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SUSTAINABILITY BASED CAREERS AND GRADUATE PROSPECTS





Abstract:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals aim to create a sustainable global future through seventeen inter-related objectives that encompass the environment, social justice, and good governance. Countries are deploying national programmes to meet their sustainable development targets. Sustainability-based career roles are being created at a rate faster than employers can fill them. Recent evidence suggests that employment in sustainability sectors and related professions can provide more favourable opportunities for graduates seeking their first job. Universities are also called upon to do more about sustainability. They are increasingly coming under scrutiny from students as to their sustainability performance. Embedding sustainability in the curriculum and linking it to employability is needed to ensure the relevance of higher education to students and employers. Educators must also consider the efficacy of their pedagogy in teaching sustainability.

Some media networks dubbed the latest COP a 'fragile win', and criticisms abounded regarding the 'slow' pace of progress. However, the fact remains that nations now have little alternative but to move forward on the SDGs

In September 2015, 193 countries, including Britain, adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that contain seventeen interrelated objectives to create a more sustainable global future. Two years later, the United Nations began formal efforts to measure, monitor and track the progress of countries towards the attainment of these goals. In November 2021, these goals were reaffirmed by the global community at COP 26 in Glasgow. Some media networks dubbed this latest COP a 'fragile win', and criticisms abounded regarding the 'slow' pace of progress. However, the fact remains that nations now have little alternative but to move forward on the SDGs.

National governments, responding to pressure from civil societies, have committed to de-carbonisation and social regeneration targets. Developed countries are combining the re-building of their (COVID-struck) economies with sustainable development strategies (OECD, 2020). Organisations face increasing pressure from governments, consumers, and investors to improve the sustainability of their practices. As a result, employers are creating jobs in sustainability at a faster pace than they are able to staff them (Lombrana, Mathis and Lima, 2021). Universities and colleges too, are coming under increasing pressure to improve their sustainability performance (Bryant, 2021), not only in de-carbonising their campuses, but also their curricula (Hess and Maki, 2019). Sustainability rankings for universities could over time be used by students to determine their choice of institution and may even be used to determine funding levels. It therefore makes good 'business sense' for governments, public organisations, companies,

and universities to incorporate the SDGs into their decision-making processes at all levels.

Terms such as 'Green', 'Sustainable', 'CSR', 'Net-Zero', 'De-carbonisation', are commonly used to refer to efforts aimed at attaining the SDGs and moving towards a more sustainable global future. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) are three broad terms used by 'socially responsible investors' to describe the incorporation of SDGs into investment decisions. Career roles that involve implementing the SDGs at a national, industry or organisational level also have a wide-ranging nomenclature: the term 'Green Jobs' refers to those occupations that focus on 'positions in agriculture, manufacturing, R&D, administration, and service activities aimed at substantially preserving or restoring environmental quality' (UN Environment Programme). The European Environment Agency's definition also includes the economy and human well-being related to the environment. 'Sustainability Jobs' include career roles that allow organisations to continue and prosper in their core business, while ensuring the environmental and social impact of their activities are kept to an acceptably low net-negative level. 'ESG careers' tend to focus on accurately measuring the environmental and social impact of investments – they include analysing supply/value chains, corporate operations, government policy, environmental/social projects. For the purpose of our discussion, we shall use the term Sustainability-Based Careers (SBCs) to include all career roles that have as their central purpose the attainment of the UN SDGs at a national, industry or organisational level.



Growth of Sustainability Based Careers

Investment in ESG and green sectors have enjoyed phenomenal growth in recent times (Gamlath, 2020). While inefficiencies exist, these sectors are expected to grow further, as investors demand greater accountability from corporate boards, and civil societies demand more action on environmental and social issues from their governments. The pressure on employer organisations to improve their sustainability performance may come not only from investors and governments, but also from employees. Companies find that job seeker perceptions of employer sustainability performance is a key determinant of employment choice. Therefore, in order to attract and retain much needed talent, employers must pay sufficient attention to their own sustainability credentials (Presley, Presley and Blum, 2018).

SBCs are not merely the product of sustainability transformation, they are a necessary antecedent to the attainment of SDGs—of which policy makers are well aware. In a press conference, the Deputy Energy Secretary of New York State emphasised that the transition to clean energy and net-zero carbon requires the creation of ‘green collar’ careers and not simply jobs in the green sector. New York State, which aims to generate all its electricity from renewable sources by 2050, has injected new investment into green technology and expects this sector also to create significant new employment opportunities. Critical to the transition is the creation of ‘durable careers’ in the clean energy sector (Ram, Aghahosseini and Breyer, 2020). In many cities around the world, the creation of SBCs is increasing with the implementation of sustainable infrastructure plans. In America, federal projects such as ‘Rewiring America’ is expected to create between 5 and 10 million new sustainability-based careers by 2035 (Whieldon, 2020). Ambitious proposals to invest billions in sustainably re-booting the economy, such as the \$1.75 trillion ‘Build Back Better’ scheme in America, and ‘Green New Deal’ in Britain, would add momentum to the growth of SBCs.



SBCs and Graduate Prospects

Studies have found that SBCs on average tend to be more welcoming to recent graduates compared to non-sustainability-based jobs. A common challenge faced by recent graduates attempting to gain a footing on a career path, tend to be employer requirements for prior work experience. This proves to be an even greater obstacle for graduates from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who lack suitable family or social connections. Recent graduates may find themselves pushed to the ‘back of the queue’ due to their lack of work-experience. SBCs can provide those without years of work experience a better opportunity to access their first career (Sulich, Rutkowska and Poplawski, 2020). Earlier work by (Falxa-Raymond, Svendsen and Campbell, 2013) have also found SBCs to be ‘potentially transformational’ for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schemes that employ graduates, especially those with less opportunity

to gain prior experience, may also help employer organisations to maintain (or improve) their ESG ratings (Gamlath, 2020).

Furthermore, the global shortage of talent for sustainability-based career roles (Lombrana, Mathis and Lima, 2021) is causing employers to be more flexible in their recruitment practices, which for recent graduates offer greater opportunities for on-the-job training and career progression (Xie, Zhu and Qi, 2020). The Falxa-Raymond study found that that SBCs also provide greater intellectual stimulation, socio-psychological benefits, and an increased sense of accomplishment, which is partly due to the uniqueness of the work. A societal benefit of careers in sustainable sectors, is that they tend to offer long-term, well-paid employment prospects for disadvantaged communities. These jobs tend to be far more secure and less likely to be transferred overseas (Whieldon, 2020).



For pedagogy to be effective in preparing students for sustainability-based careers, it must be transformative, values-based and should challenge existing norms. Students must be engaged in thinking about complex systems, using real-world-based learning

Skills and Education

Compared to other career categories, SBCs on average tend to involve higher levels of non-routine work and analytical skills; the less routinised work environment therefore requires greater levels of creative problem-solving (Consoli *et al.*, 2016). The occupational boundaries in these types of roles are frequently shifting, and the division of labour is constantly being redefined. A distinct trait of sustainability-based careers is that they offer higher-levels of on-the-job training (and learning). Xie, Zhu and Qi (2020) find that on-the-job training in the 'green sector' translates positively into career growth. Of relevance to universities and colleges are issues about curricula and pedagogy in terms of what would better prepare students for such careers.

Embedding sustainability skills into the curriculum and linking them to employability is needed to prepare graduates more effectively for the new sustainability-based work environment

and is a subject that is generating increasing attention among educators and academics, not least within university business schools (Winfield and Ndlovu, 2019). Universities are also important sites for resolving uncertainties about climate change and gaining a critically reasoned perspective on environmental and social issues (Hess and Maki, 2019). However, it is not only about what is taught, but also how it is taught.

For pedagogy to be effective in preparing students for sustainability-based careers, it must be transformative, values-based and should challenge existing norms. Students must be engaged in thinking about complex systems, using real-world-based learning. Traditional pedagogical approaches such as lectures and case studies must be redesigned. In evaluating the effectiveness of pedagogic methods, educators and regulators must substitute traditional *post-hoc* measures with more holistic methods such as the 'Good Practice Learning and Teaching for Sustainability Education (GPLTSE)' framework (Holdsworth and Sandri, 2021). Education must move beyond sustainability literacy and endeavour to equip students with relevant *capabilities*.

Disciplinary fields and the theories they expound should also be reviewed in the current context. For example, the principles of growth-based economics that are taught in classrooms, propose a negative relationship between employment and environment. To increase employment (i.e., to reduce unemployment) there must be economic growth, which is inevitably incompatible with environmental sustainability. Therefore, viewed from the prism of neo-classical economic theory, a paradox exists in the relationship between environment, growth and employment. New paradigms are needed to decouple environmental impact from economic output and to tackle unemployment without growth (OECD, 2020). Since 'green transition' tends to be associated with job-destruction, for example in the fossil-fuel sector, there have been calls for stronger actions to favour job-creation relative to environmental activities (Aldieri and Vinci, 2018). However, recent evidence suggests that job-creation in renewable energy would significantly outweigh job losses in the carbon-fuel sector (Ram, Aghahosseini and Breyer, 2020). Nations and industries find themselves in a major transition as the urgency of meeting sustainable development targets grows. In transitioning to a more sustainable future, there are complex implications for labour markets.



Conclusion

The SDGs adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, set seventeen interrelated goals aimed at creating a more sustainable world. With whole economies transitioning to a more sustainable future, profound effects are being felt in virtually every sector. Organisations have had to re-map their production plans and reconfigure their work roles – with existing occupations changing and wholly new occupations being created (Consoli *et al.*, 2016). SBCs are not merely the product of sustainability transformation, they are a necessary antecedent to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policy makers must therefore ensure that transition not only creates jobs but also stable careers (Whieldon, 2020). SBCs are set to grow, and demand is already outstripping labour supply on a global scale (Lombrana, Mathis and Lima, 2021).

While the perennial problem for graduates has been the lack of prior work experience to meet employer expectations when accessing their first careers, SBCs tend to be more welcoming to those without previous work experience. SBCs are also potentially transformational for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, offering greater opportunities to train on-the-job. Across career roles more generally, employers are looking for candidates

who can add value to their organisations, and at interviews now tend to favour graduates with an understanding of sustainability (Winfield and Ndlovu, 2019).

British universities are called upon to do more. On the one hand, embedding sustainability in the curriculum and linking it to employability would prepare students more effectively for careers; another driver is student-expectations. With students becoming more sustainability-conscious, universities are expected to do more in driving towards improving their sustainability credentials. In the UK, 140 universities signed up to sustainability commitments ahead of the COP26 summit. However, according to a recent survey by peopleandplanet.org (a student-led campaign), more than half of UK universities are not on track to meet their sustainability targets (Bryant, 2021). Employers are already feeling the impact of sustainability-conscious applicants in attracting and retaining talent; universities could expect to do the same as students may base their choice of institution on sustainability credentials, and regulators may follow suit. The sustainability agenda is expected to grow in importance for employers, educators, and graduates.



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