

A background image of five young people (three women and two men) smiling and giving thumbs up, arranged in a circular pattern.

## Sustainable Development on Degree Courses – What Students Think and Want

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21 March 2018

## Editorial



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### Dear Reader

Two years ago, in 2016, Switzerland signed the Paris climate agreement, with the aim of limiting global warming to well below two degrees Celsius. “Signing this agreement is more than just a symbolic gesture,” said Doris Leuthard, member of the Federal Council, at the time. “We are saying ‘yes’ to a world that is gradually bidding farewell to fossil fuels.”

A year later, in 2017, we signed up to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Among other things, these stipulate that, by 2030, all learners should be acquiring the knowledge and skills required to promote sustainable development, including via Education for Sustainable Development and by embracing sustainable lifestyles.

This illustrates the urgency of the UN's guiding principle for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – however, it is not just a matter for politicians. Achieving these goals will require the whole of society, and especially the younger generation, to get involved. And students have a key role to play: as the decision-makers of tomorrow, they will be required to take responsibility for the consequences of what is being done today. It is therefore important that we get a say even at this early stage in what is being taught and researched at universities.

Although some initial initiatives have already been launched, we remain some way off where we need to be – as the following report illustrates. There is still significant potential for students and lecturers alike to do more for the sustainable development cause; similarly, there is scope for showing society how it can act in a sustainable and future-proof way.

To this end, more than 300 students from over 20 universities have held the first-ever Swiss Sustainability Week, with a broad programme of content providing information on current issues concerned with environmental, social and economic sustainability to several thousand students, academics and members of the public across twelve cities. Adopting a variety of different approaches, the events encouraged visitors to question their own everyday lives, start initiatives and take action. However, the universities are also expected to start initiatives of their own and serve as pioneering role models for the rest of society. The VSN-FDD-FSS, the VSS-UNES-USU and the WWF have therefore compiled a list of demands that addresses the issue of sustainability at Swiss universities on all levels. By fostering constructive dialogue and inspiration, the Swiss Sustainability Week is intended to implement these as quickly as possible – because time is running out.

We hope you find this an inspiring read and would like to thank you for supporting us on our journey to a more sustainable Switzerland.

Marie-Claire Graf and Lia Zehnder, March 2018

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## Summary of Findings

- 87 per cent of the students surveyed were very or fairly interested in sustainable development, with the figure higher at the federal institutes of technology (ETH) and general universities than at universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education. French-speaking respondents were somewhat more interested than their German- or English-speaking counterparts, and women were more interested than men. Master's students revealed a slightly higher interest than those on a Bachelor's course, though the difference was only small. Interest amongst Bachelor's students increased the further they progressed through their degree.
- 38 per cent of those surveyed were largely or completely satisfied with their university's commitment to sustainable development, with students at universities of teacher education and applied sciences more satisfied than those at the ETH.
- 38 per cent were largely or completely satisfied with their lecturers' commitment to and expertise in sustainable development, with those at the ETH rated best and those at the general universities rated worst.
- 36 per cent of students surveyed were largely or completely satisfied with the range of sustainable development topics covered. Here too, the ETH came out best and the general universities worst. "Environmental issues" were most commonly identified both amongst the sustainable development topics that received adequate coverage and amongst those that were desirable but that had not been addressed to date.
- Only 26 per cent thought that sustainable development topics were taught in a very or fairly practical way, with the universities of applied sciences and ETH rated best and the universities of teacher education rated worst.
- With regard to the overarching competencies needed to shape sustainable development (in German *Gestaltungskompetenzen*), between 27 and 68 per cent (depending on the specific competency) stated that these were promoted as part of their degree course. On average, respondents said that 5.8 of these 12 "shaping competencies" were promoted (5.9 and 5.5 amongst Bachelor's and Master's students respectively). The competencies mentioned most frequently were "Thinking and acting with foresight" and "Acquiring knowledge in an interdisciplinary way", while "Being able to use preconceptions of equity as the basis for decision-making and acting" and "Being able to show empathy for and solidarity with disadvantaged people" came up most rarely.
- 65 per cent of respondents wished strongly or to a certain extent that sustainable development was given much more importance on their degree course and at their university.
- As expected, students who were very or fairly interested in sustainable development were less satisfied with their university's commitment to the cause and expressed a stronger wish for sustainable development to be given more importance than those who expressed moderate, little or no interest.
- A comparison between disciplines reveals that students of natural and environmental sciences were more interested in sustainable development than those studying other disciplines. Engineering sciences students were more satisfied with their university, their lecturers and the range of topics covered than law, economics and social sciences students, while the feedback from students of natural and environmental sciences were roughly average for all disciplines.

## Demands

The survey reveals that, although students are very interested in sustainable development, what their universities offer them in this regard is unsatisfactory. Based on the findings from the survey, the VSN-FDD-FSS, the VSS-UNES-USU and the WWF therefore demand the following:

1. All universities in Switzerland promote sustainable development, doing so more consistently than they have to date and in all their departments (teaching, research, services, operations and financing).
2. Lecturers make a commitment to sustainable development and further enhance their expertise in the sustainable development topics that fall within their discipline.
3. The range of topics covered is significantly expanded on all degree courses and in all areas of sustainable development: environment, society, economy, the relationship between the Global North and the Global South, and sustainability or intergenerational equity.
4. Practical teaching methods that promote decision-making competencies are employed more often, more consistently and for longer in teaching sustainable development topics.
5. All the overarching competencies required to shape sustainable development (*Gestaltungskompetenzen*) are fostered, including those focused on ethics, empathy and motivation.
6. All the key personnel at universities and on their management boards commit to ensuring that sustainable development is given more importance across the universities and on their degree courses.

# Introduction

## Objective

As part of the first-ever nationwide Swiss Sustainability Week in March 2018, a trilingual online survey (in German, French and English) invited students from all types of university in Switzerland to state their interests and wishes and to rate aspects of sustainable development on their degree course and at their institution. This meant that, for the first time in Switzerland, a basis could be developed that would place students' opinions at the heart of the issue of sustainable development.

The survey was conducted as a partnership between three organisations:

- Swiss Association of Student Organisations for Sustainability (VSN-FDD-FSS)
- Swiss National Union of Students (VSS-UNES-USU)
- WWF Switzerland

The findings from the survey give both those responsible for the survey itself and key university personnel at all levels (Swiss Conference of Higher Education Institutions, Swissuniversities, university management boards, faculty or department heads, course heads, lecturers) a basis for understanding how their students view the current situation and identifying what needs to be done. Based on the findings, the VSN-FDD-FSS, the VSS-UNES-USU and the WWF have compiled a list of specific demands that are intended to serve as a basis for the decision-makers to define objectives, agree actions and implement them.

## Method

The trilingual SurveyMonkey survey (in German, French and English) ran from 16 February to 10 March 2018 and was aimed at students at a recognised higher education institution in Switzerland. Students were given six statements and asked to what extent they agreed with them on a scale from one to five. For the final question, they could select which of the overarching sustainable development competencies out of the twelve sub-competencies that make up the "shaping competencies" identified by de Haan (2008) their university promoted. For four of the questions, respondents also had the opportunity to formulate their own answers (topics given adequate coverage, topics desired and not addressed to date, suggestions for improvement, additional overarching competencies).

Respondents needed between five and ten minutes to complete the survey. Those studying a minor or subsidiary subject could complete the survey based on their minor subject once they had rated their major or main subject. Master's students were able to choose whether to complete the survey based on their Bachelor's or Master's degree. The following context data was collected:

- Gender
- Type of university
- Name of university
- Discipline and course description\*
- Level: Bachelor's, Master's, first- and second-stage postgraduate teaching degree (deemed equivalent to a Master's)
- Stage on course (in semesters)
- At general universities: type of degree (major/minor/single-subject)

\*based on the classification used by Swissuniversities and [www.berufsberatung.ch](http://www.berufsberatung.ch), simplified

Participants were also asked to provide an e-mail address to prevent anonymous, frivolous or multiple entries.

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent via various channels:

- VSN-FDD-FSS and VSS-UNES-USU: invitations sent to local groups with the request to pass them on; also social media and the Swiss Sustainability Week website
- WWF: newsletter, social media and invitations sent to partner organisations in the education sector
- The WWF was present at talks and at several sites involved in Swiss Sustainability Week

The last of these channels brought in the highest number of fully completed surveys by a clear margin. Context, communication and motivation to take part probably led students with something of an interest in sustainability to complete the questionnaire. For this reason, the pool is not representative of all students in Switzerland. Nevertheless, the findings provide important insights into student opinions of sustainable development on the courses taught at Swiss universities.

Only surveys that contained answers to all the questions were included in the evaluation.

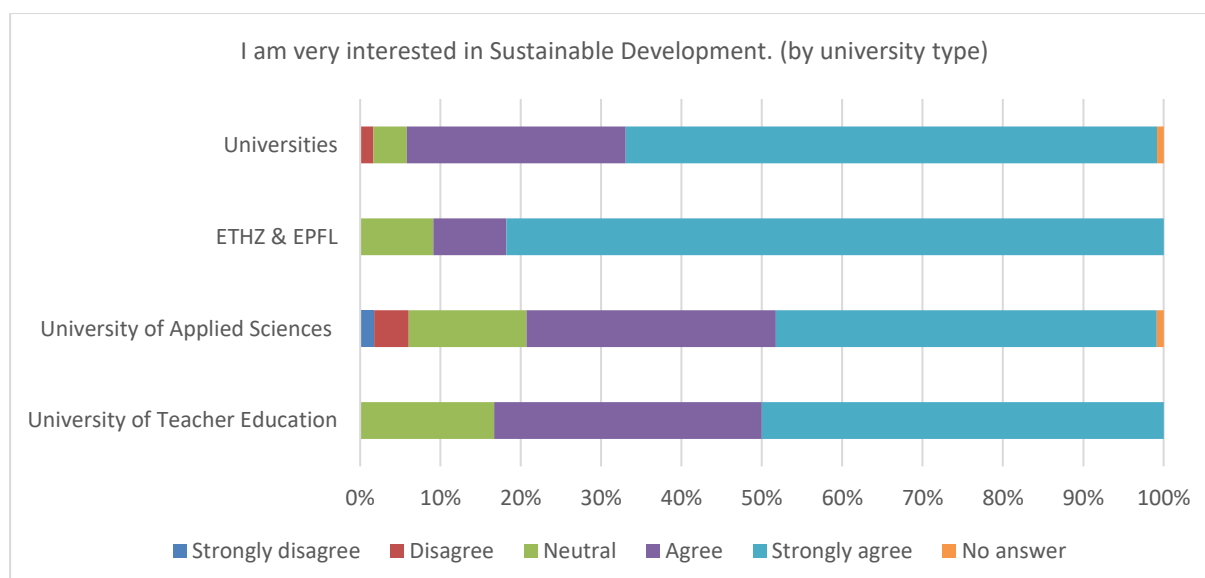
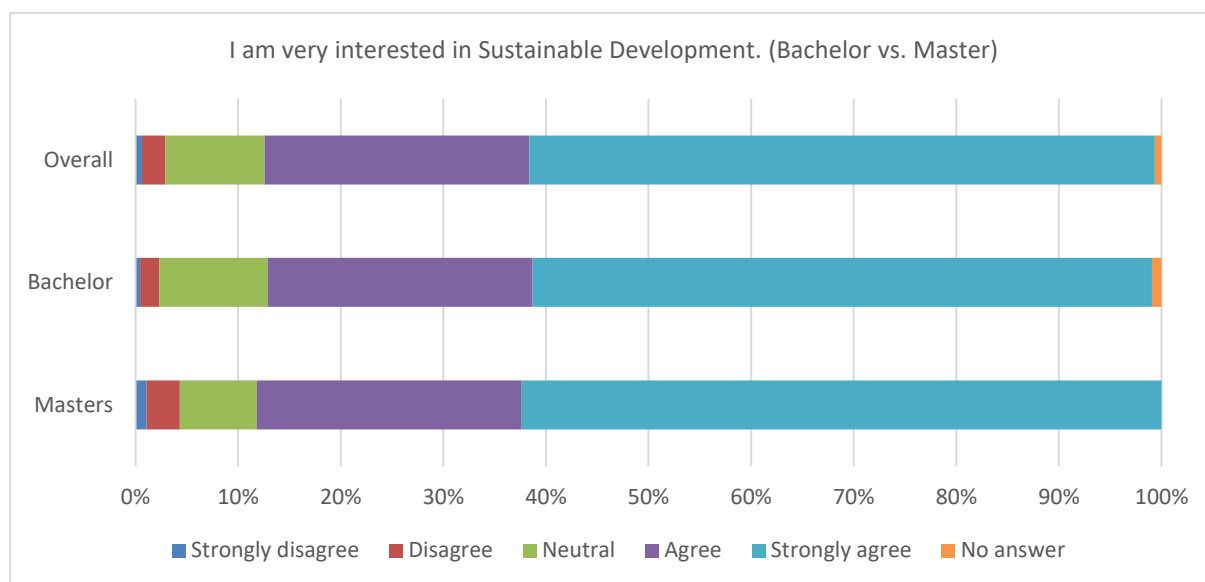
## Participants

A total of 310 students completed the survey in full. The participants break down as follows: 55 per cent women, 43 per cent men, 2 per cent other/no answer. 85 per cent completed the survey in German, 10 per cent in French and 5 per cent in English. In terms of university type, 39 per cent of students were from a general university, 18 per cent from an ETH, 37 per cent from a university of applied sciences and 6 per cent from a university of teacher education. Students from 27 universities took part and every discipline was represented. The best-represented ones were engineering sciences, law and economics, natural and environmental sciences and social sciences. 70 per cent completed the survey for their Bachelor's degree course, 29 per cent for their Master's and 1 per cent for their first- or second-stage postgraduate teaching degree (deemed equivalent to a Master's). Detailed information on the participants can be found in the Appendix.

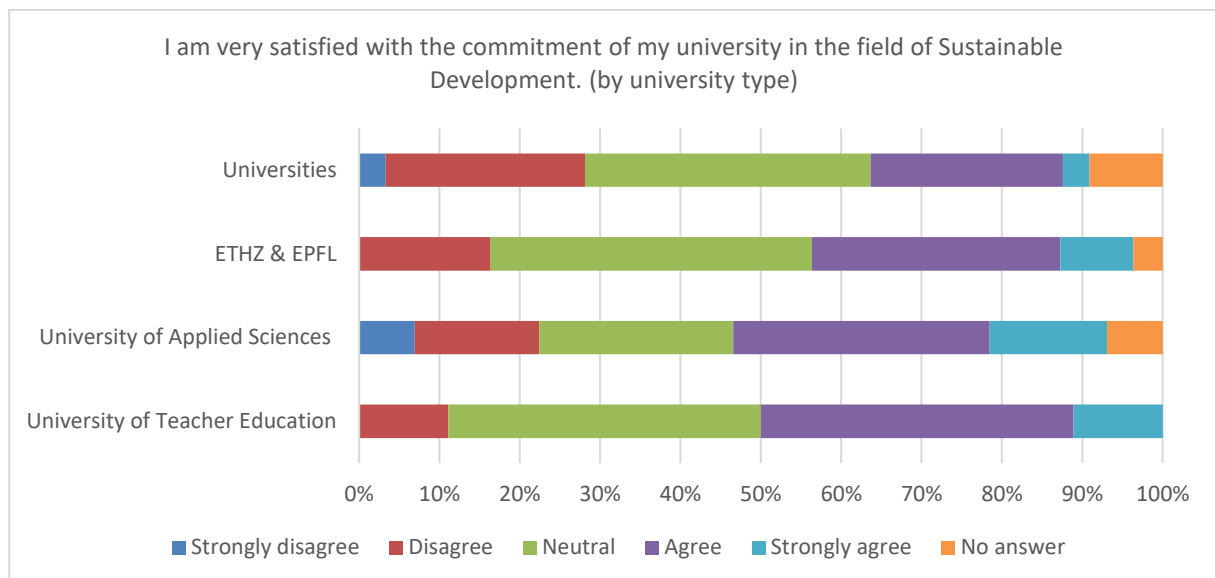
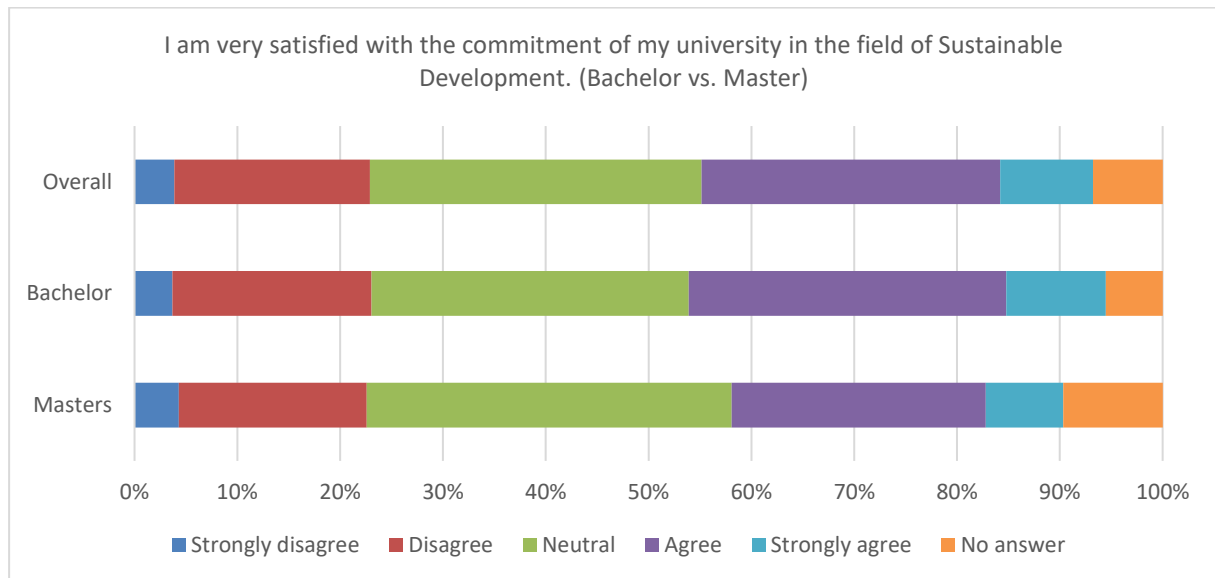
## Results

### Responses to the individual questions

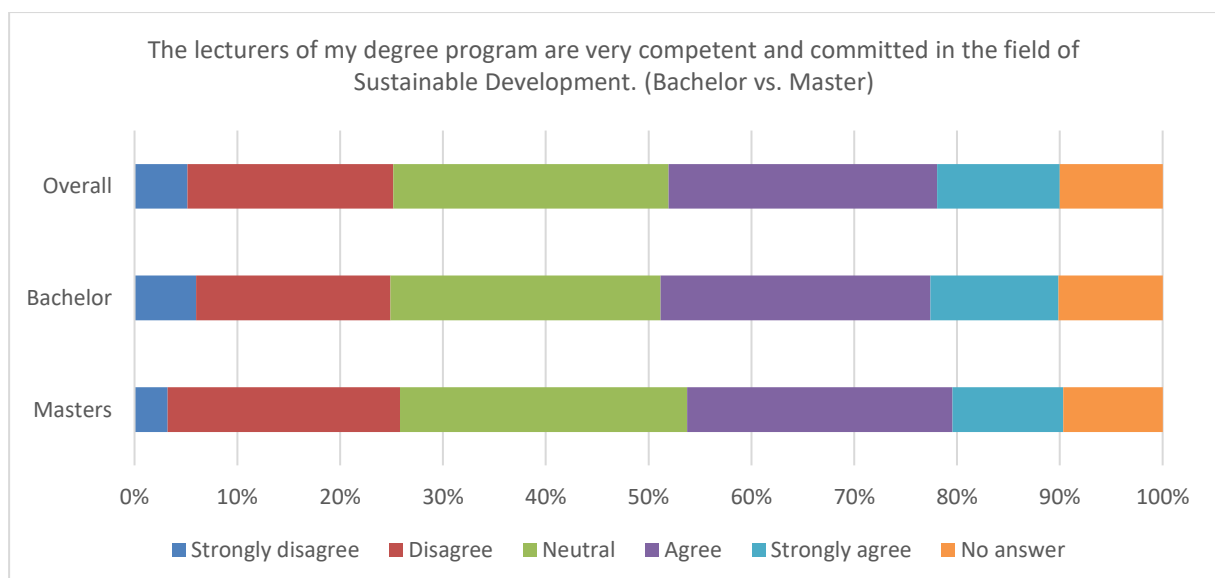
#### Interest in sustainable development

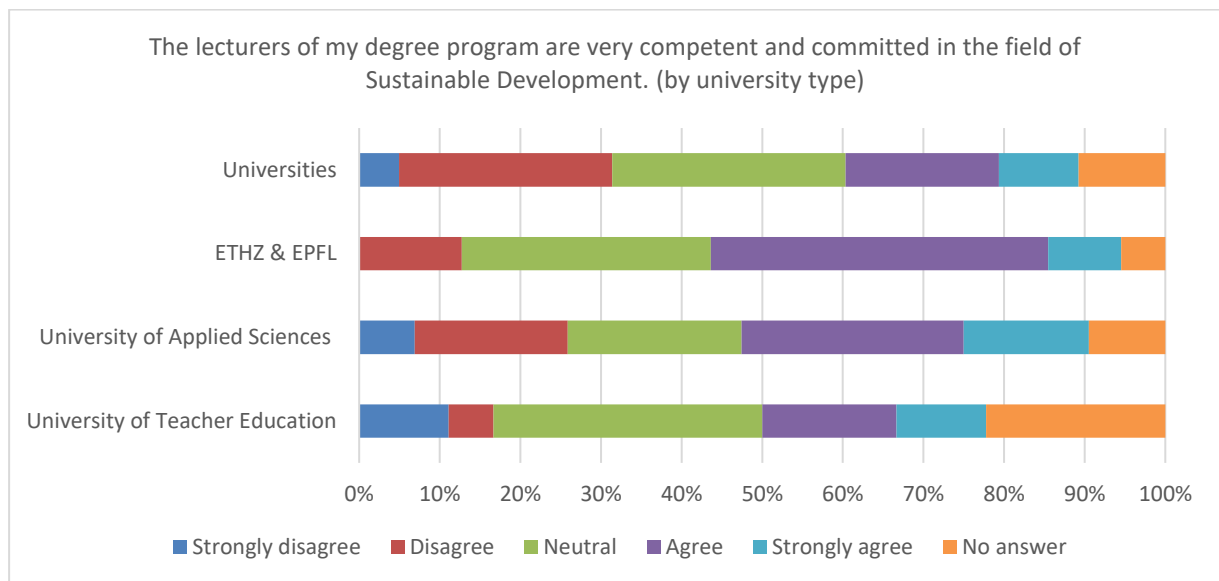


### University's commitment to sustainable development

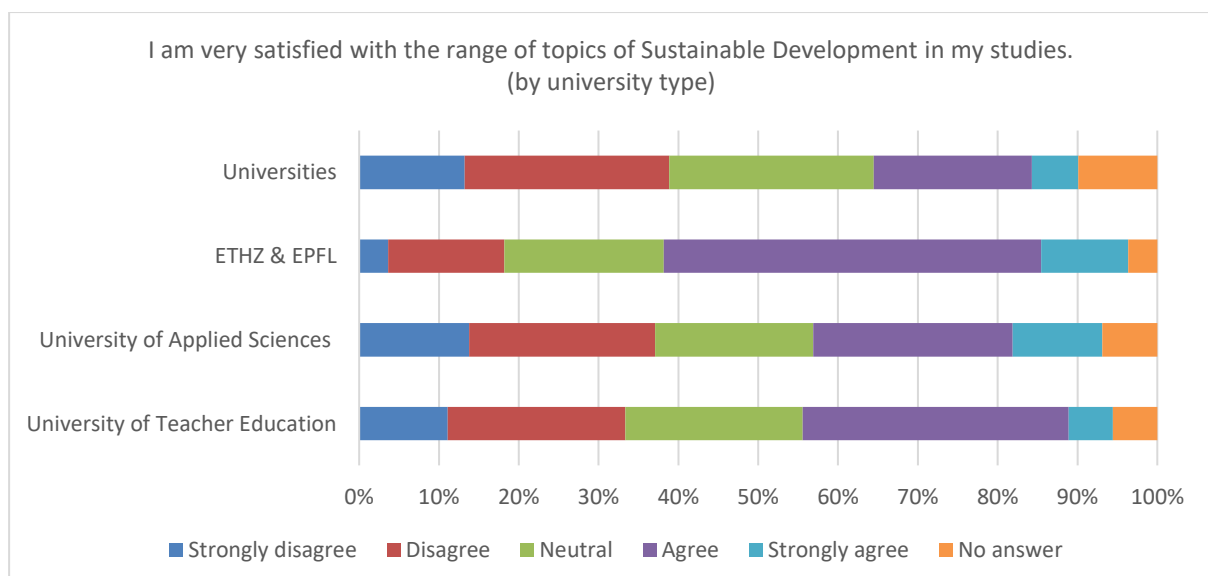
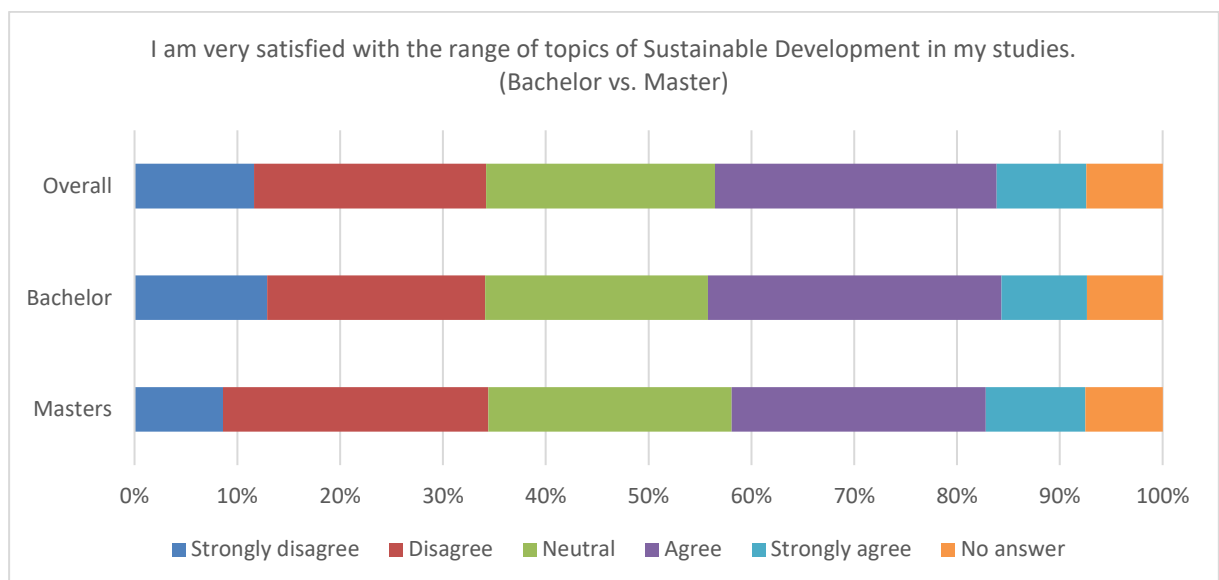


### Lecturers' expertise in and commitment to sustainable development





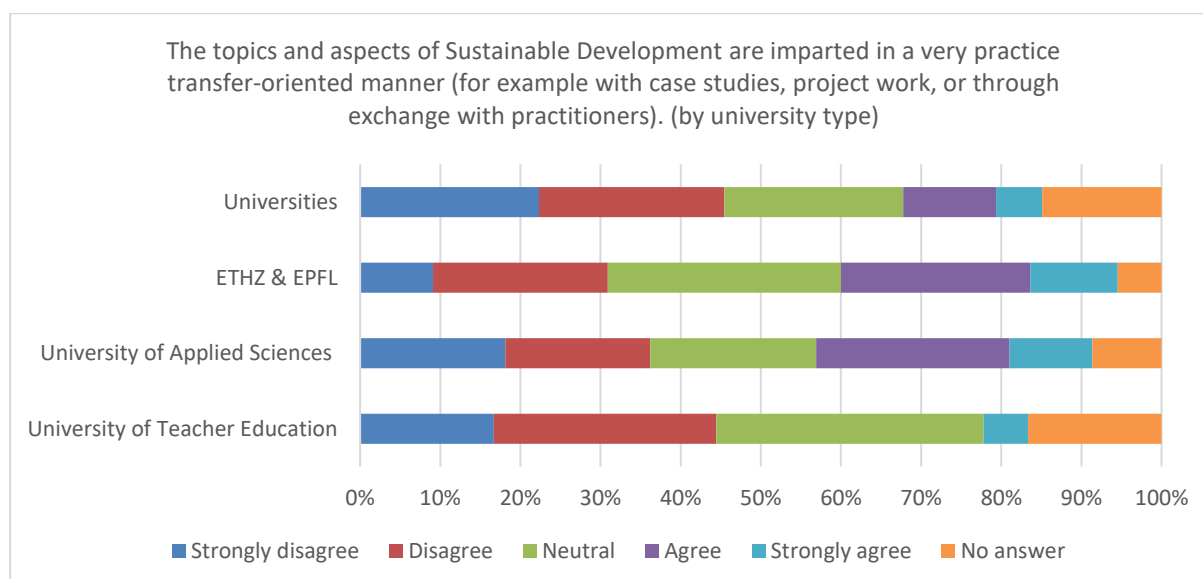
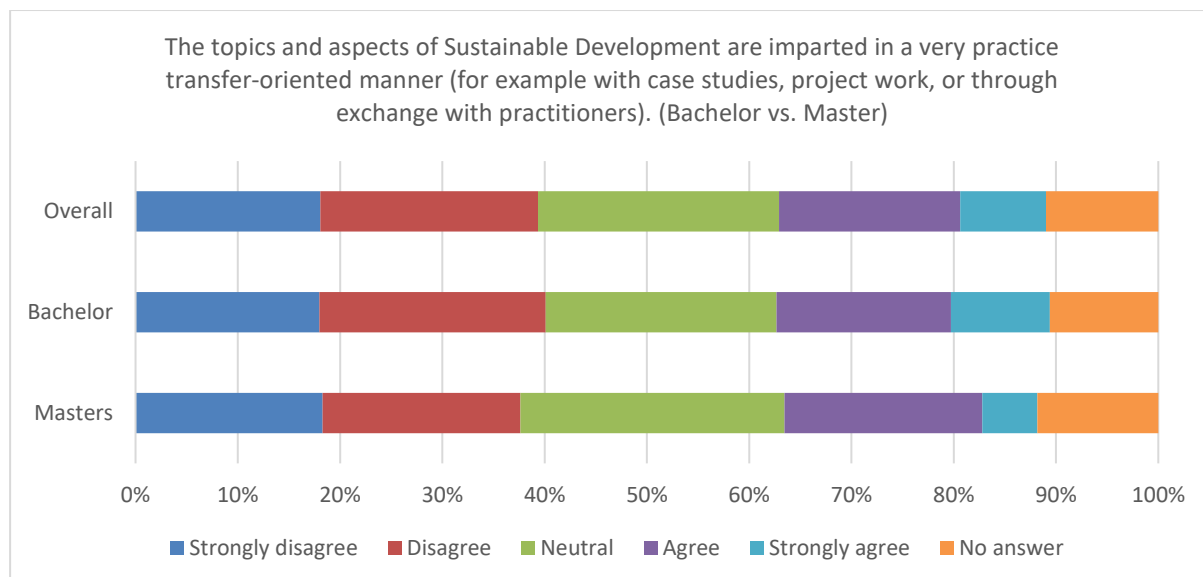
### Range of sustainable development topics covered



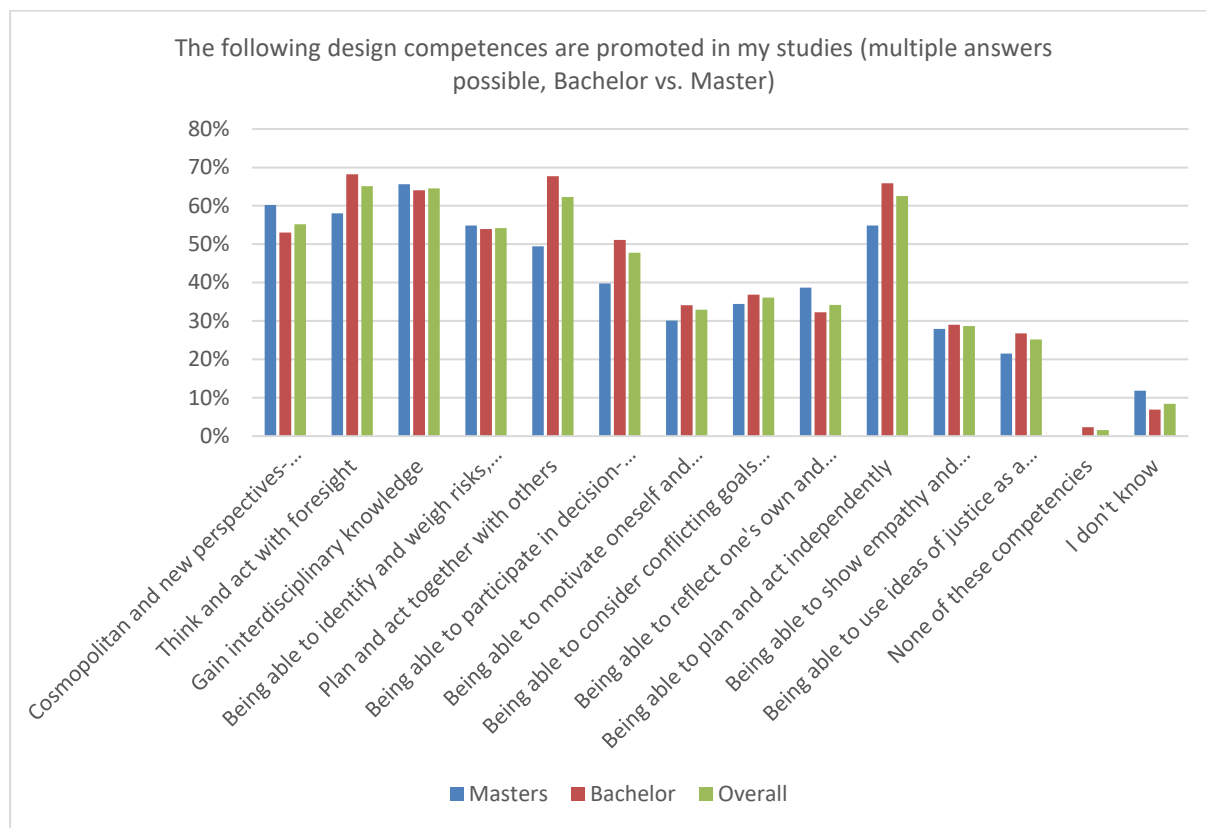
Freely formulated answers (quantity)	Topics given adequate coverage	Topics desired and/or not addressed to date
Topics relating to environment	55	40
Topics relating to economy	13	36
Topics relating to society	13	11
Topics relating to Education for Sustainable Development or environmental psychology	8	8
Other topics, including overarching topics	22	32
None	18	5
Total answers	129	132

Suggestions for improvement: roughly half the 113 answers provided relate to the campus and half to teaching. They are very heterogeneous in nature and cannot be split into categories.

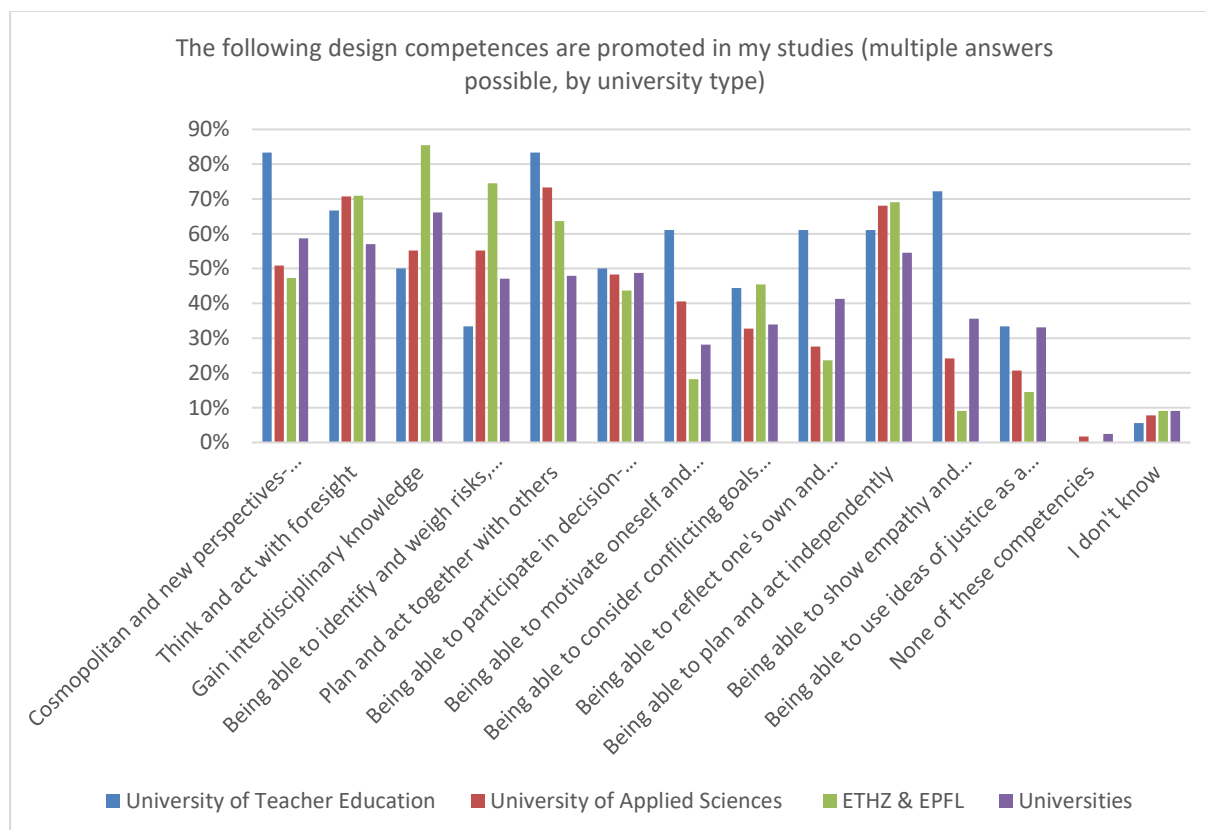
### Practical methods of teaching sustainable development topics and issues



### Overarching sustainable development competencies fostered



See overleaf for key

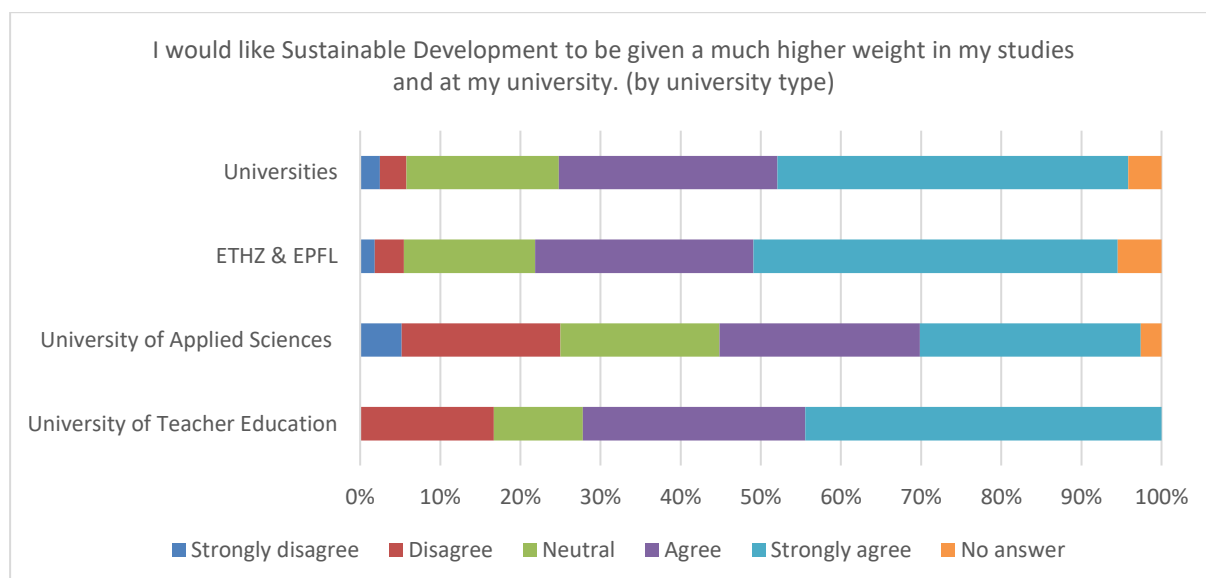
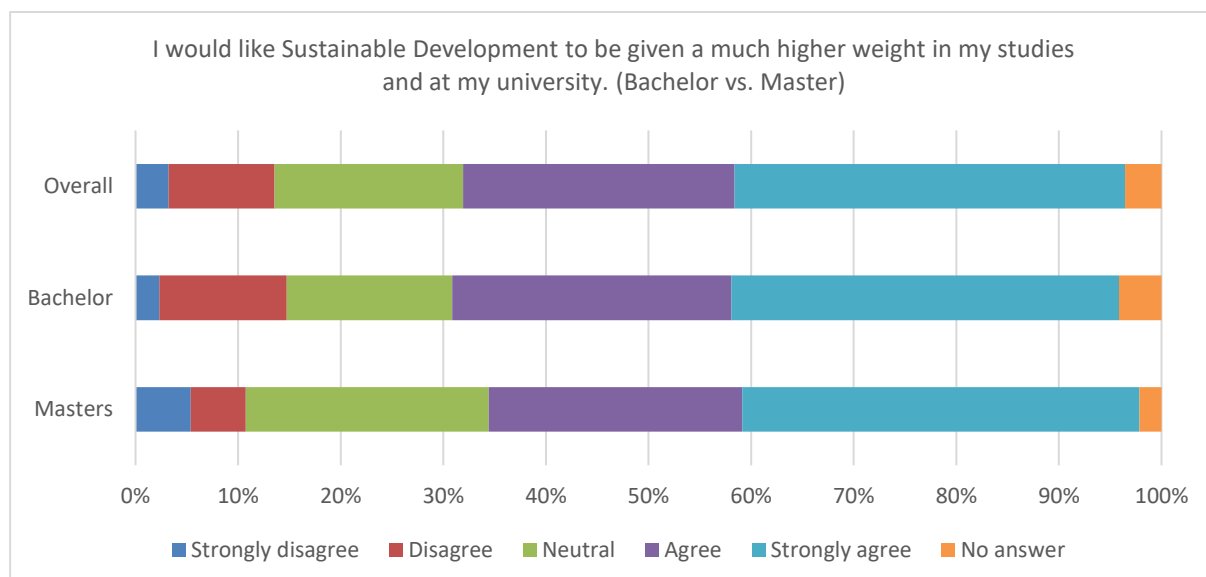


See overleaf for key

The twelve “shaping competencies” (based on de Haan 2008):

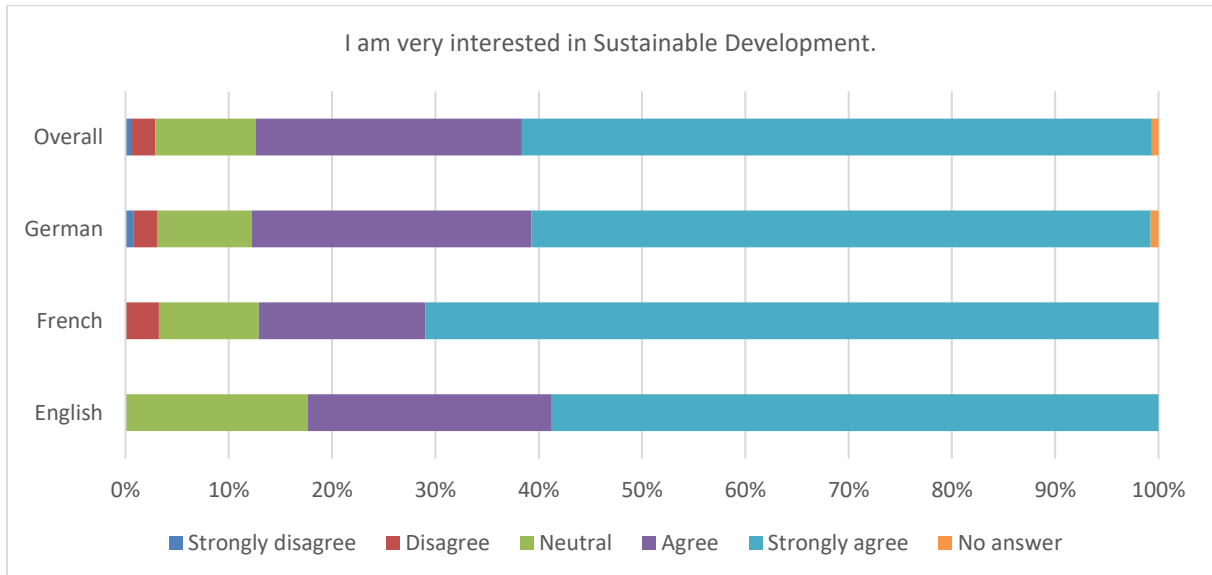
Cosmopolitan and new perspectives-integrated knowledge building	Being able to motivate oneself and others to become active
Think and act with foresight	Being able to consider conflicting goals when reflecting on action strategies
Gain interdisciplinary knowledge	Being able to reflect one's own and others' mission statements
Being able to identify and weigh risks, dangers, and uncertainties	Being able to plan and act independently
Plan and act together with others	Being able to show empathy and solidarity for the disadvantaged
Being able to participate in decision-making processes	Being able to use ideas of justice as a basis for decision-making and action

### The importance students would like to see given to sustainable development on their course and at their university

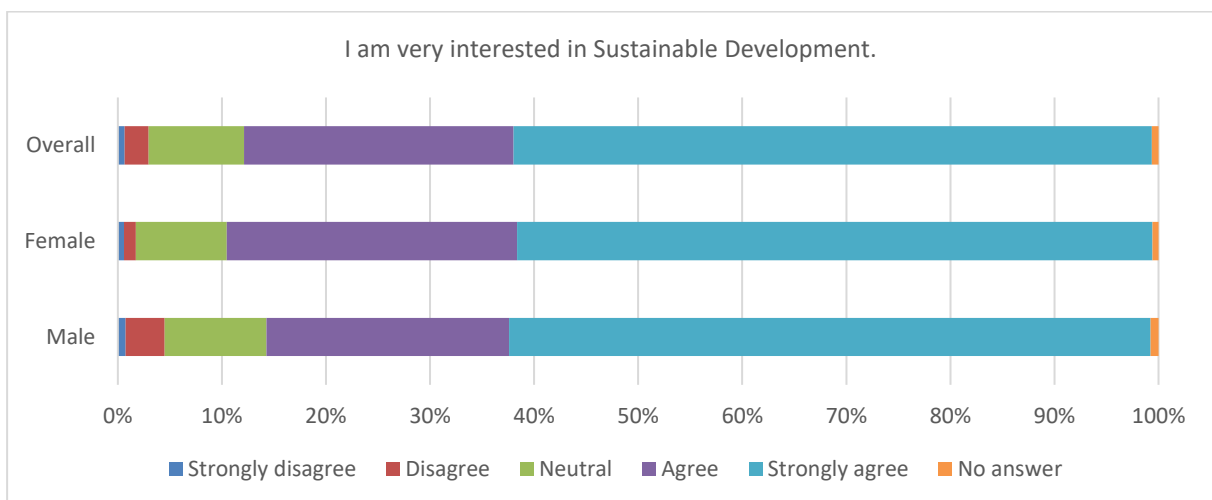


## Relationship between participants' interest in sustainable development and their characteristics

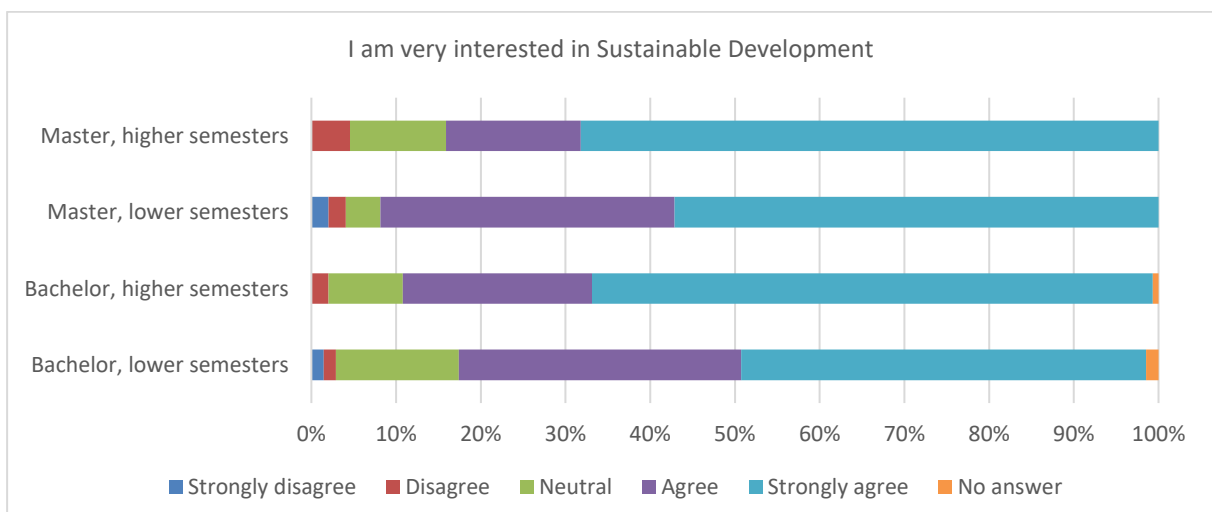
### Language



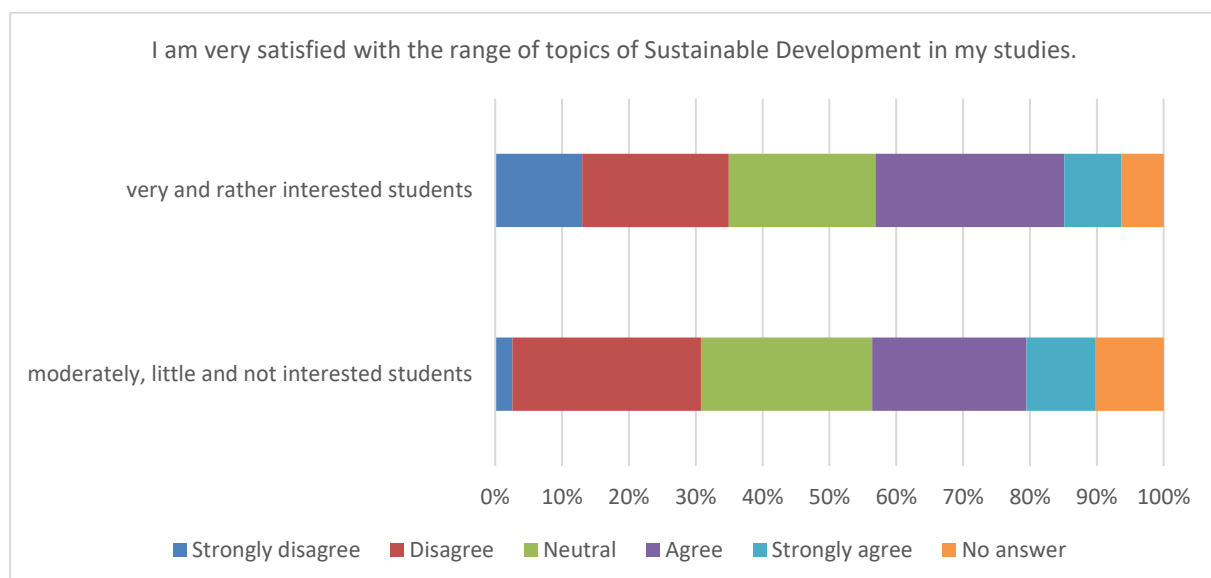
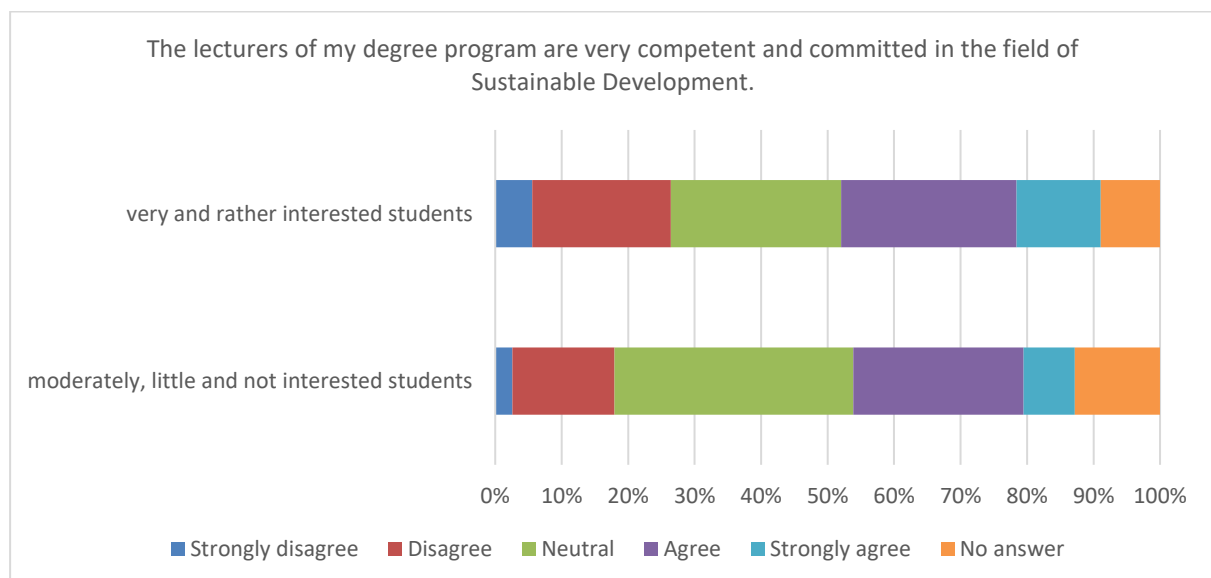
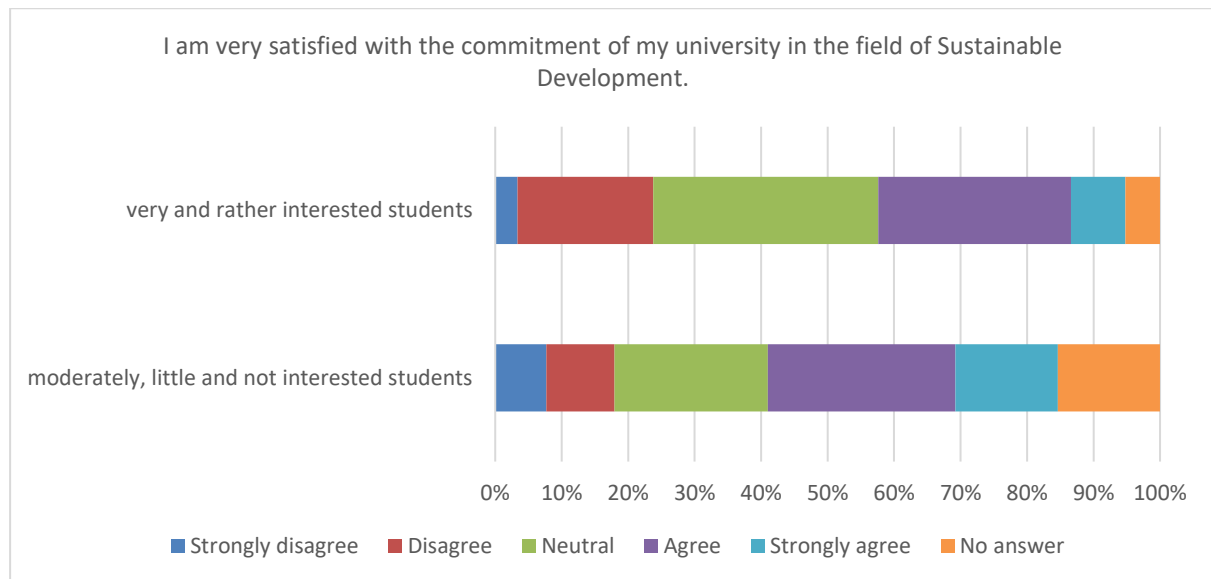
### Gender

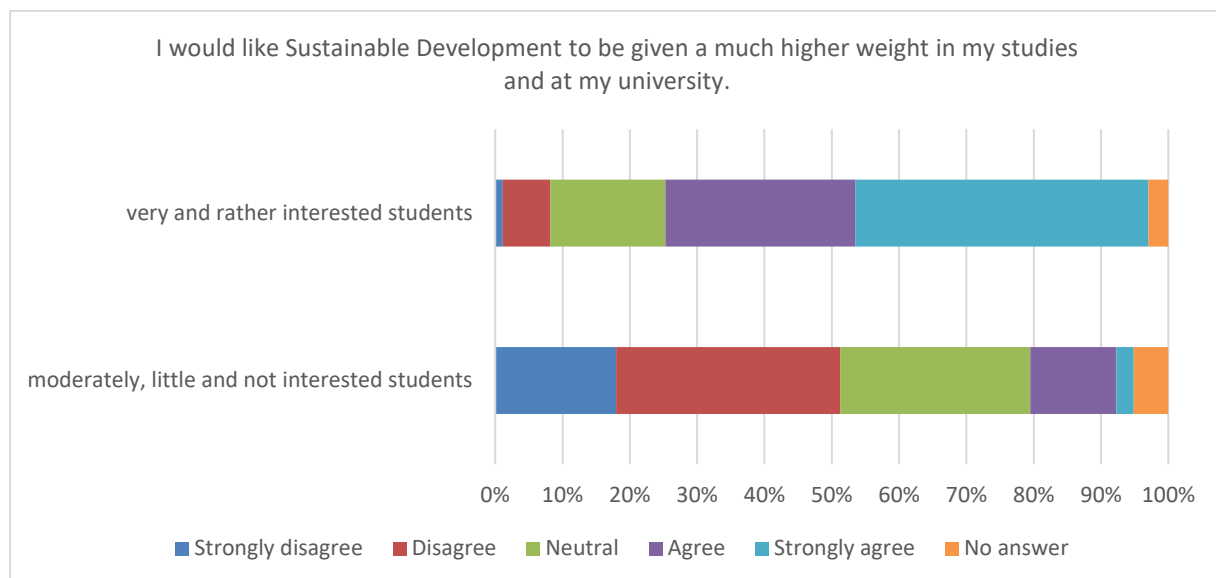
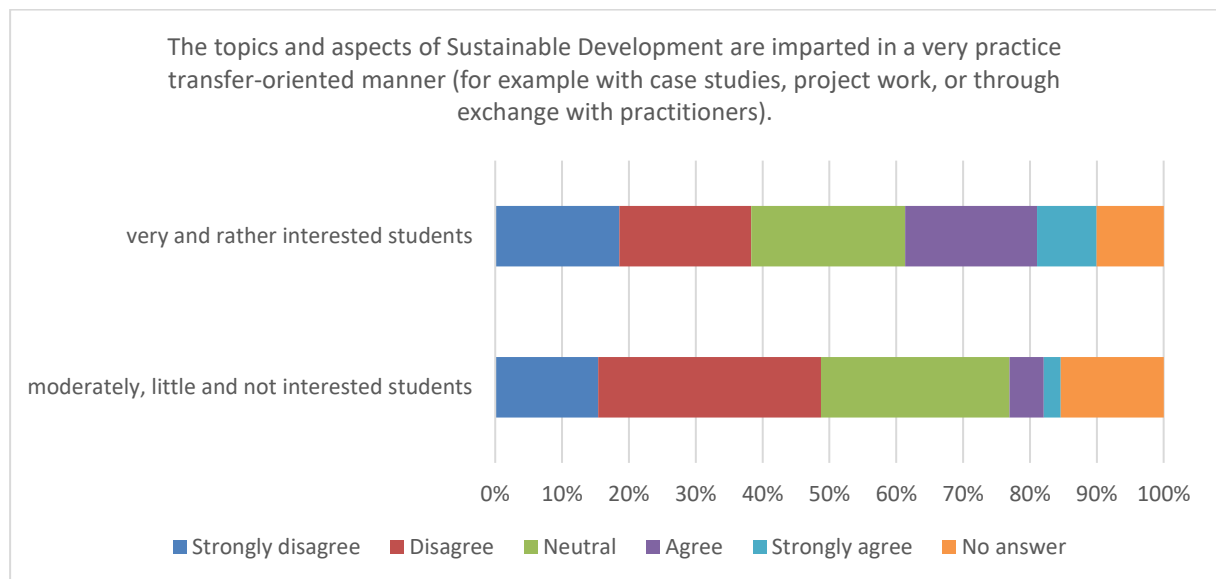


### Stage on course (in semesters)



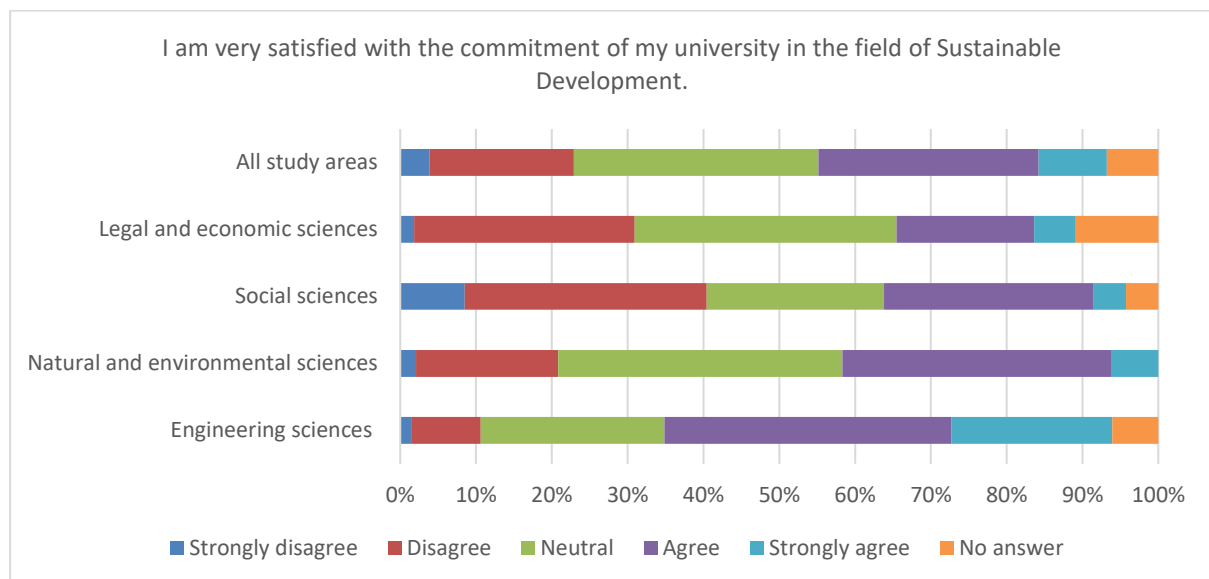
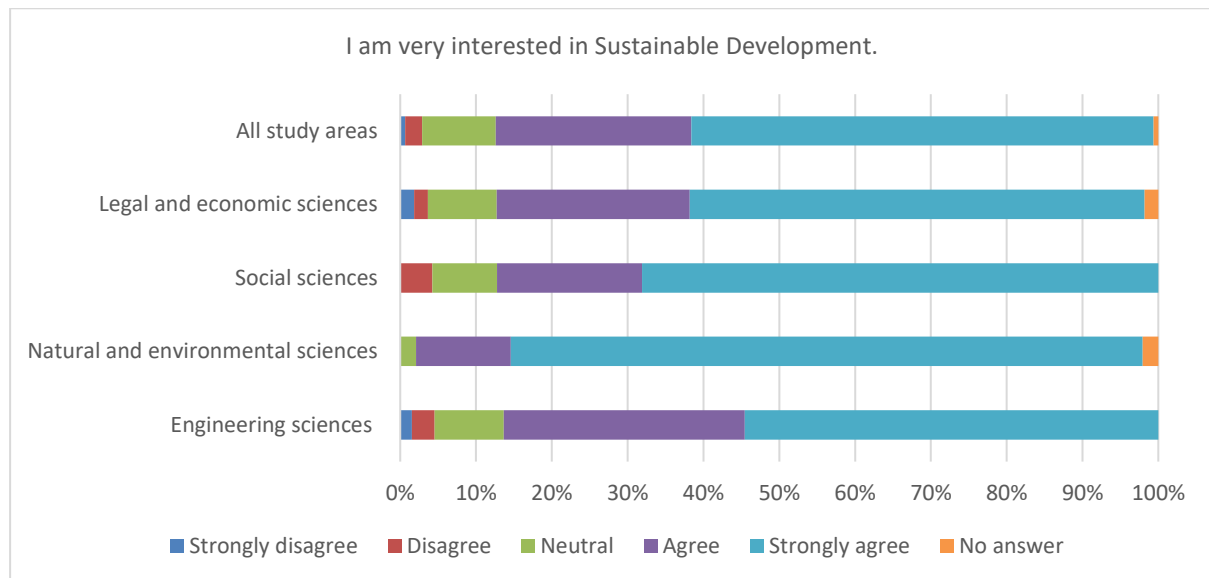
## Relationship between participants' interest in sustainable development and what they think and want

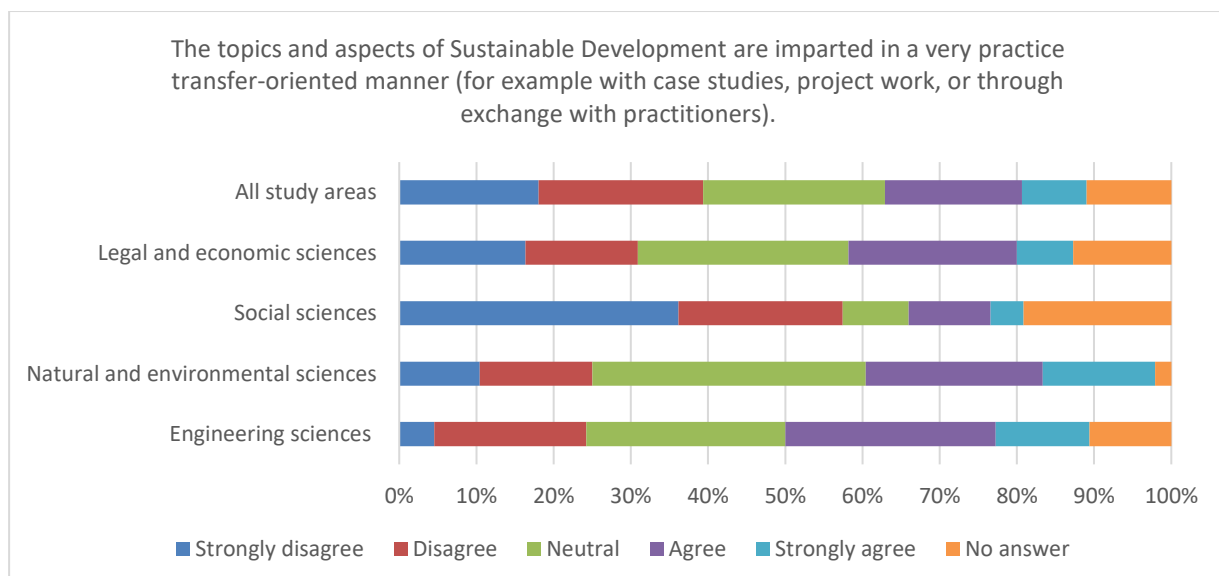
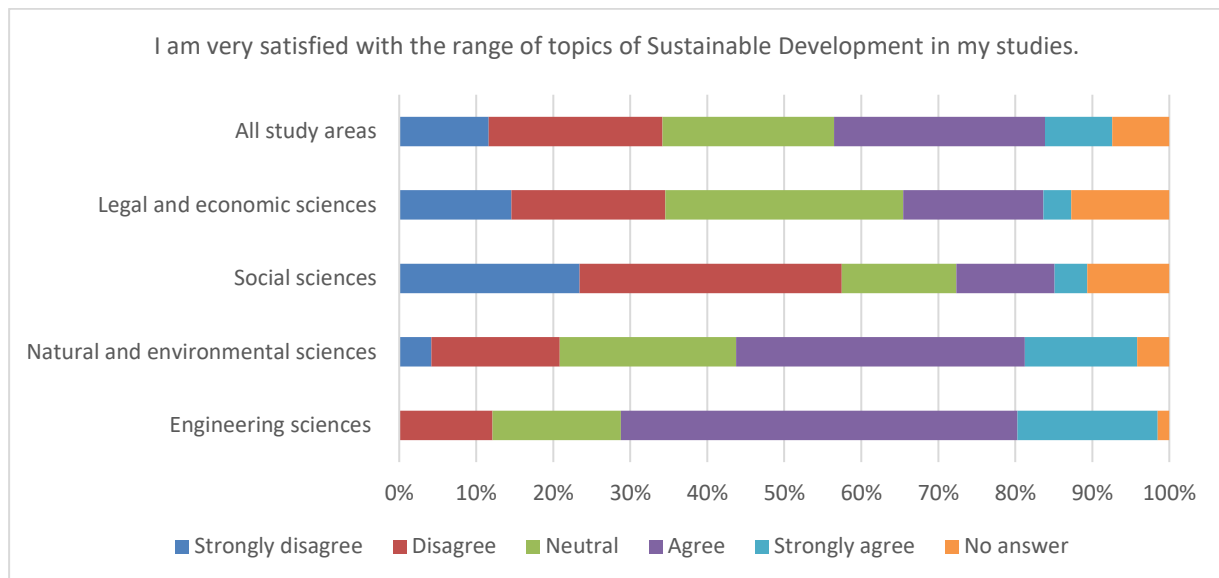
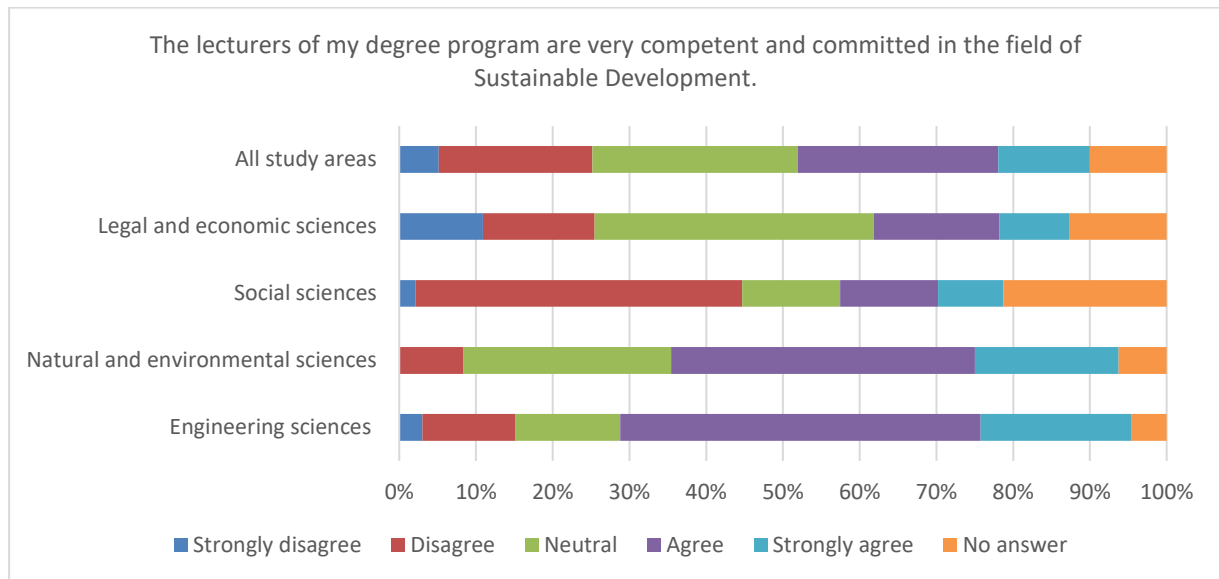


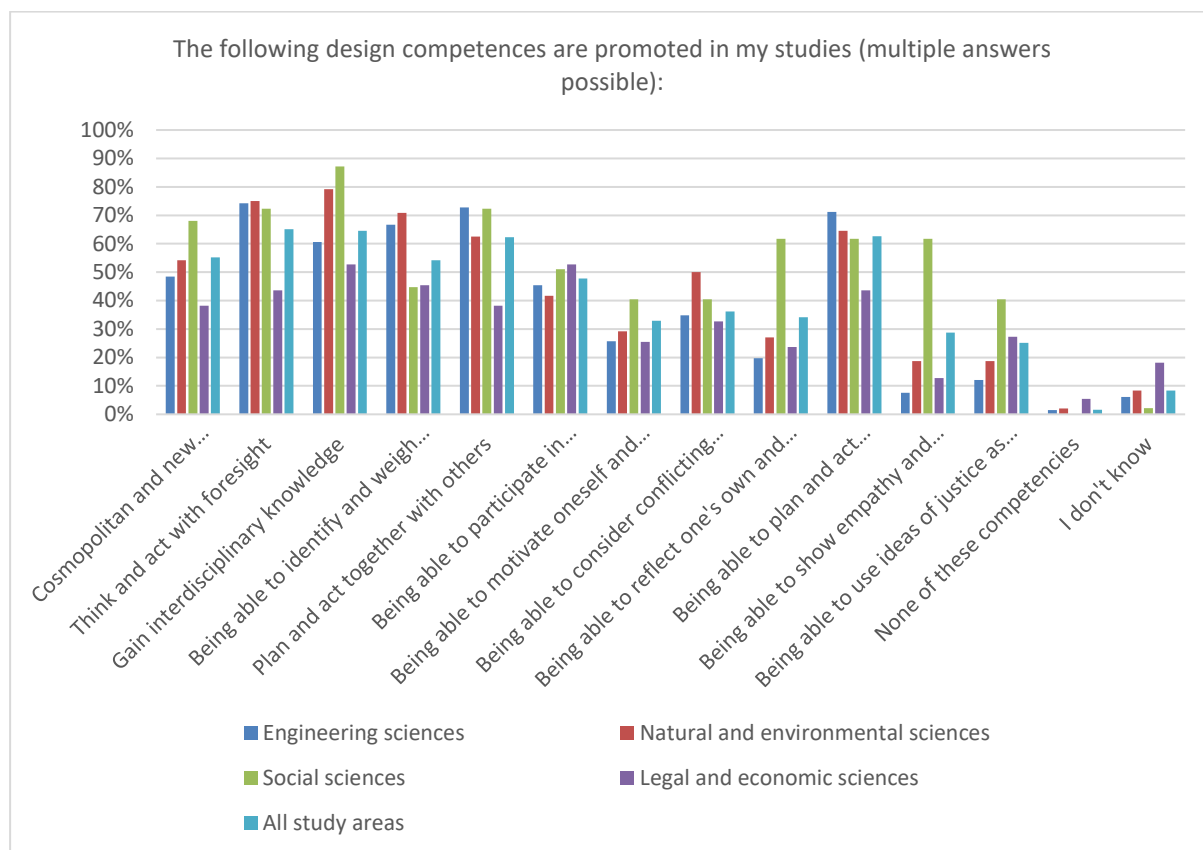


## Comparison between disciplines

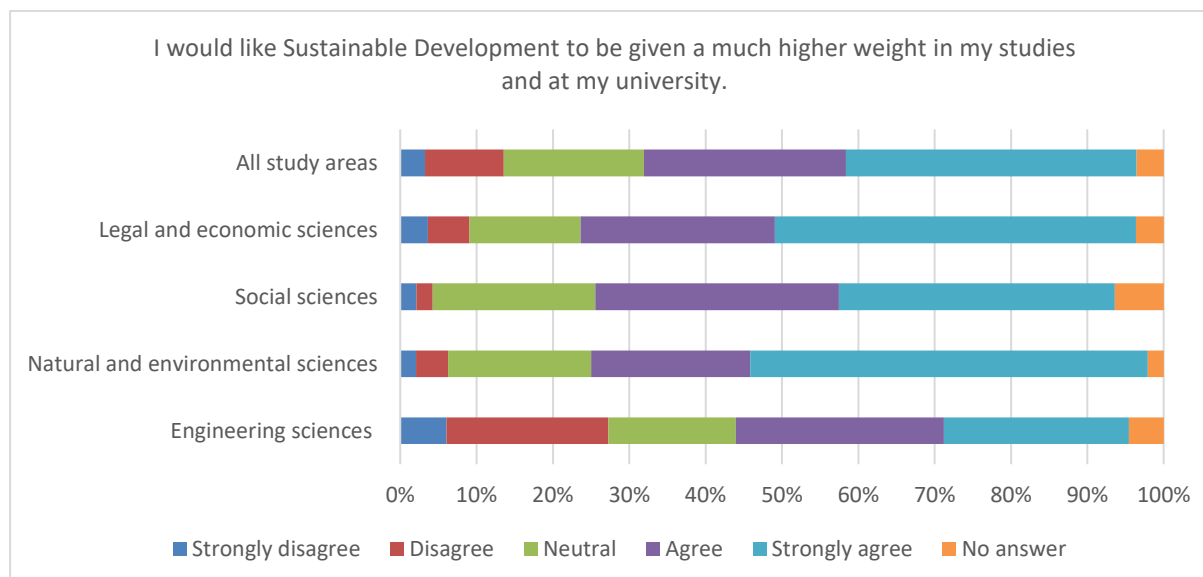
Four disciplines with an adequate sample size were able to be evaluated separately:







See legend on page 12



## Comparison with a Larger-Scale Student Survey

The UK's National Union of Students (NUS, 2018), a confederation of 600 student organisations, has run a survey on sustainable development at universities every year since 2010. More than 40,000 students in all have completed it, including over 12,000 in 2017 alone. The main findings from the most recent survey (2016-17) are summarised below, although it is also worth mentioning that results have painted a consistent picture over the years.

There is clear agreement amongst those surveyed, with nearly 9 out of 10 respondents (87 per cent) of the opinion that universities must actively integrate and promote sustainable development. Three-quarters (76 per cent) also agreed that sustainable development should be actively integrated and promoted on all courses. However, only slightly more than half (52 per cent) believed that lecturers should be obliged to incorporate sustainable development into their teaching. In addition, not quite two-thirds (58 per cent) felt that sustainable development was something that they would like to find out more about.

These findings echo the survey results from Switzerland and serve both as further evidence of just how interested students are in sustainable development and as a clarion call to universities to incorporate and promote sustainable development topics consistently on their courses.

## Bibliography and Links

de Haan G. (2008): Gestaltungskompetenz als Kompetenzkonzept der Bildung für NE. In: Bormann I., de Haan G. (Ed.): Kompetenzen der Bildung für NE. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften; quoted from: **Die zwölf Kompetenzen der BNE (n. Haan et.al. 2008).**

**WWF Switzerland (2017): Sustainability in Swiss Higher Education. Summary**

**VSN-FDD-FSS (2016): Nachhaltigkeit an die Schweizer Hochschulen! Forderungen (Sustainability Into Swiss Universities! Demands)**

**National Union of Students (2018): Sustainability Skills 2016-17: Research into students' experiences of teaching and learning on sustainable development**

## Appendix: Participant Characteristics

### Chosen language

German	85%	262
French	10%	31
English	5%	17

### Gender

male	43%	133
female	55%	172
Other/No answer	2%	5

### Type of university

University	39%	121
University of Applied Sciences	37%	116
University of Teacher Education	6%	18
ETHZ & EPFL	18%	55

### Name of university

Universität Basel	12
Universität Bern	19
Université de Fribourg	27
Université de Genève	2
Université de Lausanne	3
Universität Luzern	22
Université de Neuchâtel	1
Universität St. Gallen	8
Università della Svizzera italiana	0
Universität Zürich	26
Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, Genève, IHEID	1
Stiftung Universitäre Fernstudien Schweiz, Brig	0
Berner Fachhochschule, BFH	5
Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, FHNW	6
Fachhochschule Ostschweiz, FHO	66
HES-SO Haute école spécialisée de Suisse occidentale	18
Hochschule Luzern, HSLU	5
Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana, SUPSI	1
Zürcher Fachhochschule, ZFH	14
Fachhochschule Les Roches-Gruyères, HES-LRG	0
Kalaidos Fachhochschule	1
Haute école pédagogique des cantons de Berne, du Jura et de Neuchâtel	0
Haute école pédagogique du canton de Vaud	2
Pädagogische Hochschule Wallis   Haute école pédagogique du Valais	0
Haute école pédagogique Fribourg   Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg	0
Interkantonale Hochschule für Heilpädagogik Zürich	0
Pädagogische Hochschule Graubünden   Alta scuola pedagogica dei Grigioni   Scola auta da pedagogia dal Grischun	1
Pädagogische Hochschule Bern	2

Pädagogische Hochschule Luzern	9
Pädagogische Hochschule Nordwestschweiz (FHNW)	0
Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen	1
Pädagogische Hochschule Schaffhausen	0
Pädagogische Hochschule Schwyz	0
Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau	1
Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich	2
Pädagogische Hochschule Zug	0
Schweizer Hochschule für Logopädie Rorschach SHLR	0
SUPSI - Dipartimento formazione e apprendimento (Ticino, SUPSI)	0
Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne EPFL	3
Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich ETHZ	52

### Disciplines

Theology, religious studies	1%	2
Legal and economic sciences	18%	55
Medicine, pharmacy, health, sports	4%	12
Social sciences, social work, educational science	15%	47
Linguistics and literary studies, communication, information	3%	10
Cultural and historical studies	3%	8
Art, music, design	5%	14
Mathematics, computer science	5%	16
Natural and environmental sciences	15%	48
Engineering sciences and architecture, agriculture and forestry sciences	21%	66
Teaching, pedagogical professions	8%	26
Sustainability science	2%	6

### Level

Bachelor	70%	217
Master	29%	91
Secondary I + II Qualification (only PH)	1%	2

### Stage on course (in semesters)

Semester 1	2%	7
Semester 2	35%	108
Semester 3	3%	10
Semester 4	29%	89
Semester 5	2%	7
Semester 6	29%	89

### General universities: survey completed for major/minor/single-subject degree course

Major	56%	68
Minor	3%	4
Mono Course (no Minor)	41%	49



**Why we are here**

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.