Oxford Brookes University   **July 2025**

Sustainability in Early Careers UK, 2025

A survey-based and interview-informed study exploring the supply of and demand for sustainability-oriented early career roles in the UK

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windō

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Foreword
Oxford Brookes University

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This report presents the findings of a nationwide study into the supply of and demand for placement, internship, and graduate roles that involve "sustainability" (in its broadest sense). The study also sought to understand employer views on student readiness for such roles to inform Higher Education Institution (HEI) curriculum design.

At Oxford Brookes University, we are increasingly focused on the real-world impact of higher education—on how we prepare students not only for employment, but for meaningful engagement in the social and environmental challenges of our time. This research was commissioned in response to a critical question we have heard echoed across our networks of educators, students, and employers: *Are we doing enough to support sustainability career pathways for our graduates?*

This study was conducted in collaboration with Windō, the UN Global Compact Network UK and a network of nine other UK universities. All these universities are active members of the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative (UNPRME) and its UK and Ireland Working Group on Careers and Sustainability led by Oxford Brookes University. The research leverages data from over 200 UK organisations to inform recommendations for curriculum design, employer practices, and sectoral strategy. The study was deliberately designed to draw on employer practice across multiple job roles, disciplinary areas and organisational sectors.

The findings of this report offer a compelling blend of affirmation and provocation. They affirm what many of us already suspected—that there is significant interest in sustainability roles among students. But the findings also challenge us to confront the structural and cultural disconnects that limit the visibility, accessibility, and integration of sustainability across such early career roles.

We are especially encouraged by the nuance in this study. Rather than framing sustainability as the domain of a small subset of "green jobs," it paints a richer picture: one in which sustainability can be embedded across a diversity of sectors and functions. It highlights the importance of systems thinking, strategic foresight, and values-based practice—skills and dispositions that we must now teach with greater intent.

This research would not have been possible without the deep collaboration of Windō, UN Global Compact Network UK, and our network of participating universities; University of Bristol, University of Exeter, Keele University, Nottingham Trent University, Richmond American University London, University of Surrey, University of Stirling, University of Westminster and University of Warwick. Academic as well as professional service teams (especially careers services) were instrumental in disseminating the survey and connecting the research team to businesses.

We are also indebted to all the organisations that contributed. Their willingness to engage critically and candidly with this agenda reflects a shared commitment to equipping students for the realities of a changing world.

As educators for sustainability, we are acutely aware that the concept of 'employability' must now extend beyond skills alone. It must encompass purpose, values, adaptability, and an understanding of global systems. We hope this report will serve as both a reference point and a call to action for institutions across the UK and beyond.

Foreword
Professor Tim Vorley OBE

**Pro Vice Chancellor and Dean, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Oxford Brookes University**

Graduates today are entering a world of work shaped by disruptive innovation, climate change, and social transformation; and they are doing so wanting to make a difference. As our graduates embark on their careers, they do so seeking to shape the world with a sense of purpose.

To better support our graduates there is an onus on universities to ensure that sustainability is integrated into all of our programmes, and that students are equipped with the skills and mindset to thrive. This is imperative to meet the growing demand of our learners who are looking to pursue more purpose-driven careers.

There is also a need for employers to more clearly signal their sustainability credentials and commitments. As the report highlights, sustainability is already a focus for many employers, although communicating this can often be lost in the recruitment process. It is, however, central to attracting and retain talent.

The report highlights the opportunity for universities and businesses to connect and collaborate around questions of sustainability, in order to empower and support graduates as changemakers in their early career roles and beyond.

Foreword
Windō

Oli Coles &
Ken Janssens

Co-Founders, Windō

At Windō, we have long believed that the transition to a more sustainable and equitable economy must be rooted in transparency, values alignment, and opportunity. This research, which we are proud to have co-developed with Oxford Brookes and other university partners, offers critical insight into how well—or how poorly—the current system is serving the next generation of talent.

Windō helps Gen Z jobseekers find employers who share their values by showcasing company DEI, sustainability, and wellbeing data, and offering a curated job board, insights, and resources tailored for early-career talent and inclusive hiring teams. Through our work we know that young people today are not just looking for jobs. They are looking for work that aligns with their values, contributes to a greater purpose, and reflects their growing awareness of the social and environmental challenges we collectively face. At the same time, employers are navigating rapid change—balancing net zero targets, demands for social justice, and a more vocal, values-led workforce. The question is: Where and how do these two forces meet?

This report reveals that while there is no shortage of ambition on either side, the systems that connect talent with opportunity are not yet fit for purpose. Sustainability-related roles are often under-signposted. Competency frameworks are emerging but unevenly applied. And while many students are ready to act, they are not always supported to do so.

Windō exists to close these gaps—between employer intention and student expectation, between opportunity and awareness, between data and lived experience. We hope that the insights in this report will encourage educators to embed sustainability more deeply into the curriculum, and employers to signal their sustainability commitments and opportunities more clearly and inclusively.

Most of all, we hope it empowers students to recognise that their values are not a 'nice to have'—they are a professional asset, a differentiator, and a guidepost in an increasingly complex world.

Key collaborators

Steve Kenzie

Executive Director at UN Global Compact Network UK

The UN Global Compact's Ten Principles of responsible business and the UN Sustainable Development Goals define the holistic approach to sustainability that we need to achieve the future we want. It is often the case, both in business and academia, that sustainability is defined too narrowly and then siloed. At the UN Global Compact Network UK, we fervently believe that "every job is a sustainability job". That ethos runs through this report and its concrete recommendations. I am proud that the UN Global Compact Network UK has been able to support this important work and look forward to sharing it with our Network members.

Matthew Taylor
Business School Accreditation and Rankings Manager

Steve Wallers
Employer Engagement & Student Employment Manager

University of Exeter

At the University of Exeter we combine world-class research with excellent student satisfaction and we are one of the very few universities to be both a member of the Russell Group and have a Gold award from the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We have a strong commitment to sustainability and this is embedded across the University's sovereign strategies. The 'Career Zone' is an exemplar of how the University integrates sustainability beyond just teaching and research, with this service making a commitment to address and meet the requirements of the SOS 'Responsible Futures' framework for embedding sustainability in learning. We are delighted to have been able to contribute to the research that underpins the Sustainability in Early Careers report. Its findings will help us shape future versions of our Careers in Sustainability & Environment Week, our employer panels, our joint work with PRME and student initiatives such as how personal branding and storytelling around the theme of sustainability can support a student's career journey.

Introduction

This study investigates the emerging landscape of placements, internships, and graduate roles in the United Kingdom that pertain to sustainability, defined in its broadest sense to include environmental stewardship, corporate responsibility, diversity and inclusion, ethical governance, and social impact. Recognising the growing interest among graduates in sustainability-driven careers, this research aims to assess the extent and explicitness of employer offerings, the perceived readiness of applicants, and the systemic barriers or enablers influencing access to such roles.

Deloitte's (2025) Gen Z and Millennial Survey highlights the importance of 'purpose-driven work' and 'environmental concerns'. Within the context of a 'greening economy,' global demand for 'green' talent is said to outstrip supply of talent (LinkedIn 2024), yet anecdotally, our experiences indicate that students struggle to enter sustainability-related placement/internship/graduate roles due to the limited supply of positions and high competition.   This is effectively captured by Fortune (2024) in reporting that "the reality is that young workers are stuck: They can't break into green jobs because they lack the skills required—yet they'll never gain the skills or experience required until they bag a green job".

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the reality is that young workers are stuck: They can't break into green jobs because they lack the skills required—yet they'll never gain the skills or experience required until they bag a green job.

Fortune, 2024

As employer development programmes evolve to meet new talent requirements, educational institutions must also respond to the changing sustainability skill sets industry needs. This requires building more understanding of organisational sustainability requirements across sectors so that graduates are 'workforce ready'. It also needs educational institutions to work alongside industry partners in to ensure placement/internship experiences align with the skills industry needs.

If, potentially, "every job is a sustainability job" (gov.uk 2020, EAUC 2023), then it follows that every programme should enable sustainability-related workplace learning and experiences. Student placements and shorter-term internships are integral to many university entrepreneurial and experiential learning strategies. This study is designed to investigate organisations' approaches to placement, internship and new graduate-level roles related to sustainability.

*We see "**sustainability**" as an umbrella term relevant to all sizes/sectors of business, encompassing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environment, Social and Governance (ESG), Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), philanthropy, net zero, the Green Transition, positive impact, ethics, and other related term*s.

Other definitions of note applied within this study are:

*'**Placements/internships**": Any paid or unpaid position offered to university students for a period of between 1 month and 1 year.*

*"**Graduate roles**": Roles that use graduate skills and attributes including graduate jobs and graduate schemes.*

The study objectives were to explore:

1. The scale and explicitness of sustainability-related roles
2. Where sustainability is not explicit in available roles, why this is the case
3. Employer perceptions of applicant interest in and demand for sustainability-related roles
4. Employer perceptions of applicant readiness in terms of desirable skills for sustainability-related roles
5. Employer approaches to careers fairs and other promotional channels in communicating sustainability-related role information

Methodology

Organisation responses (n)

201

UK university partners

10

including Oxford Brookes University

Supported by

UN Global Compact Network UK

2.1. Research Design

The project employed a mixed methods approach, based principally on a quantitative survey including some open-ended questions and supported by a small number of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. This study was approved by Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee (L23322) and also met the ethics requirements of the other academic collaborators.

2.2. Survey Distribution and Sample

The survey was disseminated via academic collaborators and the UN Global Compact Network UK between May 2024 and March 2025. The survey targeted individuals responsible for or knowledgeable about placement, internship, or graduate recruitment—including roles in sustainability, HR, and early careers strategy.

After removing partial and duplicate records, the dataset of 201 organisational responses was cleaned for analysis. Quantitative questions were analysed using descriptive statistics, and open-text responses were coded thematically. Where applicable, comparisons are drawn to national employer benchmarks and relevant sectoral studies.

2.3. Interview Approach

Survey respondents were invited to opt in to be contacted to arrange an interview to explore the issues raised in more depth. Alongside contacts provided through university networks, 12 interviews were held, but 3 were not included for analysis as the organisations were found not to offer placements, internships, or graduate positions. Interviews were held with company owners/founders or senior staff in sustainability-related roles. Interviews were mainly held over 6 months between July and December 2024 and were conducted online over an average 45 minutes, structured around questions related to each of the research questions. These were audio-recorded and analysed using NVIVO 2.0 which enabled a thematic analysis against each question that could be compared with the survey responses. Anonymised and coded quotations are presented here by respondent (R) number.

Employer characteristics

The 201 employers participating in this study reflect a representative cross-section of the UK economy in terms of sector and size. Nearly half (46%) were small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), 34% had between 251–5,000 employees, and 20% exceeded 5,000 employees. This broadly aligns with UK labour market distributions.

Respondents themselves were a mix of sustainability professionals (30%) and personnel management roles (42%), with others working across employer branding, organisational development, and compliance—demonstrating that sustainability-related recruitment responsibilities often reside across departments.

201

employers surveyed

46%

SME enterprises

34%

251 -5,000 employees

20%

5,000+ employees

Sectorally, the largest representation came from Management and Consulting (12%), followed by Finance (9%), Manufacturing (8%), Education (8%) and Information Technology (7%). These sectors collectively accounted for 44% of the total respondents. Importantly, participants also spanned energy, healthcare, legal, and NGO sectors. Interviewees echoed the diversity of this participation, offering perspectives from engineering consultancies to retail impact organisations.

Management & Consulting 12%
Finance 9%
Manufacturing 8%
Education 8%
Information Technology 7%
Other 56%
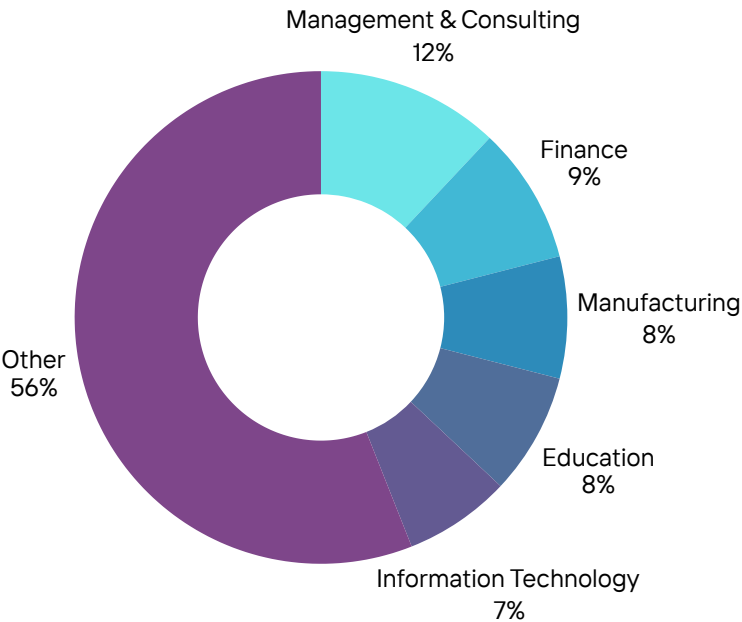
# Perceptions of employer engagement in sustainability

Respondents rated their organisation's engagement in five areas of sustainability on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). This section synthesises both the average scores and the distribution of responses to paint a clearer picture of how employer sustainability efforts are perceived.

Area of Sustainability	Mean Score	No. of Respondents
Environmental impact	4.04	177
Societal impact	4.04	176
Philanthropy	3.36	174
ESG reporting	3.69	175
Equality, diversity and inclusion	3.99	177

Survey responses indicate that employer engagement with sustainability is generally viewed positively, especially in relation to environmental impact, societal impact and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), which received the highest top-tier ratings. In contrast, philanthropy received the weakest scores, suggesting a shift in expectations from charitable giving to more embedded forms of impact. ESG reporting sat in the middle, with notable engagement but signs of inconsistency, possibly reflecting perceptions of surface-level compliance.

Despite strong average scores across all five areas, around one in four respondents rated their organisation's efforts as only moderate or worse. This highlights uneven perceptions of excellence and suggests that sustainability may still be siloed or under-communicated in some organisations.

The key takeaway: while many employers are doing well, stronger internal communication, more consistent integration of sustainability practices, and broader stakeholder engagement are needed to ensure that positive efforts are both widespread and recognised across the organisation.
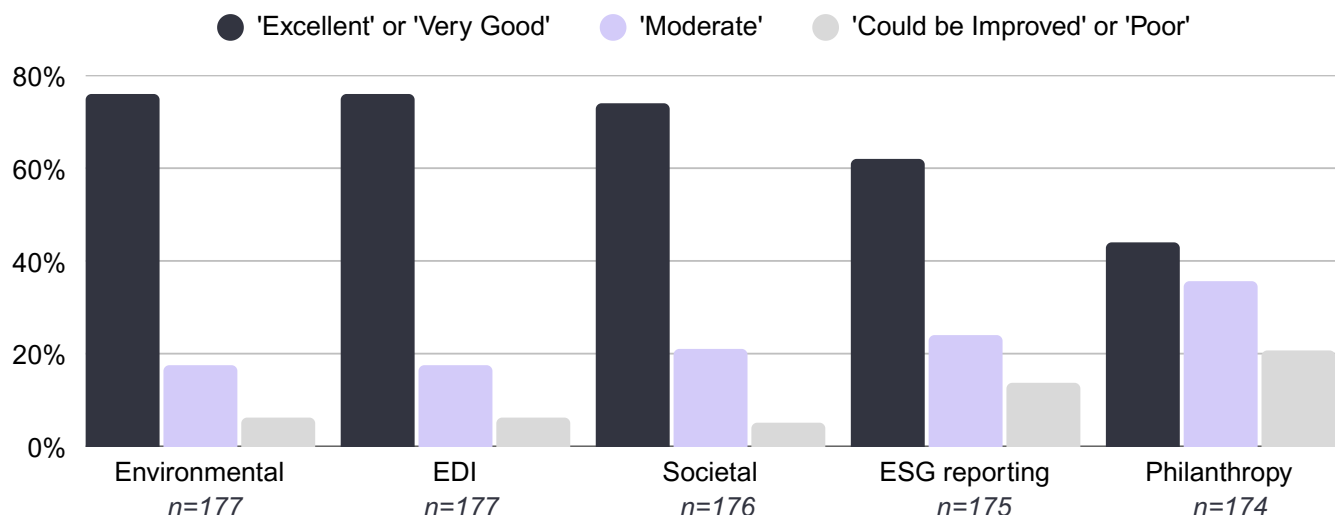
Provision of placement, internship, and graduate roles

Paid roles

Among the 201 organisations surveyed, the provision of early career opportunities was relatively strong, particularly in the paid category: 81% offered at least one type of paid internship, placement, or graduate role. Among those providing quantitative data, the average number of placements or internships offered annually per organisation was 27, while the average number of graduate roles was 55. When it came to sustainability-specific opportunities, 42% of organisations offered sustainability-focused internships or placements, with an average of 8 roles per year, and 42% also provided sustainability-specific graduate roles, likewise averaging 8 roles annually.

Notably, many additional positions—though not formally labelled as sustainability roles—still enabled engagement with sustainability-related work: organisations offered an average of 22 placement or internship roles and 38 graduate roles per year that provided such informal opportunities. The Institute of Student Employers Recruitment Survey Report (2024) into the full spectrum of student and graduate employment types indicated 94% of the 145 respondents offering graduate level roles and 78% offering some form of paid or unpaid internship/placement roles to university level students. The broad findings of the current study are thus largely consistent with this established employer survey.

81%

offer paid internship, placement or graduate roles.

27

the average number of placements/internships offered annually per organisation

n=113

55

the average number of graduate roles offered annually per organisation

n=106

42%

offered sustainability-focused roles

8

the average number of sustainability-focused graduate roles annually per organisation

n=85

22

average annual number of placements/ internships per organisation that allow for engagement in sustainability*

n=84

38

average annual number of graduate roles that allow for engagement in sustainability*

n=83

*These are roles that are not sustainability-focused

Provision of placement, internship, and graduate roles

Unpaid roles: prevalence and concerns

In addition to paid opportunities, a significant portion of respondents—99 organisations—reported offering unpaid placements, internships, or insight schemes. Among these, 51% provided short-term (1–3 month) unpaid internships, while 23% offered 4–11 month unpaid internships or placements, and 17% reported providing unpaid opportunities lasting a full year. 33% of organisations also offered in-person insight schemes, and the majority of "other" unpaid roles were school-level work experience placements, typically lasting one week.

While unpaid roles remain part of the broader early careers ecosystem, their brevity, informality, and lack of financial accessibility present notable concerns. These roles are often concentrated in smaller organisations or sectors with limited resources, reinforcing systemic disparities in access. Interview commentary did not explicitly endorse unpaid roles, but it did point to the value of structured and supported opportunities—something many unpaid schemes lack.

From an equity and inclusion perspective, the continued reliance on unpaid early career experiences—particularly in the sustainability space—demands critical scrutiny. As the sector moves toward more formalised and impactful sustainability engagement, it must also reckon with the fairness, accessibility, and long-term viability of the opportunities it creates.

51%
Provide short-term (1–3 month) unpaid internships

23%
provide 4-11 month unpaid internships or placements

17%
provide 1 year unpaid internships or placements

33%
offer in-person insight schemes

Demand & motivation

**Balancing demand and motivation:
understanding applicant interest in sustainability roles**

38%

reported more applicant demand than there were roles available

32%

reported a balanced supply and demand

29%

reported more opportunities than demand, suggesting a lack of student awareness or preparedness

Employer perspectives on applicant demand were sought to shed light on the frequently debated question of whether demand for sustainability roles among applicants exceeds the supply of opportunities. This issue has gained prominence in recent years. For example, the Global Green Skills Report (LinkedIn, 2024) noted that global demand for green talent grew twice as fast as supply between 2023 and 2024, with demand increasing by 11.6% compared to a 5.6% increase in supply.

Findings from this study offer a more nuanced picture. 38% of respondents to this question (n=130) reported more applicant demand than there were sustainability roles available, while 32% indicated a balance between supply and demand. Notably, 29% reported more opportunities than applicant interest, suggesting possible issues around candidate awareness, readiness, or self-selection.

Interview commentary added further depth to this mismatch. One employer stressed the importance of genuine motivation: "You need to actually care about working in sustainability" (R1), cautioning against applicants who treat sustainability as a fashionable career choice rather than a meaningful commitment. Another interviewee spoke of looking for a "thread of interest" in candidates' prior experiences or extracurriculars: "It doesn't need to be all ESG-related. But there's got to be this thread of interest" (R8). These insights reinforce the idea that authentic motivation and alignment with purpose are becoming as important as technical qualifications.

This trend is reflected in broader hiring patterns. Between 2020 and 2022, LinkedIn reported a 154% increase in values-related terms on entry-level job postings, as employers increasingly tailor their messaging to attract purpose-driven candidates. In April 2023, LinkedIn introduced a new search filter (Young, 2023) enabling candidates to look for employers based on core values such as "diversity," "social impact," and "environmental sustainability."

Together, these findings suggest that future-facing Higher Education employability strategies must move beyond teaching technical skills alone. They must also support students in identifying and articulating their values, cultivating self-awareness, and preparing for values-based recruitment processes that are likely to define the future of work in the sustainability sector.

Applicant readiness for sustainability engagement

Perceptions of applicant sustainability competencies were assessed using a list that combined those developed by UNESCO (2017) and Microsoft/BCG (2022).

Employers largely viewed students and recent graduates as moderately well-prepared for sustainability-related work, though notable gaps in specific competencies remain. Survey responses (n = 114) indicate strong readiness in some areas: 95% of respondents rated applicants as moderately or extremely ready in digital skills, and 94% gave similarly positive ratings for collaborative skills. Competencies such as critical thinking and self-awareness were also viewed favourably, though slightly less so.

Digital skills

95%

rated applicants as moderately or extremely ready

Collaborative skills

94%

rated applicants positively

However, deeper concerns emerged around more complex or technical capabilities. Only 11% of employers rated applicants as extremely ready in systems thinking, while 23% felt they were not at all ready in this area. Competencies related to sustainability science and strategic thinking also drew concern, suggesting that while students may bring enthusiasm and foundational skills, they often lack confidence or experience with more analytical or integrated sustainability challenges.

While a role-appropriate level of technical knowledge was always deemed necessary, the employer interviews mostly emphasised the criticality of behavioural attributes. Many described their strongest candidates as passionate, proactive, enthusiastic, and humble, with a willingness to admit when they don't know something (R1). Attributes such as motivation (R6), the ability to thrive in competitive environments (R8), and skill in navigating systemic tensions (R3) were all seen as valuable. As one interviewee put it: "Technical knowledge is not the issue. Influencing is a really important skill... and being able to bring people on board with change" (R9).

At the same time, concerns were raised about student passivity when facing uncertainty. One employer commented: "Whenever they have to deal with ambiguity, they look at either someone more senior or someone to continuously help them in making a decision" (R5). This highlights a need for greater resilience, initiative, and confidence in navigating complex, evolving contexts—common in sustainability roles.

Despite these caveats, the findings suggest that students are, on the whole, well-positioned for a labour market increasingly shaped by sustainability concerns. Institute of Student Employers (ISE, 2024) data show that 63% of employers agree that ESG issues will become increasingly important in how they recruit in future. To meet this rising expectation, education providers must continue to strengthen both technical competencies and the reflective, interpersonal, and adaptive qualities that employers increasingly value.

"

Technical knowledge is not the issue. Influencing is a really important skill... and being able to bring people on board with change

Interviewee R9

Systems thinking

23%

rated applicants as not at all ready

63%

of employers agree that ESG issues will become increasingly important in how they recruit in future

ISE, 2024

17

Visibility of sustainability in role descriptions & messaging

Despite many organisations offering generic roles that involve sustainability-related tasks or projects, most do not communicate this clearly in their recruitment materials. Only 43% of employers reported including sustainability components in job descriptions for general roles, and just 34% said such information appeared in job advertisements.

Interviewees recognised this as a missed opportunity. Some acknowledged they had not considered explicitly referencing sustainability: "That's a good tip — we can put it in the job description" (R6). Others felt it was unnecessary because sustainability was already deeply embedded in their organisational culture: "People come to us for our green credentials" (R9). However, relying on this assumption risks excluding students who are unfamiliar with the organisation or lack access to informal or insider knowledge.

Making sustainability engagement more visible is key—not only to aligning with student expectations, but also to enhancing employer branding and creating clearer, more authentic expectations between applicants and employers.

43%

of employers reported including sustainability components in job descriptions for general roles

n=138

34%

reported including sustainability information in job advertisements

n=138

Employer engagement at careers fairs

Careers fairs remain a widely used but inconsistently leveraged recruitment channel. Of the 119 organisations that responded to this part of the survey, 80 reported attending careers fairs. However, of those, only 61% said they actively communicate sustainability job opportunities during the event.

Among those who do share sustainability messaging, the most common approaches were through informal discussion (81%) and website recruitment pages (69%). Less frequently used methods included formal talks (27%), inclusion in event guide materials (25%), and literature handouts (38%). This suggests that while some employers are engaging meaningfully, many are missing opportunities to communicate their sustainability credentials in more structured or visible ways.

One employer highlighted the student appetite for such information: "100% of the students that we chat to during the career fairs, they are requesting sustainability policies, their CSR reports and such" (R2). This aligns with broader trends in values-driven career decision-making. Windō's 2024 Young Talent Survey found that 67% of young talent would be willing to sacrifice salary to work for a company aligned with their values, and 69% would leave a company if its values did not align with their own.

Despite this clear and growing demand, many organisations are still not using careers fairs as a platform to showcase their sustainability commitments. This represents a missed opportunity to engage a values-driven generation of job seekers and strengthen employer appeal through purposeful messaging.

119	80	61%	81%
organisations responded	attend careers fairs	communicate sustainability job opportunities during the event	use informal discussion to to share sustainability messaging

Further employer insights

The interview strand of this study generated vital nuance and texture to our understanding of employer perspectives. Key themes included:

Clarity and culture:

Many employers integrate sustainability in practice but not in documentation. A large firm explained, "It's really front and centre in what we do... but it might not be obvious from a job advert" (R1).

Motivation matters:

Employers want to see a genuine, values-driven interest: "We'd waste time trying to get someone motivated — we can't afford that (R6)". Extra-curricular indicators of commitment are often considered and valued.

Barriers to role creation:

Time, supervision capacity, and risk aversion were cited, especially in regulated roles or client-facing positions. "If they get it wrong, we could lose £100 million" (R1) said one engineering consultant.

Desirable dispositions

Employers consistently valued humility, proactivity, enthusiasm, and adaptability. "We're looking more at attitude than skill set when we're hiring in a placement" (R8) one stated.

Curriculum signals:

Several noted that students struggle to apply frameworks to messy real-world contexts. Communication gaps and digital over-reliance were also flagged.

These insights reinforce the view that sustainability competencies are as much about mindset and communication as they are about technical knowledge.

Discussion

This study reveals organisations grappling with both momentum and misalignment in relation to early careers and sustainability. On one hand, student interest in sustainability is demonstrably high, and many employers are already offering opportunities for sustainability engagement—even if not always explicitly. On the other, the systems of recruitment, signalling, and curriculum support are not yet robust enough to match the scale of demand or the complexity of sustainability-related work.

A key tension exists between implicit and explicit sustainability. Organisations may genuinely integrate sustainability in operations or culture, but unless these are reflected in job materials, interviews, and early career development frameworks, the message may be lost. This can unintentionally exclude capable applicants and perpetuate perceptions that sustainability roles are scarce or exclusive.

Another insight lies in the readiness gap. Employers want more than technical knowledge—they want candidates who can navigate ambiguity, show humility, and influence others. These traits sit uneasily with many university curricula, which still focus more heavily on technical proficiency and individual performance than on values, systems, collaborative skills and change-making capacities.

Employer capacity to offer sustainability roles is widely acknowledged to be shaped not just by resources, but by perceptions of risk and opportunity, responsiveness of internal processes, and leadership buy-in. This speaks to the need for systemic interventions—not simply to 'train' students and graduates in the workplace, but to evolve a strategic approach and infrastructure that shapes early career recruitment and development for sustainability.

Conclusions

This report confirms that sustainability-related roles remain under-communicated and inconsistently embedded within early career pipelines. Student enthusiasm is high, and many are moderately well-prepared, but the translation into opportunity and access is incomplete.

The research suggests that universities must do more to embed relevant skills and attitudes into teaching and careers preparation, and that employers must be more intentional in signalling and structuring sustainability-related roles. Cross-sector collaboration—between HEIs, employers, industry bodies, and students themselves—is essential to create coherent, equitable pathways into meaningful sustainability careers.

Recommendations

A. For higher education institutions

1. Curriculum reform: embed systems thinking, anticipatory skills, and values-led frameworks across all disciplines, aligned to wider education for sustainability goals
2. Career services innovation: support students to map and articulate their sustainability values and skills, and to identify roles that align—even where sustainability is not named as part of job roles.
3 Employer engagement: work with employers to create more work opportunities and experiences with sustainability content, and embed the measurement of student learning from these experiences within appropriate assessments.
4. Employer engagement: work with known employer networks to encourage more explicit visibility for the sustainability content of their placement, internship and graduate roles.

B. For employers

1. Signal roles clearly: describe sustainability responsibilities—even in generalist roles—and reflect values and goals in job adverts and onboarding.
2. Assess values and mindsets: incorporate scenario-based tasks and values-alignment questions into hiring processes.
3. Access and equity: prioritise funded, paid sustainability placements to avoid excluding students unable to afford unpaid experiences
4. Widen entry routes: support shorter, project-based opportunities or rotational placements to accommodate smaller teams and early-phase sustainability work.

C. For policy and sector bodies

1. Standardise definitions: promote shared language and frameworks for sustainability skills and role categories.
2. Incentivise role creation: offer tax breaks, funding, or recognition schemes to employers (especially SMEs) creating high-quality sustainability placements.
3. Benchmark progress: develop reporting mechanisms for HEIs and employers to track improvements in sustainability role provision and student engagement.

Final note

The transition to a more sustainable and inclusive economy will not be driven by technology alone. It will depend on people—on their ability to act with courage, insight, and collaboration in complex and often contradictory systems.

Early career pathways are a critical leverage point. This report offers a detailed and honest reflection on where we are—and where we must go next. It is both a diagnostic and a provocation.

We hope it helps open doors, raise standards, and inspire action—for educators, employers, and most of all, the students preparing to shape our shared future.

A just and sustainable economy won't be built by technology alone—it will be shaped by people bold enough to lead in complexity. Early career pathways are where this work begins. This report is both a mirror and a call to action—for educators, employers, and the next generation of changemakers.

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Interview respondents by sector and size:

R1: Large consultancy - engineering, systems and technology
R2: Small recruitment company: information technology & services
R3: Micro consultancy – stakeholder engagement for social/environmental impact
R4: Micro non-governmental organisation: water sector
R5: Micro retail investment education platform
R6: Micro technology services business
R7: Large automobile company
R8: Large consultancy in law
R9: Large renewable energy organisation

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