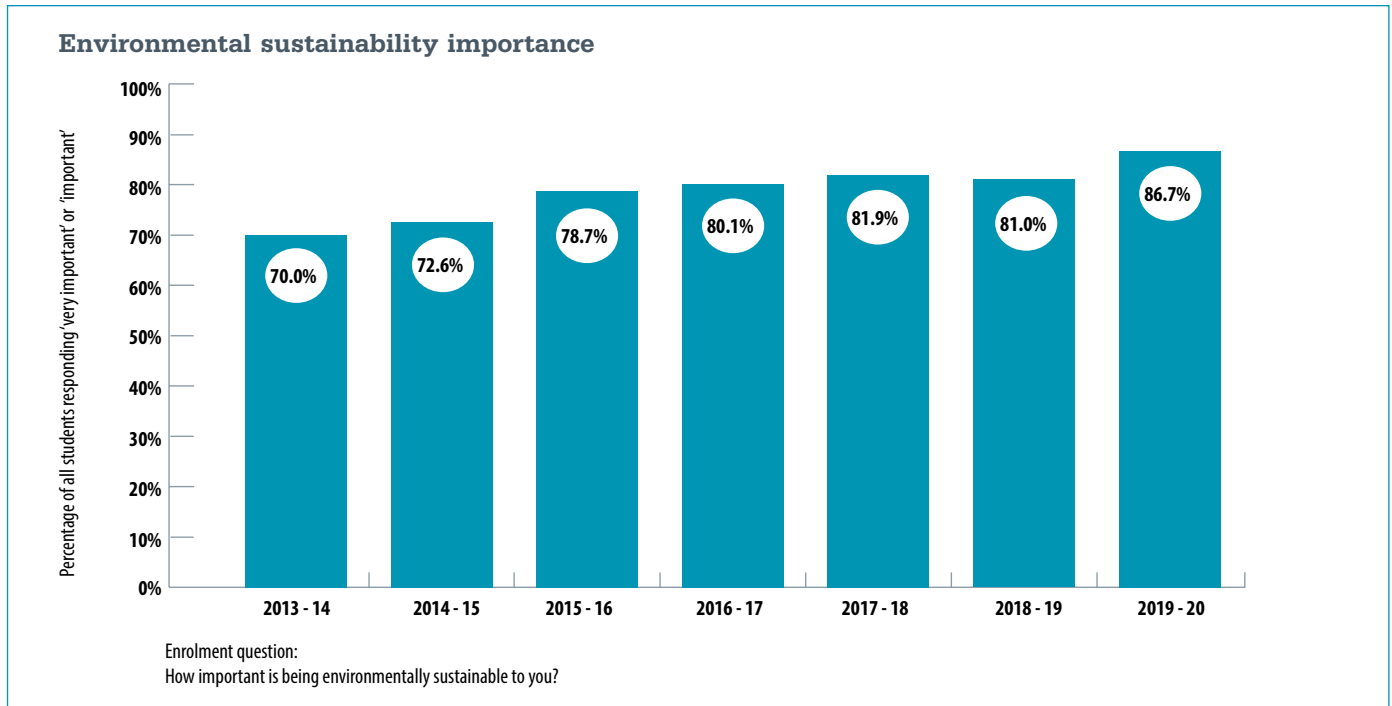
indicate that students expect more on sustainable development from their prospective university, and perhaps that they are less exposed to these issues and what the University is doing about them before actually commencing their studies. Responses from returning students, although slightly lower, remain consistent with previous years (over 80% of returning students agree that Manchester Met is environmentally sustainable). This indicates that our student body once studying and actively part of university life are aware of the actions Manchester Met are taking, and perhaps engaging in activities to address sustainable development challenges.

In the recent 2019-2020 enrolment survey, the responses provided for the question are not valid, due to a change in answer options.



## Importance of environmental sustainability

Since 2013-14, more of our students rate environmental sustainability as an important issue. When asked as part of the enrolment survey, 86.7% (2019-20) stated that environmental sustainability was either 'important' or 'very important' to them, nearly a 6% increase on the previous academic year, where 81% of all students rated the issue as personally important. The survey responses may reflect the growing public concern about the environment that has soared since the global climate protests in response to the climate crisis.



## Summary of student responses

Manchester Met students are gaining the skills and knowledge required to understand sustainable development issues because of their university experience; this could be from their taught course, informal opportunities, the campus environment or University practices and culture.

Students are recognising that the University is embedding more education for sustainable development related issues into its formal and informal offering. Over 5 years, there has been a 17.4% increase in the number of returning students who state that they are gaining skills and knowledge to understand sustainability issues (59.7% in 2015-16 to 77.1% in 2019-20). This could also be due to the fact that students are actually noticing the inclusion of sustainable development in their learning experiences because of heightened societal awareness, rather than the explicit addition of sustainability related content into the curricular. Further research to understand the causes behind the shift in student responses to this question may be beneficial.

As the University achieves more in terms of its organisational sustainability performance, and is recognised through national and international sustainability rankings and accolades such as the People and Planet University League rankings, so too does the student perception that the organisation is environmentally sustainable. Improving our public profile and reputation with regards to sustainability appears to correlate with how environmentally sustainable students perceive the University to be; over 80% of all students have consistently rated the University as being sustainable since 2014-15. However, as the University only started to track student perceptions of this issue through the online enrolment survey in 2014-15, it is not possible to determine whether there has been a shift since the university

improved its sustainability performance, profile and reputation, but it is likely that this is the case.

An increase in the proportion of students who respond that environmental sustainability is an important issue to them has increased from 70% (2013-14) to 86.7% (2019-20), an increase of nearly 17%. This may correlate to the increase in returning students who feel they are gaining skills and knowledge for sustainable development (SD), in that they are consciously aware that SD issues are incorporated into their learning, and equally, correlate to the decrease in students who feel that the university is environmental sustainable (2018-19 survey responses). Students may have higher expectations of universities when it comes to how sustainable an entity they are, and of how sustainable development issues are incorporated into their learning and research activities.

## About the Manchester Met Student Enrolment Survey

All students (including new and returning students) are required to complete an online enrolment survey each year, before they commence their studies. As part of the survey, students are required to answer three questions relating to sustainability, which provide valuable insight into perceptions, importance, sustainability learning experiences and interest. Manchester Met have tracked student responses on these issues since 2014, and use the information to track and monitor progress on education for sustainable development and sustainability communication and awareness. Approximately 32,000 students are required to complete the enrolment survey annually for the September intake.

# STAFF PERCEPTIONS

## University staff travel and sustainability survey

Manchester Metropolitan staff were asked a series of questions relating to environmental sustainability in the all-staff 'travel and sustainability survey' in 2016, 2018 and in 2020. Findings presented in this report outline trends, highlight areas of good and excellent performance, and identify potential opportunities for improvement or provision of service.

Although some of the questions put to staff have evolved since 2016, where possible, useful comparisons have been drawn, comparing findings from the 2016, 2018 and 2020 surveys.

### Perception of Manchester Met

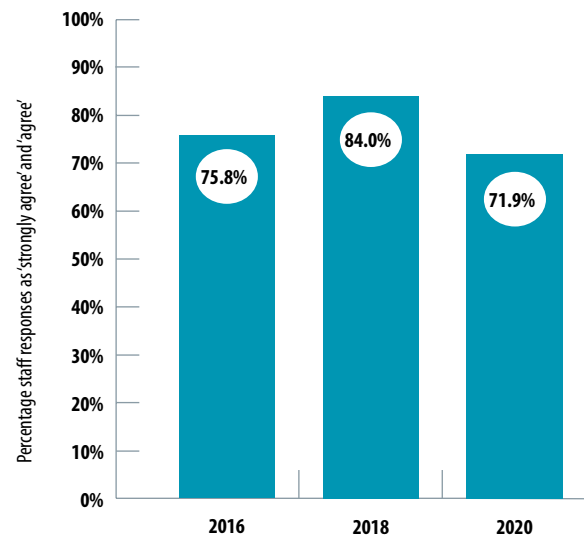
71.9% (2020 survey) of staff agreed or strongly agreed that the University is environmentally sustainable, a decrease of 13% from 84.9% (2018) and 75.8% (2016). When examined further, there appears to be a marked difference between the perceptions that professional services and academic members hold - 74.6% (2020) of professional staff compared to 63.4% (2020) of academic staff perceive that Manchester Met is environmentally sustainable, a difference of 11.2%.

This appears to reflect the findings highlighted from the student enrolment survey, where a decrease to 67.3% (2018-19) of all students rate the University to be environmentally sustainable, and could reflect a change in attitudes and awareness of sustainability issues and higher expectations of organisations with regards to the environment.

### Importance and understanding of sustainability

Staff were asked whether 'issues relating to environmental sustainability are important' to them and if they possess a 'clear understanding of what environmental sustainability means'. Across the survey years, the proportion of respondents who rate that environmental sustainability is of personal importance and that have a clear understanding of what environmental sustainability it means, has remained high and relatively constant since the 2018 survey. Between 94% and 95.5% of respondents strongly agree and agree across both questions. This indicates that University staff are concerned, attaching importance to the issues as well as possessing a good level of understanding of 'environmental sustainability'.

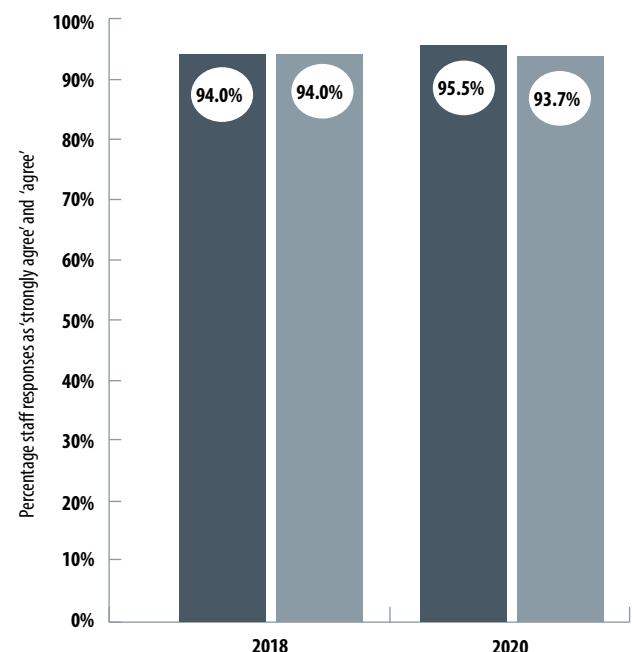
### Staff perception of Manchester Met as an environmentally sustainable university



Survey question:

Do you believe that Manchester Metropolitan University is an environmentally sustainable university?

### Staff understanding and importance of environmental sustainability



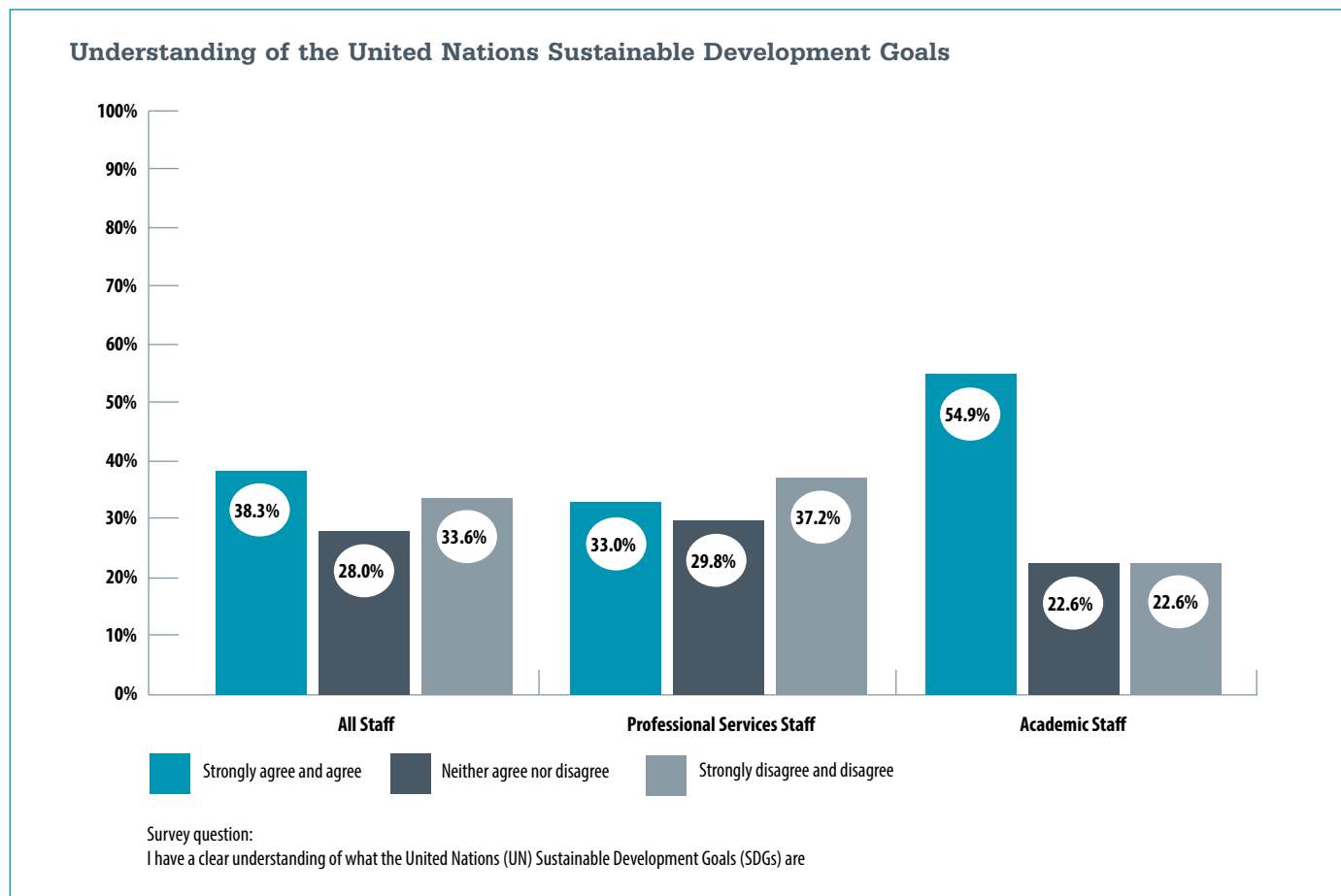
Understanding Importance

Survey questions:

I have a clear understanding of what environmental sustainability means.  
Issues relating to environmental sustainability are important to me.

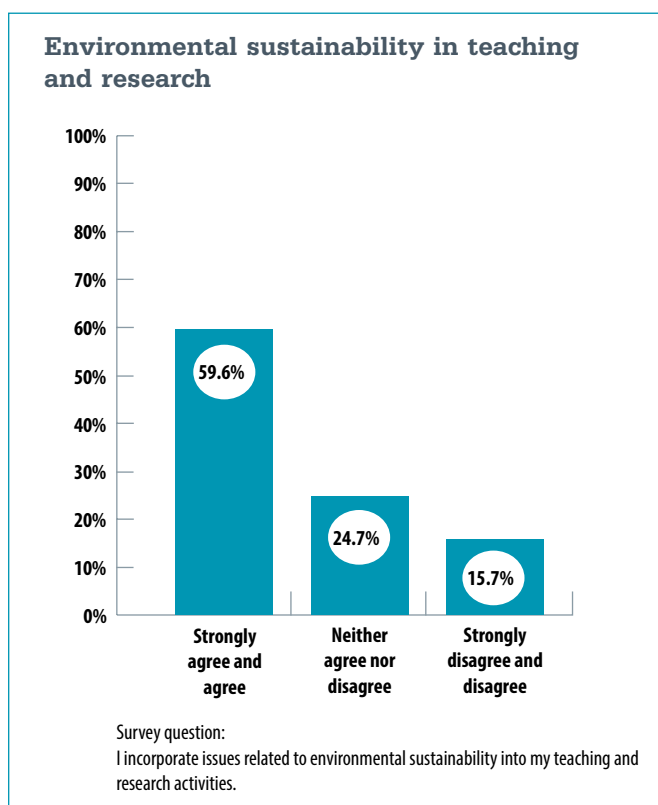
## Sustainable Development Goals

An additional question was included in the 2020 survey to gain insight into staff understanding of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Respondents indicate that understanding of the UN SDGs is relatively low; just 38.3% of staff agree or strongly agree that they possess a clear understanding of what they are, and there is a noteworthy difference in understanding between the professional service staff (33%) compared to academic staff (54.9%).



## Learning and research

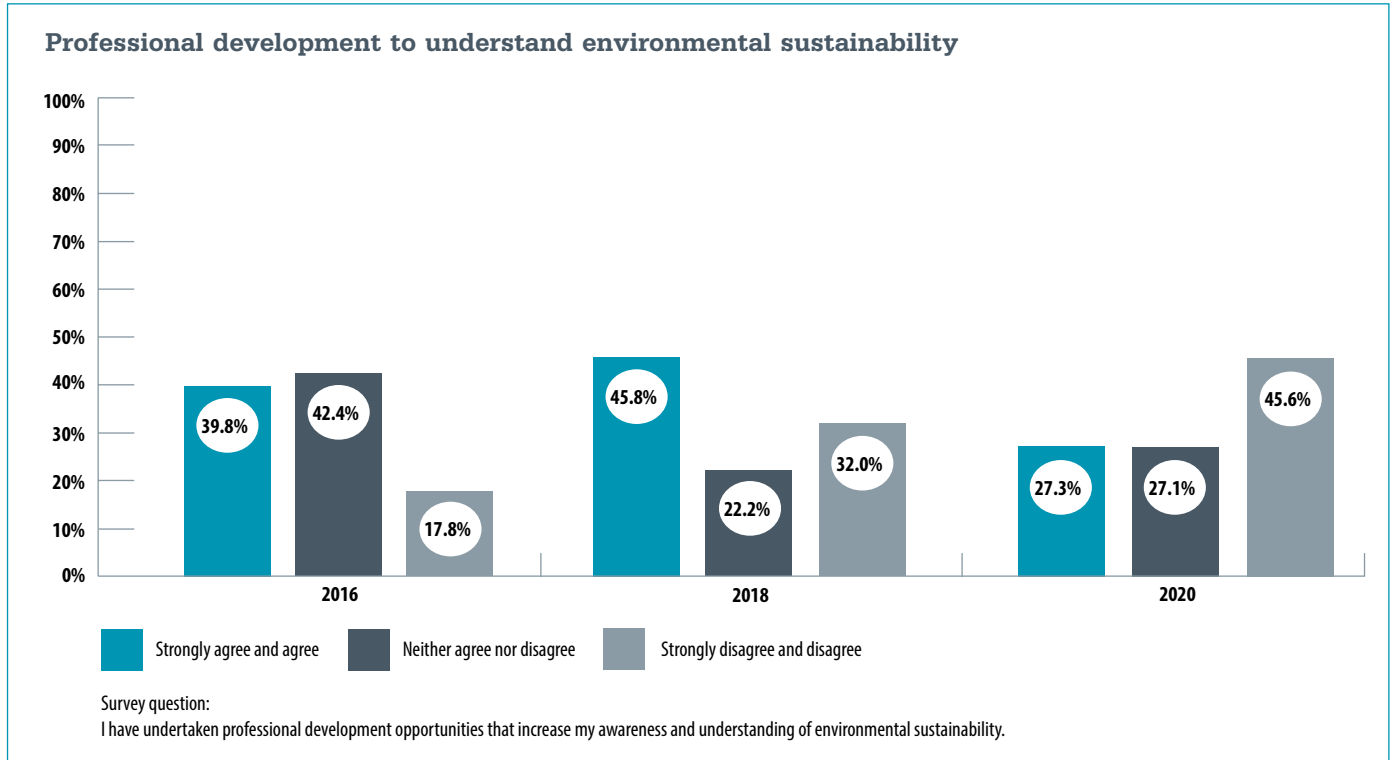
Academic staff members were asked whether they incorporate environmental sustainability into their teaching and research activities, a new survey question in the 2020 survey. Of the 235 academic members of staff responding to the survey, 59.6% agreed or strongly agreed that environmental sustainability issues were incorporated into their teaching and research, 15.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 24.7% did not indicate a view. Although encouraging and positive, there could be opportunities to understand how the University can further support the inclusion of sustainable development related topics into teaching and research more broadly across the curriculum and research. Additional research and feedback would be required to enable this.





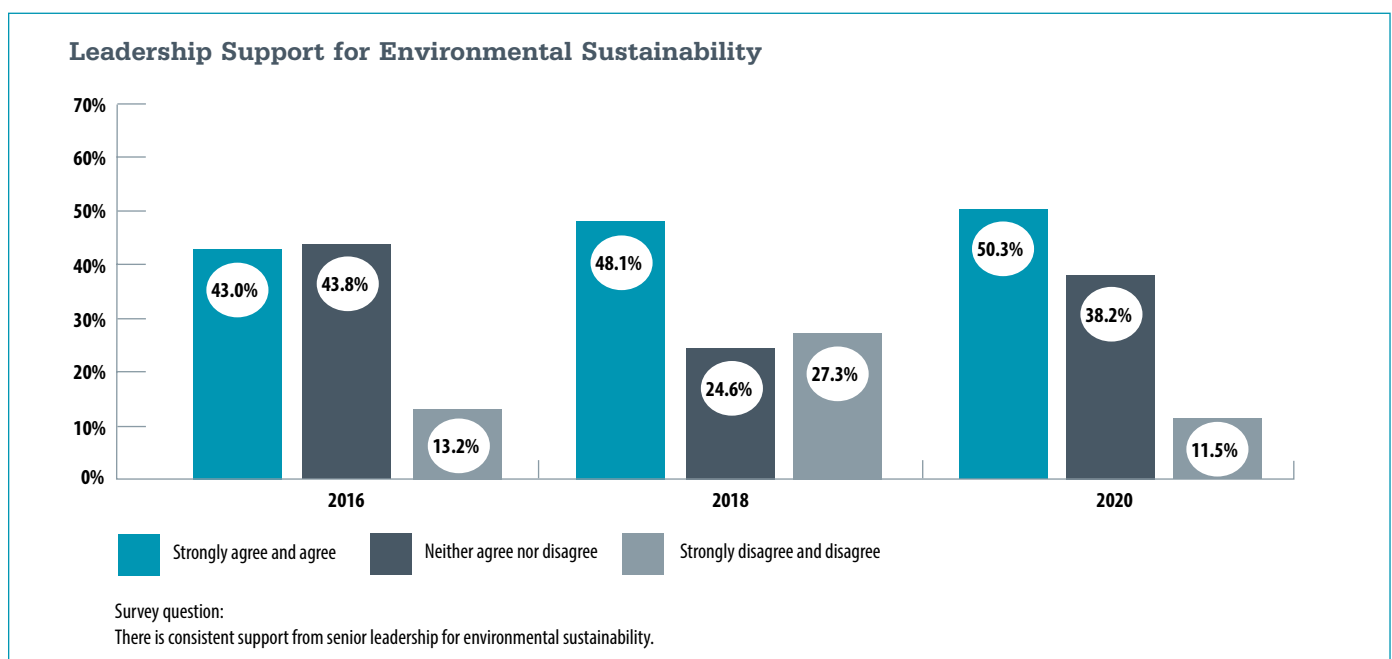
## Professional development

Although in all survey years staff indicate that they understand what environmental sustainability means, the 2020 survey revealed that only 27.3% of staff agree or strongly agree that they have received development activities to enhance their awareness or understanding of the issues. In contrast, 45.6% (2020) of staff disagree or strongly disagree that they have received professional development, indicating a need for the University to resource and implement a training and development programme, not only for environmental sustainability, but also broader sustainable development related issues.



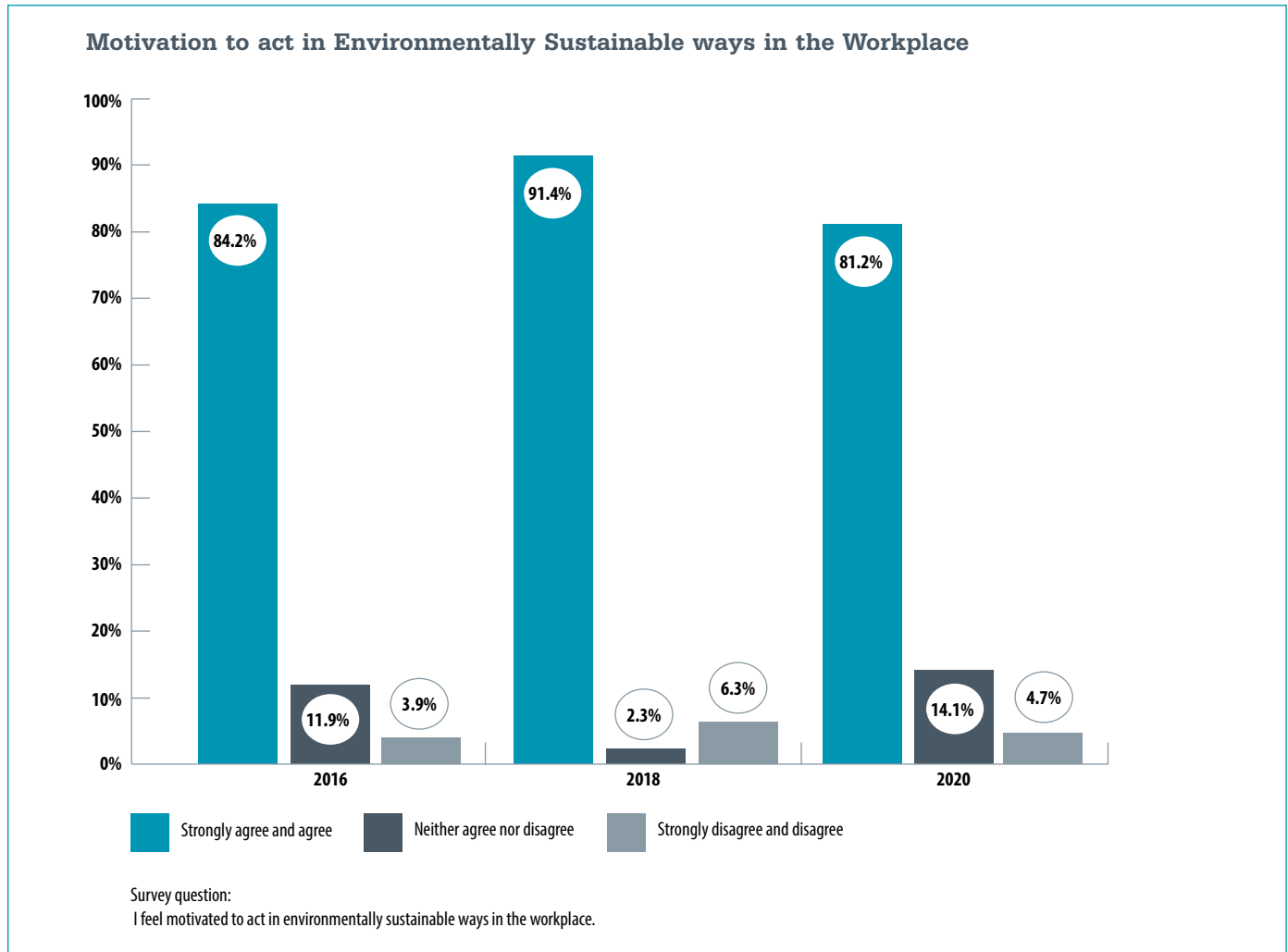
## Leadership for environmental sustainability

When asked whether there is 'consistent support from senior leadership for environmental sustainability', 50.3% of staff agree or strongly agree that there is, and 11.5% disagree or strongly disagree in the recent 2020 survey. Since the 2016 survey there is a 7.3% increase in the proportion of staff who indicate that they agree or strongly agree that there is consistent leadership to support environmental sustainability. This is a slight increase, but reveals that there is potential for significant improvement in how the staff community view University leadership support of the issues.



## Motivation for environmental sustainability

Motivation to act in environmentally sustainable ways in the workplace has decreased. In the 2020 survey, 81.2% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they felt motivated to act in environmentally sustainable ways in the workplace, compared to 91.4% of staff in 2018 (a decrease of -10.2%). This could be linked to the degree to which staff feel supported and enabled to work in environmentally sustainable ways; the extent to which staff believe there is consistent leadership support for environmental sustainability remains relatively low at 50.3%, and only 27.3% have indicated they have received relevant professional development.



## Summary of staff responses

Staff perception of Manchester Met as an environmentally sustainable University has decreased by 13% in the recent 2020 survey- and, the results indicate that a higher proportion of professional service staff (74.6%) compared to academic staff (63.4%) believe this to be the case. Although, the importance placed on environmental sustainability and understanding of environmental sustainability has remained high and consistent over the survey years- indicating staff are attaching importance to, as well as a possessing perceived high level of understanding of environmental sustainability issues.

The University asked an additional question in the 2020 survey to gain insight into staff understanding of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our findings indicate that staff understanding of the UNSDGs is relatively low (38.3%), particularly

in comparison to the perceived understanding of 'environmental sustainability' (95.5%) amongst all staff respondents. When analysed further, there is a significant difference between professional service and academic staff understanding of the SDGs; approximately 21.9% more academic staff indicate they possess an understanding of what the SDGs are (54.9% compared to 33%). These findings are both interesting and revealing, and provide good information as the university develops its plans to understand more about its current and potential contributions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Almost 60% of academic staff indicate that they incorporate environmental sustainability into their teaching and research activities. Approximately 15.7% indicated that they do not incorporate environmental sustainability into their teaching and research, and 24.7% did not indicate a view. These findings provide

an evidence base that undertaking further research could provide insight into why this may be the case, and whether the provision of further activities such as professional development for Education for Sustainable Development may result in the inclusion of more environmental sustainability and sustainable development related issues into teaching and research.

Levels of engagement in development opportunities that increase awareness and understanding of environmental sustainability have decreased (27.3% in 2020) when compared to the 2018 (45.8%) and 2016 (39.8%) survey years. In the 2020 survey, 45.6% of staff disagree or strongly disagree that they have received professional development, indicating a need for the University to resource and implement a training and development programme for environmental sustainability, and broader sustainable development issues.

Broadly, both staff and student survey findings indicate a drop in how sustainable they perceive the University to be, which could reflect a change in attitudes and awareness of sustainability issues – particularly given public consciousness of the climate crisis, global activism and the increasing frequency of adverse climatic events. Student and staff may have higher expectations of the University when it comes to how sustainable an entity we are, and of how sustainable development issues are incorporated into our learning, research and professional development activities.

### About the staff travel and sustainability survey

The travel and sustainability survey is undertaken biennially, and is open to all staff at the University. Prior to 2016, the University undertook a travel behaviour survey only.

In 2020 survey, we categorised staff into two groups- those who work in professional services, and those who are academic members of staff. This was to understand whether differences exist between the two staff groups.

Survey year	Response count	Response rate (approximate)	Academic count	Professional services count
2016	1,101	28%	Not known	Not known
2018	1,313	33%	Not known	Not known
2020	1,015 (963 answered the environmental sustainability related questions)	24%	728 (75.6%)	235 (24.4%)

### Responsible Futures Survey

Responsible Futures is a framework to embed sustainability through all aspects of the student learning experience. Manchester Metropolitan staff were asked a series of questions relating to implementation of Responsible Futures in the curriculum in a survey in 2020. Initial findings presented in this report highlight areas of implementation and identify potential opportunities for improvement.

Responses indicate that sustainability is embedded in the formal curriculum across four Faculties. Examples of practice were aligned across all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on SDG3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG12 (Responsible Production and Consumption).

While responses reveal innovative practice across the University, there is potential for significant improvement in how the staff community view embedding sustainability in the formal and informal curriculum and how this is recognised, recorded and evaluated.

# NUS SUSTAINABILITY SKILLS SURVEY

Manchester Met has encouraged its students to engage in the NUS Sustainability Skills Survey, which is a longitudinal research project run since 2011, that provides insight into students' experiences of teaching and learning on sustainable development. Our students completed the survey in all years, and more than 100 students responded in the following survey years: 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2018-19. Key findings from the 2018-2019 survey are summarised in this report.

Respondents were asked to identify how important a range of factors were to their decision on where to apply to study, being asked 'how important the following aspects were when choosing which university or college to apply to'. Responses where students selected 'very important' and 'somewhat important' are summarised and ranked in Table 1.

**Table 1**

How important are the following aspects were when choosing which university or college to apply to?				
Aspect	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Very and Somewhat Important	Importance Ranking
Employment prospects after completing the course	65%	24%	89%	1
The teaching methods	50%	34%	84%	=2
The reputation of the university / college	41%	43%	84%	=2
Reputation of the course	49%	35%	84%	=2
Attractiveness of location	32%	49%	81%	5
The 'A' level or equivalent grades or points demanded	32%	42%	74%	6
Proximity of University to home	35%	35%	70%	7
The position of the university / college in league tables	17%	50%	67%	8
The position of the course in league tables	18%	47%	65%	9
How seriously the University takes environmental issues	25%	38%	63%	10
How seriously the university / college takes global development issues	17%	44%	61%	11
Nightlife	11%	29%	40%	12

How seriously the university takes environmental issues in deciding whether to apply to a University or College ranks as the 10th most important issue out of 12 amongst the Manchester Met student respondents. This reflects the national findings where primary motivations for both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) respondents include reputation of their course and institution, employment prospects on completion of their course and the teaching methods used.

However, the NUS found that almost half (43%) of HE respondents were influenced to some extent by how seriously a university takes environmental issues, and again almost half (45%) by how seriously a university takes global development issues when choosing which university to apply to. Comparatively, Manchester Met student respondents appear to be influenced to

a greater extent by how seriously a university takes environmental and global development issues with 63% and 61% retrospectively selecting 'very important' and 'somewhat important'. Further research would be useful in understanding whether the differences are significant.

Students were asked what they felt the most relevant way of including the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment would be within their course; responses where students selected 'extremely relevant' and 'somewhat relevant' are summarised and ranked in Table 2.

**Table 2**

<b>What do you think the most relevant way of including the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment within your own course would be?</b>				
<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Somewhat Important</b>	<b>Very and Somewhat Important</b>	<b>Importance Ranking</b>
Offer placements or work experience	59%	27%	86%	1
Build the material into the existing content in the course	40%	43%	83%	2
Link coursework or dissertations to the issues	41%	41%	82%	3
Offer a specific module on the course	34%	43%	77%	=4
Run extra-curricular activities within departments	34%	43%	77%	=4
Run extra-curricular activities within the Students' Union	35%	36%	71%	6

Manchester Met students indicate that the most relevant way of incorporating skills and knowledge for sustainable development issues is through placement and work experience, by incorporating material into existing courses, and by linking coursework or dissertations to the issues, which reflect the findings in the broader national survey.

## Key Findings

Here are some of the key findings from the 2018-2019 survey, Manchester Met student responses:

- 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed universities should be obliged to develop students' social and environmental skills as part of their course.
- 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Manchester Met takes action to limit the negative impacts it has on the environment and society, compared to 74% across the NUS national survey.
- 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Manchester Met Students' Union takes action to limit the negative impacts it has on the environment and society, compared to 74% across the NUS national survey.
- 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Manchester Met encourages them to think and act to help the environment, and other people, compared to 62% across the NUS national survey.
- 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sustainable development is something which universities should actively incorporate and promote, whilst 66% agreed or strongly agreed that all course tutors should be required to incorporate sustainable development within teaching, and 67% agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to learn more about sustainable development.

## About the NUS Sustainability Skills Survey

The Sustainability Skills Survey is a national survey, undertaken annually by the SOS-UK (formerly NUS Sustainability). Each year all UK Universities are encouraged and supported to engage their student body in the survey; primarily by disseminating a range of communications to encourage students to respond to the survey. Manchester Met gains valuable insight and information to help develop strategies and plans that support the integration of sustainable development related issues into the formal and informal curriculum from this survey.

[Please click here for further information about the survey](#)



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