

Results of a 2017 student survey at University College of Estate Management

This briefing note presents results from the National Union of Students (NUS) student survey which covered attitudes, experiences and expectations associated with sustainability at University College of Estate Management (UCEM).

The institution-wide survey was completed by 461 students in November 2017. UCEM had not participated in the NUS survey previously but this will now form part of the future survey calendar. Below is a presentation of the findings which demonstrates that students support our sustainability aspirations.

1. Background

Sustainability is a key component of UCEM's vision and core purpose to provide truly accessible, relevant and cost-effective education, enabling students to enhance careers, increase professionalism and contribute to a better Built Environment. UCEM strives for excellence in meeting its economic, environmental and social responsibilities. A key strategic aim of UCEM is 'to develop and implement genuine sustainability credentials' through the UCEM Sustainability Statement (Williams 2017) which reflects our vision to ensure that:

“UCEM fully accepts its responsibilities to the natural environment and the global society. We are committed to driving forward the sustainability agenda and will play a positive and transformative role that will contribute to securing an economically, politically, environmentally and socially sustainable future.”

Realising our sustainability potential goes beyond addressing our day-to-day operations; it also involves recognising our position to influence and educate industry professionals who design, develop and manage the Built Environment. Graduates with demonstrable responsible futures skills will be well-positioned in the race for good jobs, establishing a career or promotion from an existing role. UCEM is keen to get students to think about how the demands of the workplace might 'adapt' how skills are used in employment but also throughout careers.

This survey aims to inform UCEM's future sustainability strategies and its annual implementation plan. It is part of work to achieve an NUS Responsible Futures accreditation mark in 2018, through looking into attitudes, experiences and expectations of our students. This study has been carried out by NUS since 2010 in coordination with the Higher Education Academy (Drayson 2015).

UCEM is committed to efforts to link sustainability knowledge, skills and understanding with application in practice which could be seen as enabling competence as well as capability. The institution is looking to bridge the gap between generic expressions of skills and what is genuinely required in the Built Environment sector.

2. Approach

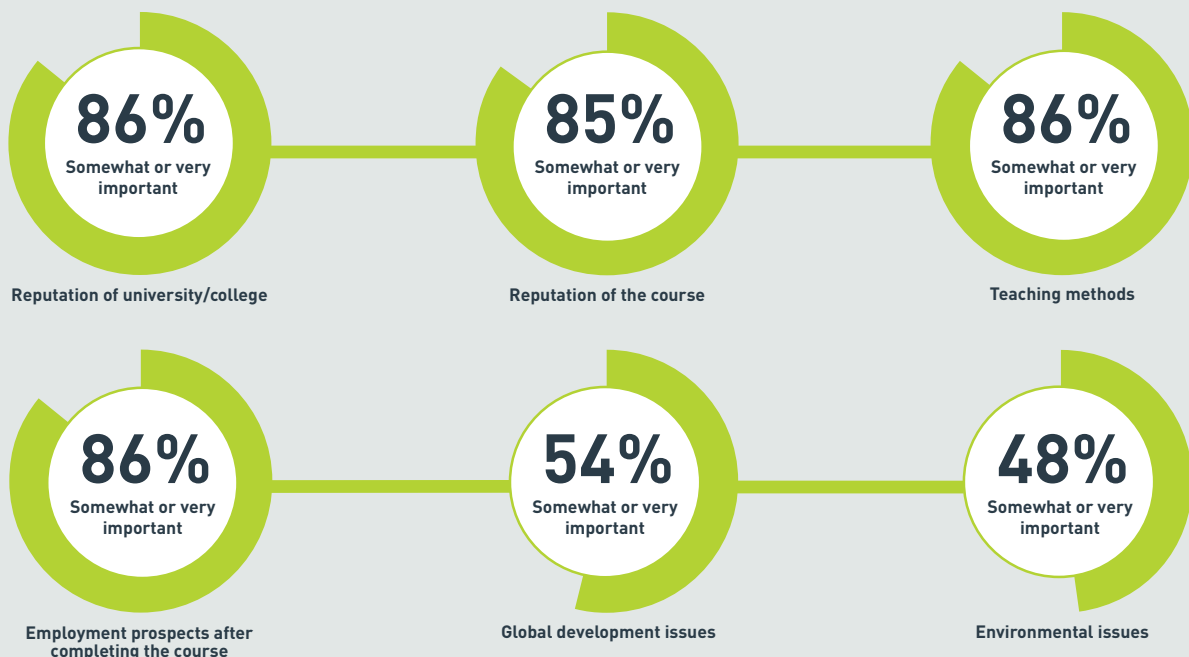
The survey was voluntary and, as UCEM is a leading global supported online education provider, respondents were recruited via an ‘all student’ survey. This was deployed through engaging once through institution-wide student email distribution lists and using student-led channels such as WhatsApp. The students leading on the NUS Responsible Futures working group were pivotal in obtaining the high response rate through advising on best format to communicate with students and publicising channels as well as ensuring that all communications were ‘student-friendly’. There were 461 responses. As a result, UCEM had the eighth highest number of responses out of the 38 participating institutions in 2017 (and highest as a ratio of the student population). The respondents were two-thirds male and one-third female. Of the students who responded, 73% declared themselves as UK citizens studying in the UK with most of the remainder being international students from outside the EU.

Respondents were from a range of levels of study with over half being undergraduate; the rest being postgraduate students and Level 3 apprentices. Thirty-nine per cent of students had last studied more than five academic years ago prior to studying with UCEM. As UCEM is a supported online education provider, the proximity of the institution to home was not an important consideration. The survey posed a variety of questions about the students’ attitudes and expectations of UCEM, directing them to draw on their experiences and priorities. All the questions were based on the NUS survey.

3. Findings

3.1 Reasons for applying

Students were asked to rank individually on a Likert scale how important several factors were when choosing to apply to UCEM. The top responses indicate how seriously they took the following:



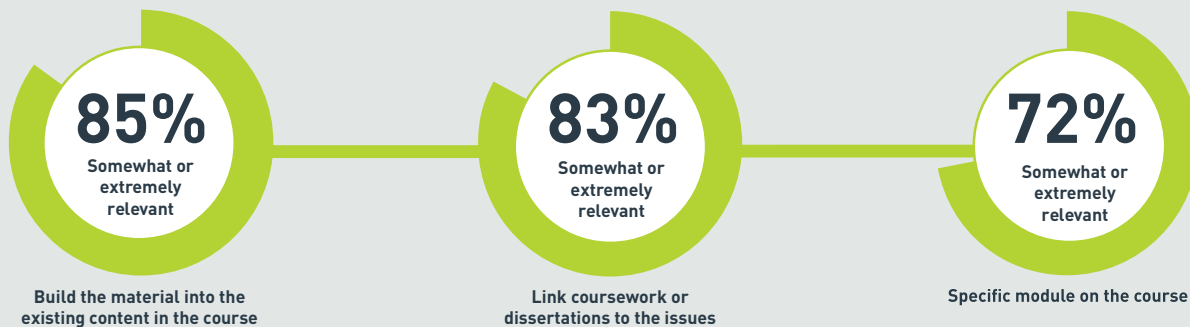
The high score attributed to the reputation of UCEM and its courses resonates with annual admissions reports, where one of the most prevalent individual sources of interest leading to student applications received in 2016/17 was ‘Recommendation’. Online teaching methods were seen as extremely important which, again, corroborated with the annual admissions reports. Employment prospects after completing the course relates more to career enhancement, development and progression as nearly all

UCEM students are already in the workplace and are looking to gain professional membership.

Prior to enrolling at UCEM, students may not have been aware as to how much emphasis was placed on sustainability in the curriculum even though it is highlighted on the UCEM website and marketing materials. This sustainability emphasis is evident in professional and statutory body requirements such as those outlined by RICS and CIOB, and in QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement in Land, Construction, Real Estate and Surveying (2016). Students were given a list of options that related to the 'top three reasons' for taking the course that they are currently studying. These were to gain qualifications (75%), to improve earning potential (51%) and to improve their chances of getting a job (30%).

3.2 Curriculum

Students were asked on a Likert scale what they thought was the most relevant way of including the skills and knowledge needed to help other people and the environment within their own courses. The top responses are highlighted below:



The highest responses indicated that the students had a preference to keep the existing approaches and build sustainability into existing content and specific stand-alone modules. It is consistent with students' qualitative comments where they stated that they would like to see sustainability seamlessly incorporated into modules, as well as making it relevant and applied through real-life case studies. Clearly, the integrative learning that occurs within the Built Environment sector is aligned with this approach to delivery. Sustainability or environmental issues are consistently chosen by UCEM students as a topic for their dissertations to gain expertise or specialise in this important area. This already informs curriculum and coursework and is being extended through explicitly evidencing Responsible Futures in all courses at each academic level.

Sustainable development was defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland 1987). Eighty-seven per cent of students consistently 'Agree or Strongly agree' that sustainable development is something which UCEM programmes should actively incorporate and promote. This illustrates that supporting sustainability through 'deeper learning' is an important consideration which requires a multidisciplinary approach and understanding.

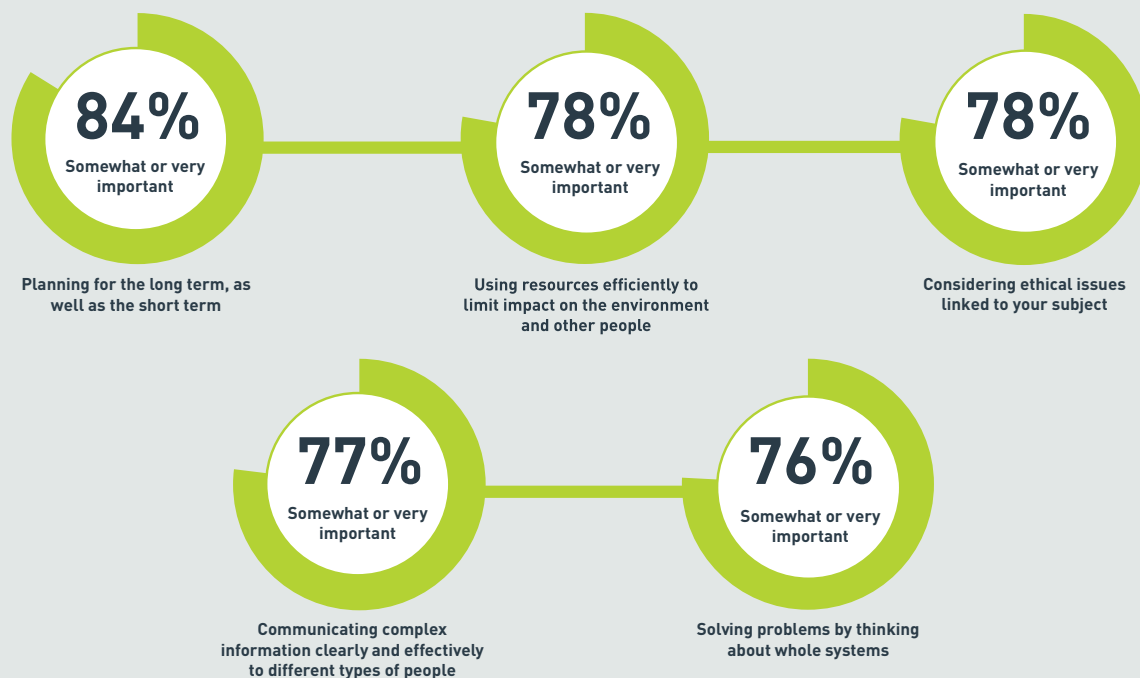
Additionally, the majority of students stated that sustainable development is something they would like to learn more about (75% Agree or Strongly agree). Examples of why they would like to learn more about sustainable development included: to protect and impact positively on the environment; increasingly significant to our sector, learning more about technology, innovations and renewables; securing the environment for future generations; and making a difference through being role models, advocates and change agents.



One student encapsulates these comments:

“It’s fundamental to the world in which we live and for future generations. There needs to be greater understanding of the impact we have on the world and how we can mitigate the damage that has already been done.”

Next, using a Likert scale, the survey explored the skills, knowledge and attributes covered in teaching so far. Below is an illustration of the importance of learning specific skills, knowledge and attributes to individual learners and perceived importance to their future employers. Results showed the top combined responses being:



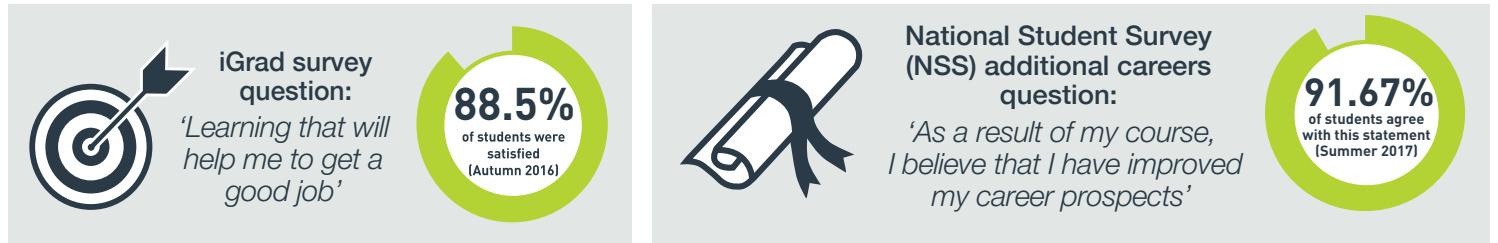
Employers clearly prefer to recruit graduates with relevant experience. They want graduates who are up-to-date with industry developments, have carried out a range of activities related to ‘real world’ experiences from the UCEM learning process, and met challenges consistently. Professional bodies are integral to the success of UCEM and its students and they are one of the main drivers for students choosing to study one of our programmes. Consequently, a major strength in the design of UCEM’s Built Environment programmes is a strong focus on meeting skills required for the workplace through those that have been requested by professional bodies and employers. The learning outcomes for UCEM programmes are driven by professional and industry requirements which helps inform the programme content. These are designed to prepare students in the workplace so that they are fit for the future (Sterling 2011) and the relevance of current UCEM sustainability content is endorsed by our students, as evidenced by this quote from one of our students:

“It has given me a deep understanding of the environmental and social issues facing society as well as the world and the possible solutions to sustainability issues.”

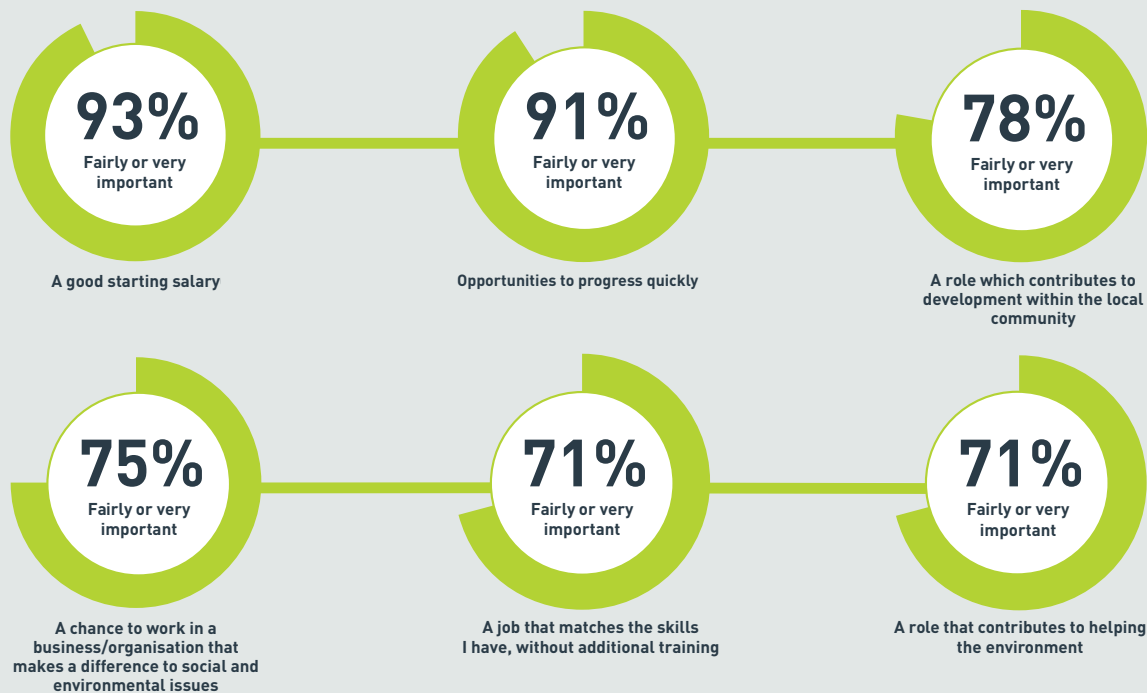


3.3 Employability

The programme curriculum is designed to enable students to develop their employability and transferable skills identified in individual programme specifications in addition to skills which relate to the professional application of the subject. UCEM's student feedback on employability and the Careers Service on the VLE has been consistently positive:



Thinking about their future employer, students were asked how important, if at all, the following factors will be when considering applying for jobs. All responses used a Likert scale and are detailed below:



Interestingly, most students appeared to be motivated more by individual success such as progression to Chartered Membership rather than wider social or environmental issues (although these are key professional body competencies and embedded within the curriculum). This contrasts starkly with another question where:

71% of students say they would 'willingly be paid £1,000 less per year' below the national average salary (£20,000 per annum) if the company they worked for had a good environmental and ethical record.

Other surveys have supported this outcome where students have indicated that they consider the type of company they work for, including one from the NUS/HEA (Drayson 2015). This aligns more closely with the other criteria where students want to contribute to a better Built Environment together with helping the local community and environment.



4. Next steps

Based on the findings from the survey, the following main actions that are planned include:

- a) Benchmarking, monitoring and reviewing students' views, within the annual implementation plan to enable the measurement of progress and identify areas with the potential for further action;
- b) Highlighting and sharing examples of best practice from UCEM programmes together with case studies, success stories and resources which support and inform the teaching of sustainability within the curriculum;
- c) Creating a sustainability hub for staff and students which builds upon, updates and extends the 'green room' resources to provide a central pillar for the support and enhancement of learning and teaching within UCEM programmes;
- d) Obtaining a future breakdown of respondents' age and domicile as part of the student survey data allowing it to be assessed to see if this impacts their worldview.

5. References

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Please visit our UCEM Sustainability Website at: www.ucem.ac.uk/about-ucem/sustainability/
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