

Business Student's engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals: Investigating the value-action gap

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Topic: Business Student's engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals: Investigating the value-action gap

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Introduction

- The world is “woefully off track” to achieve the United Nations (UN) SDGs, with only 17% of 169 targets displaying sufficient progress by achievement by 2030 (UN, 2024). Business School’s (BSs), as influential actors within the academic sector, play a vital role in developing future generations of responsible leaders and citizens that can understand and address the SDG challenges (Miotto et al., 2020).
- Students are among the most important stakeholders in the development of more sustainable societies (Aleixo et al., 2018). Given that today’s students will evolve into key influencers and decision-makers of the future, it is critical to delve deeper into their perspectives and attitudes towards sustainable development (Aleixo et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2024).
- However, very few studies have analysed the perception of BS students and students are often missing from sustainability-based discussions in Higher Education Institutions (Seva-Larrosa et al., 2023; Weybrecht, 2021). Extant studies have not assessed a holistic view of undergraduate SDG perception (Ho et al., 2022).
- There have been many studies on what students know about the SDGs, yet little research on how they are perceived- research delve into dichotomy between knowledge and motivation about the SDGs (Oltra-Badenes et al., 2022).
- Research suggests that while students realise the importance of the sustainable development, they are hesitant to take personal action (Chaplin & Wyton, 2014; Eagle et al., 2015). If our future business leaders carry these attitudes into the workplace, it raises important questions regarding the environmental and social costs (Westerman et al., 2021).

Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and engagement levels of Business School students in the North of England surrounding the SDGs and to investigate the implications of this on Business School curriculum.

Research Objectives

- To explore the perceptions and attitudes of North of England Business School students surrounding the SDGs.
- To investigate the extent to which a value-action gap exists surrounding the sustainability behaviours of North of England Business School students.
 - To recommend strategies that Business Schools in the North of England can employ to reduce the 'value-action' gap.

Strand 1: Perceptions of the SDGs

- Many studies focus on what students know about the goals. However, building on Oltra-Banedes et al. (2022), I want to explore how the goals are perceived.
- Limited evidence exists surrounding student-centric perspectives of the SDGs, and a more student-centric approach is required (Jones et al., 2024).
- Exploring: Are students engaging with the SDGS? Do they value the goals? Do they think they are feasible? Are students aware of the role that Business has? Assessing whether they believe their future work and behaviours can influence achieving any of them.
- Extant studies reveal a multitude of associations with and attitudes towards the SDGs that exist (Fløttum et al., 2022).

Strand 2: The Value-Action Gap

- The gap represents a substantial barrier to meaningful behaviour change (Chaplin & Wyton, 2014).
- The reasons for such a 'gap' are complex and not reducible to lack of information or motivational factors (Flynn et al., 2009).
- There exists a dissonance in terms of student's perceptions of sustainability and their reported behaviour determinations (i.e., a value action gap), as shown in (Afroz & Ilham, 2020; Chalplin & Wyton, 2014; Ovais, 2023), suggesting that knowledge of SDGs does not always translate to positive action. However, some studies have revealed that education did increase learners' sustainability knowledge, leading to transformation of their behaviours (Alsaati et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2024), demonstrating conflict in the existing literature.
- Research should focus on gaining a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms by which an intention-behaviour gap might arise (Hassan et al., 2014). Future research should investigate deeper into the barriers of converting knowledge and attitude of the SDGs into practice (Afroz & Ilham, 2020).
- Gaining an insight into the complexity of attitude and behaviour of students within the sustainability agenda will enable understanding that can be applied to activities that promote sustainability (Chaplin & Wyton, 2014).

Strand 3: Closing the Value-Action Gap- The Responsibility of Business School's

- There is a need to investigate potential enablers of behavioural change (Chaplin & Wyton, 2014).
- BSs are yet to reach their potential as critical agents in moving the SDG framework forward, their engagement has generally been inconsistent, slow, and haphazard (Goodall & Moore, 2019; Weybrecht, 2022).
- There is little benefit in students believing the SDGs to be important, without fully understanding what it means and how and what they can do to get involved (Chaplin & Wyton, 2014; Kagawa, 2007).
- Exploring: What do students want to see happening in BSs so that they are better prepared to alter their behaviour to assist in achieving the SDGs? How do we convert student knowledge and attitudes of the SDGs into practice? What interventions can universities make to enhance practice?

Research Methodology

- Existing research exploring this topic has been approached from a very science dominated (quantitative survey) perspective (Weder et al., 2019). Most research is descriptive, exploring the correlations between variables, yet overlooking the role of feelings and attitudes (Cotton et al., 2016).
- However, students show complex, layered, and multi-dimensional attitudes toward sustainability (Lambrechts et al., 2018). Dealing with sustainable development issues is complex and confirms the importance of acknowledging competing value positions and interests (Tyler, 2012). Attitudes can be influenced by various factors, reflecting the idea that sustainability-based topics are characterised by high complexity.
- The researcher therefore proposes that this project adopt a qualitative, interpretive-centred design that utilised semi-structured interviews to collect the required data. More qualitative research exploring indepth student perspectives is needed (Cotton et al., 2016). Open-ended questions will help to elicit a fuller expression of student views (Kagawa, 2007).
- However, following Chaplin and Wyton (2014), a mixed-methods design may be useful. Quantative understanding assessing behaviour and potential existence of a value-action gap and qualitative method for possible causes and recommendations.

Potential Impact and Contribution

- Limited research exists on undergraduates own self-stated commitment to the SDGs (Jones et al., 2024).
- Recommended that future research provide a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between sustainability, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour in the management discipline (Leal et al., 2024).
- From an initial review, there is a lack of qualitative research covering student perspectives in the UK. Qualitative studies have been undertaken in varying sector and country contexts (e.g., Fløttum et al., 2022). However, the nuanced perspectives of the UK BS student have yet to be uncovered. This is critical considering the noted influence that country context and subject discipline can have on the individual perspectives of students.
- As expected, scholars have recommended that future research be conducted in differing country contexts (Ho et al., 2022; Oltra-Banedes et al., 2022).
- Academia is constantly advancing and changing, the moment of the study can be crucial in the findings obtained. There is a need to continue to assess the perspectives and narratives of students on this topic, as these are likely to be constantly evolving (Oltra-Banedes et al., 2022).
- BSs are in a unique position to influence the mindsets and actions of future business leaders (Parkes et al., 2017). The findings may help to adapt existing BS methods that may assist in reducing the value-action gap among students. Students are undergoing a major life course transition, making them more likely to shift behaviours (Verplanken et al., 2008).

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