

Student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development

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

First-year tracker (following responses from 2010 to 2014 from first-year students)

2012 cohort (following responses from 2012 first-years, 2013 second years and 2014 third-years)

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

Research into student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development (SD) was conducted for a fifth consecutive year in 2014. This annual study:

- updates our understanding on student attitudes towards, and skills for, sustainable development through 3,775 first-year and 1,973 third- year respondents in academic year 2013/14;
- identifies trends in demands and expectations from first-year students new to university;
- tracks longitudinal demands and expectations from first-year students as they progress through their university career;
- analyses the longitudinal variability in approximately 27,000 student responses between 2010 and 2014.

The research content repeated the previous questions to capture comparable longitudinal data. There was no reference to sustainable development in its promotion to reduce bias. Responses were weighted to reflect the demographic makeup of the UK student population.

This summary sheet presents an overview of respondents understanding of and attitudes towards the concept of sustainable development, along with a picture of how this translates to everyday behaviour on related environmental issues during their time in higher education.

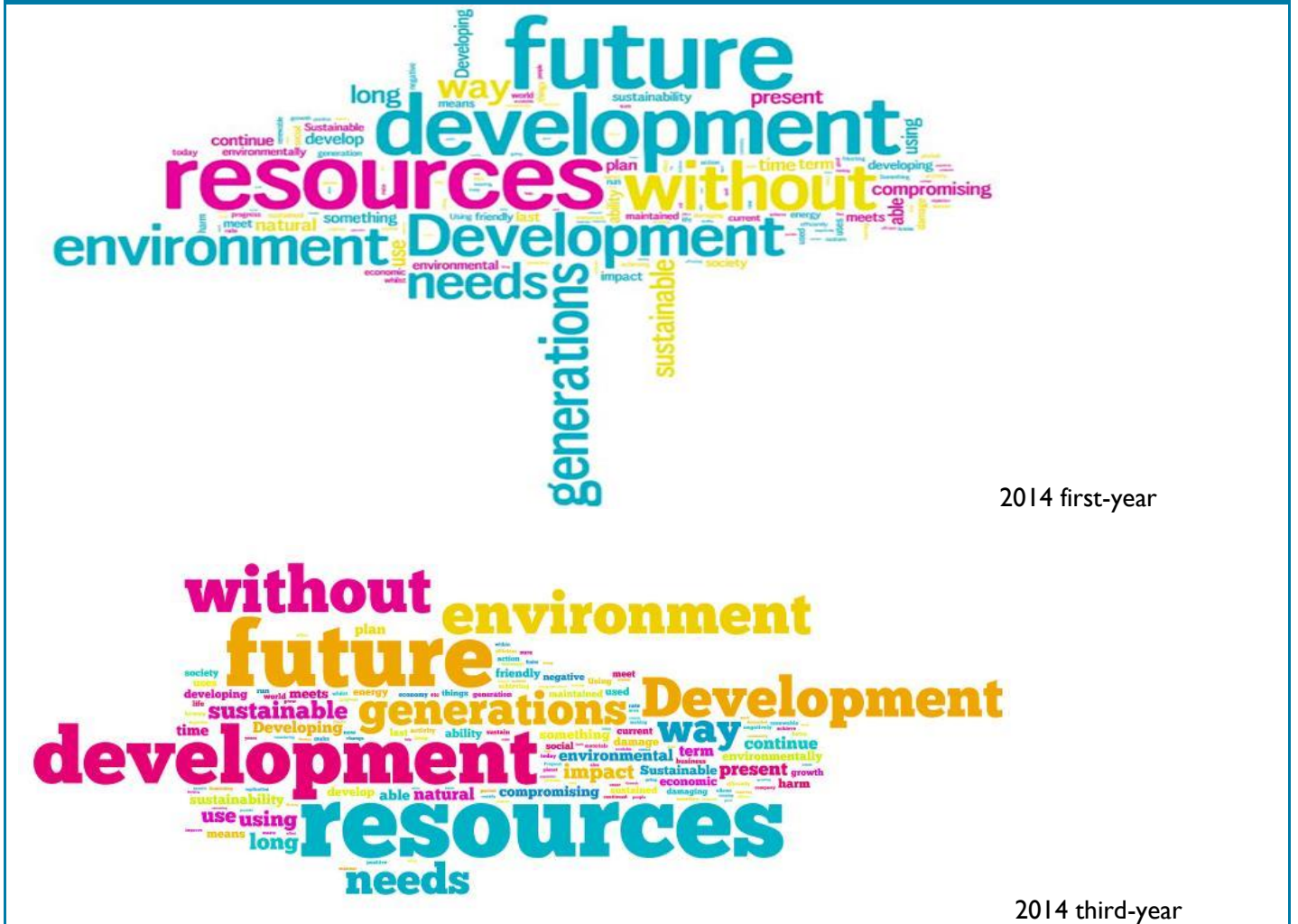
I.1 Key questions:

- What do respondents understand by the term sustainable development?
- What are the levels of pro-environmental behaviour among respondents?
- What intentions do respondents have to act on environmental issues, and how do these intentions change with progression through higher education?
- What intentions do respondents have to take part in pro-environmental clubs and societies?

2. What do respondents understand by the term sustainable development?

As in previous years of the research, respondents were asked to define sustainable development in their own words, without prompting. Respondents were not provided with a definition of sustainability until after this question which appeared at the end of the survey in order to avoid influencing respondents and ensure responses were based on their own understanding of the environmental and social skills associated with sustainable development.

Image 2.1 | What do you understand the term “sustainable development” to mean? [2014 RESEARCH]



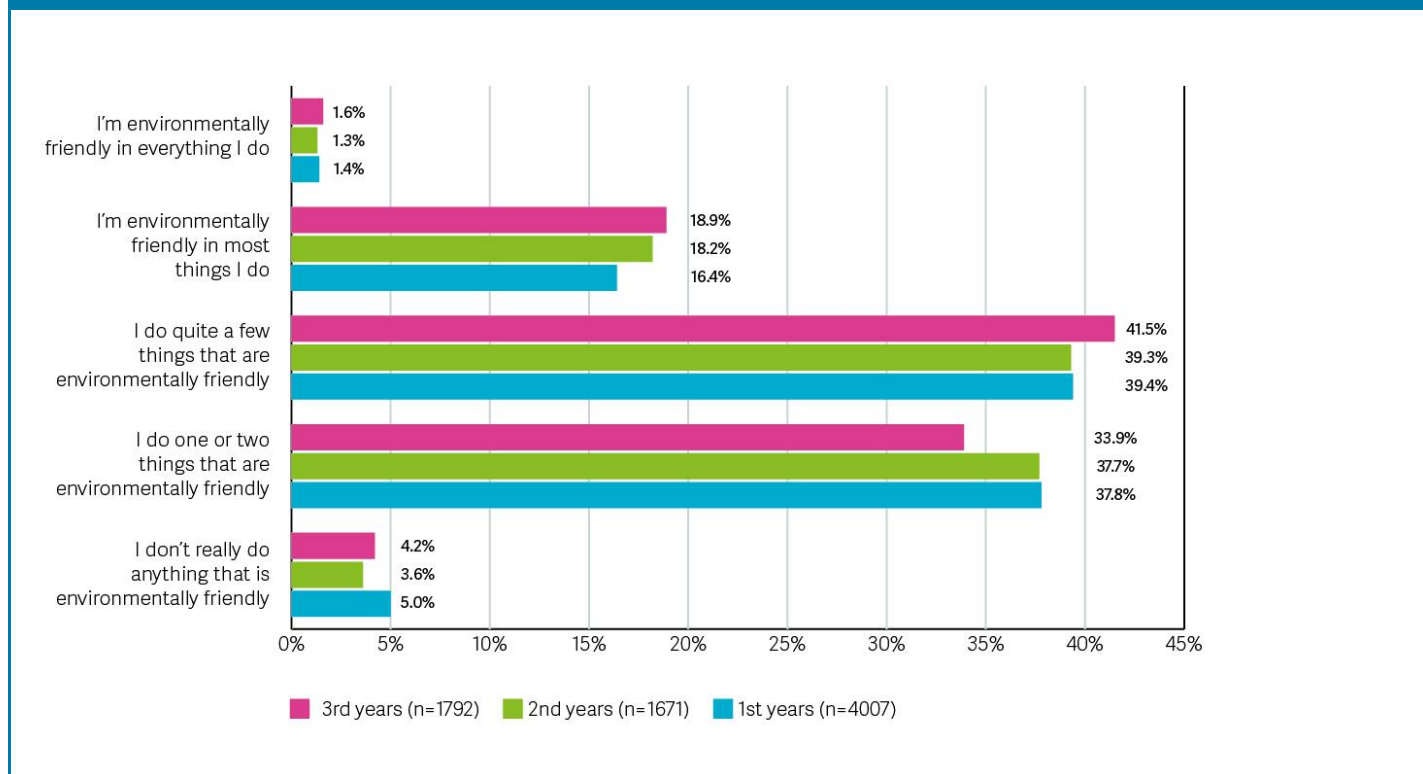
2.3 Key findings

Respondents continue to draw on an understanding of sustainable development as defined by the Brundtland (1987) definition. The environmental dimension also continues to be more prominent, as shown by Figure 1 which captures the most commonly used words to define sustainability. This suggests a potential need to review the framing of the concept to ensure the full definition is communicated and understood.

3. What are the levels of pro-environmental behavior among respondents?

It is worth reiterating in light of the previous finding on understanding of sustainable development, only two standalone questions within the survey directly addressed the environment. In order not to bias the majority of the survey, the definition of sustainability was given towards the end of the survey to allow analysis of the different understandings of the term.

Figure 3.1 | Which of these statements would you say best describes your current lifestyle? [2012 COHORT]



3.2 Key findings

Respondents believe themselves to be generally positive, in terms of demonstrating environmentally friendly behaviours, with two-fifths reporting that they “do quite a few things that are environmentally friendly”.

3.4 2012 Cohort

The 2012 cohort shows a significant change in reported pro-environmental behaviour as they progress through university among those respondents who consider themselves environmentally-friendly in most things they do (for example, 16.4%, n=653 2012 first-years compared with 18.9%, n=332 2014 third-years). This mirrors the findings of the 2010 cohort in the previous reports associated with this research.

Again it is important to bear in mind that these are self-reported behaviours and may not reflect true action, however further investigating changes in environmental behaviour in the move from home to university, and from university accommodation to private residences may reveal any true differences in environmental behaviour¹.

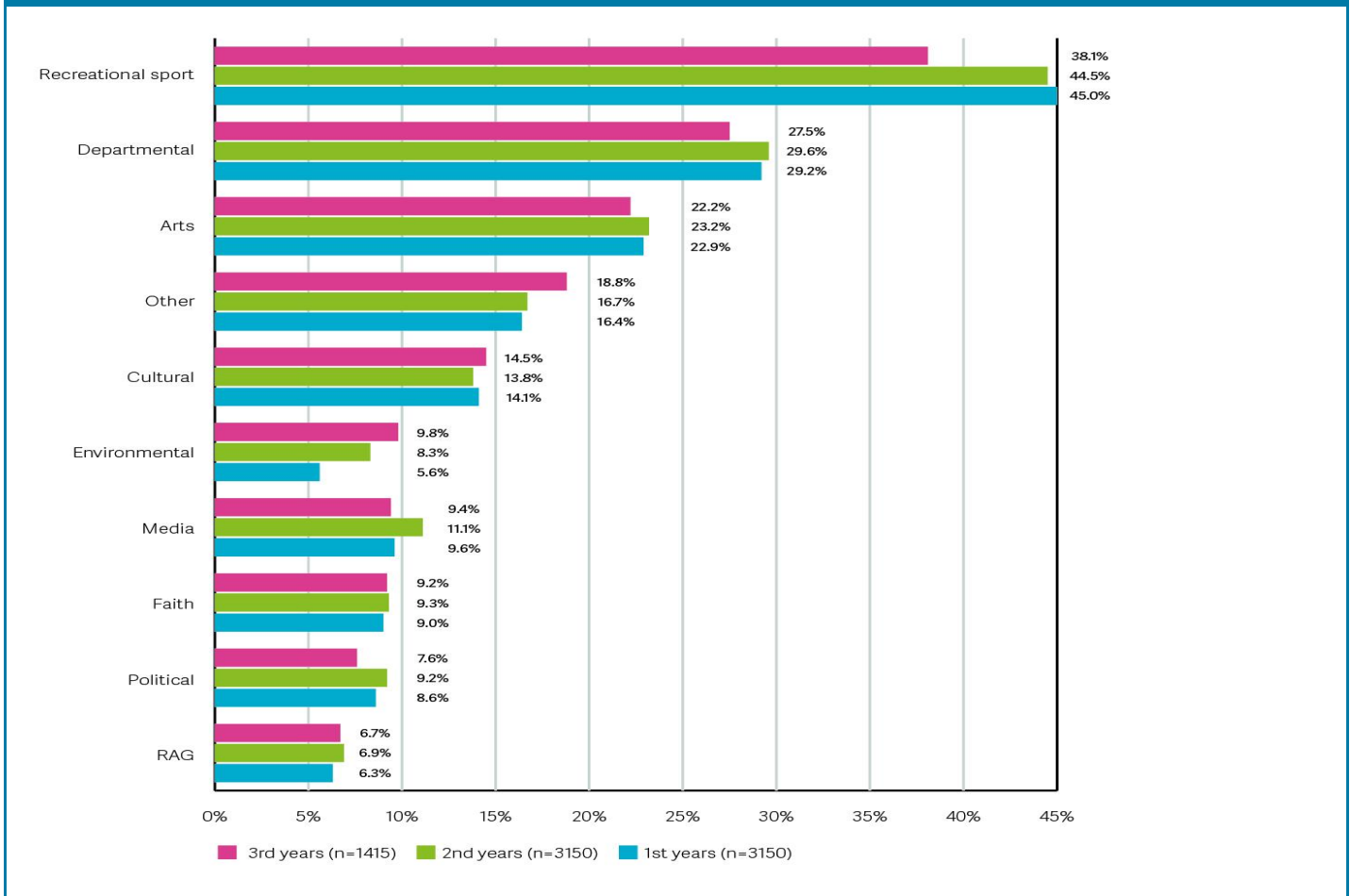
3.5 Other observations

Across all waves of the research, the proportion of respondents stating they are environmentally friendly in everything or most things they do is low indicating opportunities remain to facilitate environmental action while at university.

¹ Defra, (2011) (Unpublished)

4. What intentions do respondents have to take part in pro-environmental clubs and societies?

Figure 4.1 | Which, if any, of the following groups, clubs or societies are you part of in your current university / college? [2012 COHORT]



4.2 Key findings

Approximately 10% of third-years responding in 2014 report participating in environmentally-focused groups, clubs or societies.

See Summary 3 for preferences on teaching and learning through extracurricular activities.

4.3 2012 cohort

Respondents in the 2012 cohort have revealed a significant increase in participation in environmental clubs and societies as they progress through their university careers (5.8%, n=182 of 2012 first-years report participating, compared to 8.3%, n=119 2013 second years and 9.8%, n=137 2014 third-years).

Further investigation into what this participation looks like, including motivation and impacts would assist in driving further engagement and participation.

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

Executive summary: Employer attitudes towards, and skills needs for, sustainable development

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

Summary 1: Existing skills – the influence of further 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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