



Embedding sustainability in academia: Deans as change makers

Survey of Academics

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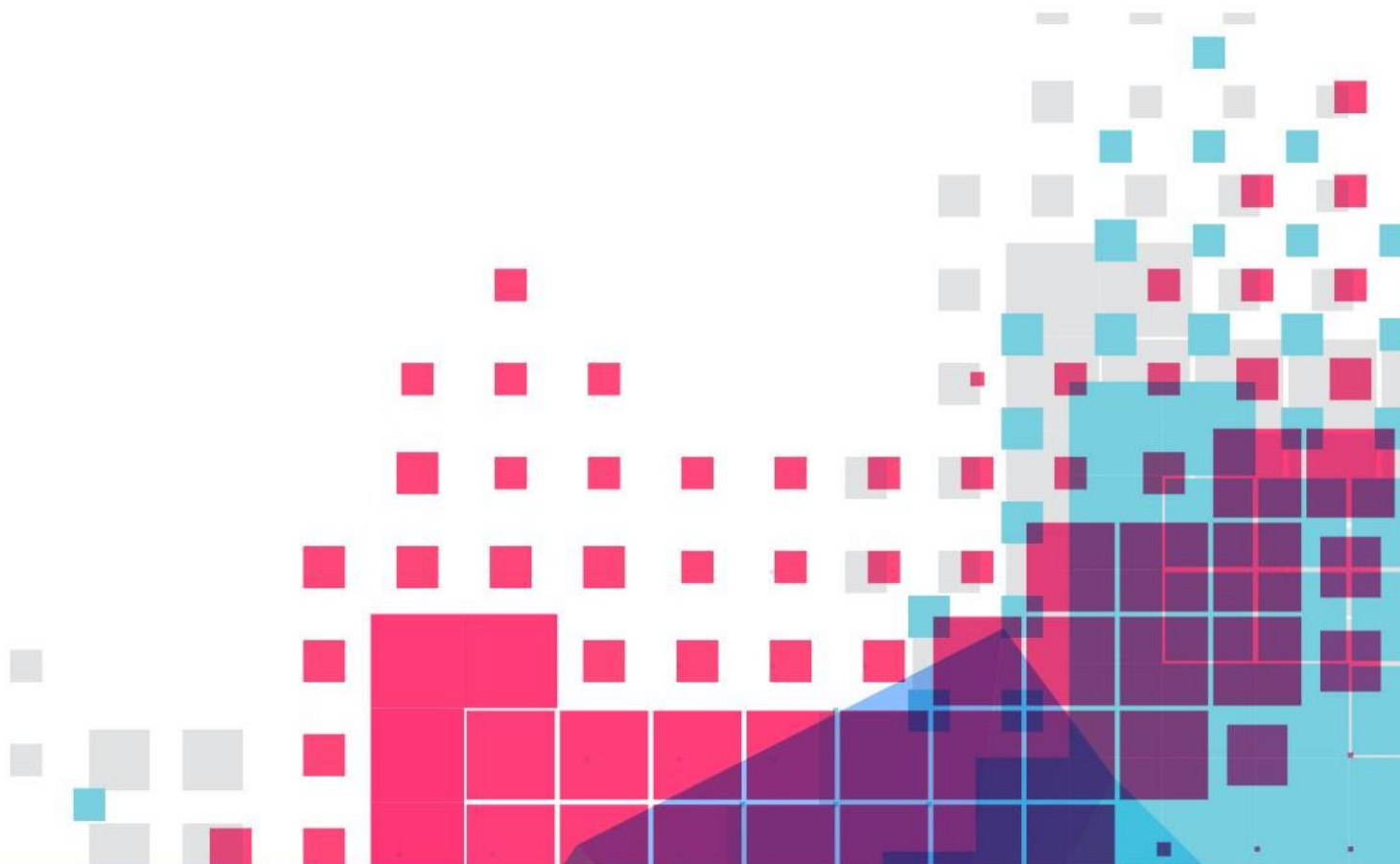


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Introduction to the Academics' survey

Purpose

As part of the **DECODE** project, this survey aims to identify the **opportunities and obstacles** that academics face when embedding '*sustainability*' in their **academic units** (e.g. faculties, schools, departments). It is complementary to the Deans survey, investigating the same issues from the perspective of heads of academic units (e.g., deans, heads of departments/schools/faculties). The survey has been built around themes from a literature review and semistructured interviews with European heads of academic units.

Key terms

To explain the key terms in the questionnaire, we have provided a brief glossary

- **Sustainability & Sustainable Development** – Within DECODE, both terms are used interchangeably and cover i) all three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, social and economic as well as ii) sustainable development goals (SDGs).
- **SDGs** – Sustainable Development Goals refer to the 17 SDGs adopted by the UN member states in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- **ESD** – Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), recognised in SDGs and the Paris agreement, is holistic and transformational education 'about' and 'for' sustainable development. Since 2017 it is linked to SDGs.
- **Societal engagement** – Activities where higher education institutions interact with external stakeholders (e.g. NGOs, municipalities, citizens, private sector) for mutual benefit (also known as the 'third mission' in some countries).

Structure of the report

The survey consists of the core and supplementary parts. The core section provides an overview of the survey sample (chapter 1), followed by strategies & policies (chapter 2), drivers & obstacles (chapter 3). It then reviews sustainability activities (chapter 4), engagement of staff and students (chapter 5) and progress attained (chapter 6). In the supplementary part, the survey covers capacity building (chapter 7), incentive & rewards (chapter 8), partnerships (chapter 9) and success factors & governance (chapter 10).

CORE PART

1. SAMPLE OF THE ACADEMICS' SURVEY

1.1 Response rate

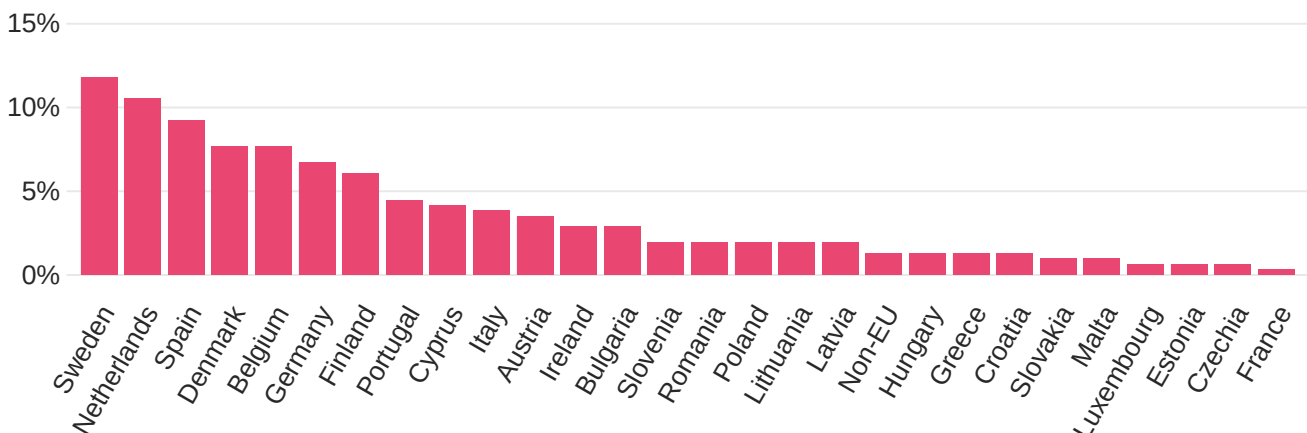
The survey consists of the core section (24 questions) and the supplementary section (6 questions). It was delivered to 14 301 academics. The core section was started by 459 respondents and completed by 314 respondents (completion rate= 68,4%). Partial responses have been included in the report (145 = 459 - 314). The survey response rate for the core part was 2.2%, calculated as complete responses (314) over e-mails delivered (14 301). The supplementary section was started by 155 respondents and completed by 150 with partial responses (5) included (completion rate = 96,8%). Only respondents who had already completed the core section, could proceed to the supplementary section. While the response rate is relatively low, which can be partially attributed to the busy schedules of academics, the completion rate is rather high.

1.2 Geographical coverage

In total, 314 academics from Europe completed the core part of the survey. Out of those, 310 were from the 27 EU countries and 4 from non-EU countries. The countries with the highest number of responses were Sweden, Netherlands and Spain. The insights from the survey can shed light on the EU developments in embedding sustainable development principles in higher education institutions, and particularly academic units. The sample is likely to have some self-selection bias.

Q26 - Please indicate the country of your institution.

314 Responses

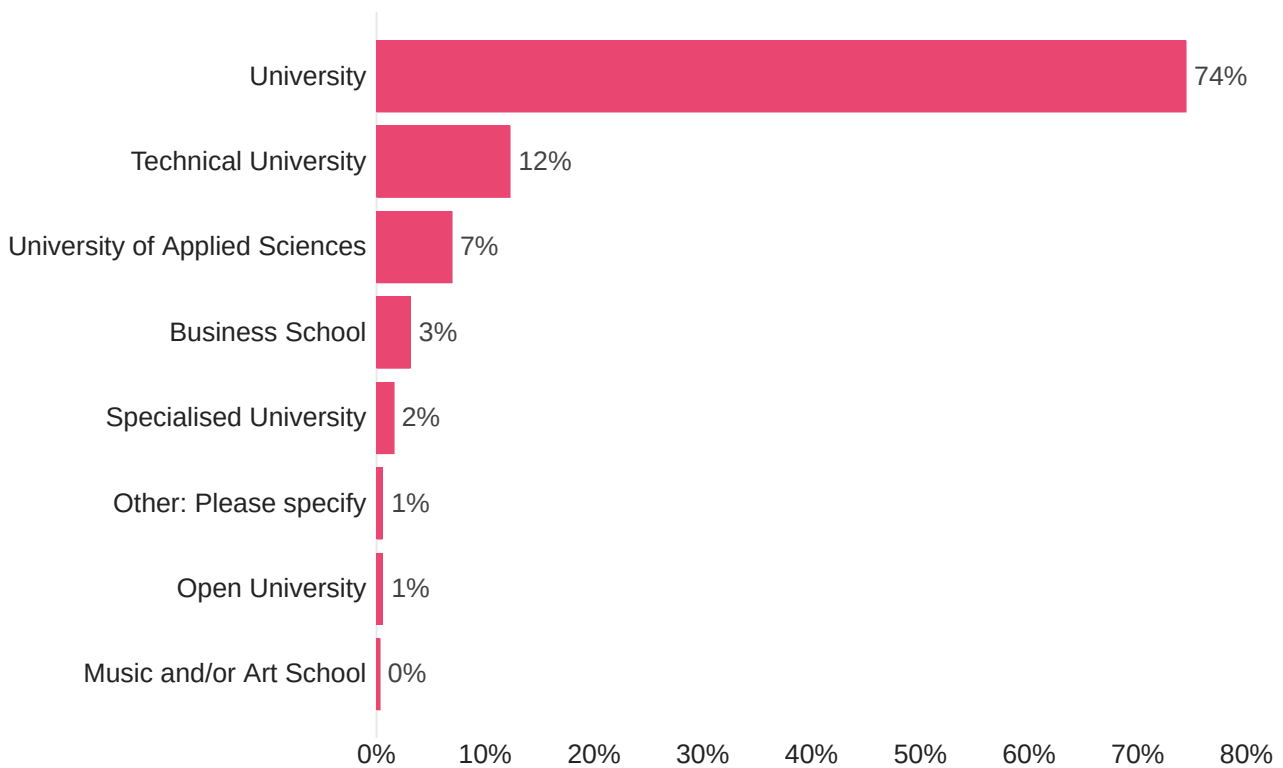


1.3 Institutional profiles

From 317 respondents, a large majority of respondents represented universities (74% of the sample), followed by technical universities (12%), and universities of applied sciences (7%). Also, business schools were relatively well represented (3%). Other institutions (e.g., specialised, music or art schools, open universities, others) represented approximately 3% of the respondents in the sample.

Q21 - What is your institution's profile? Please select from the list below.

317 Responses

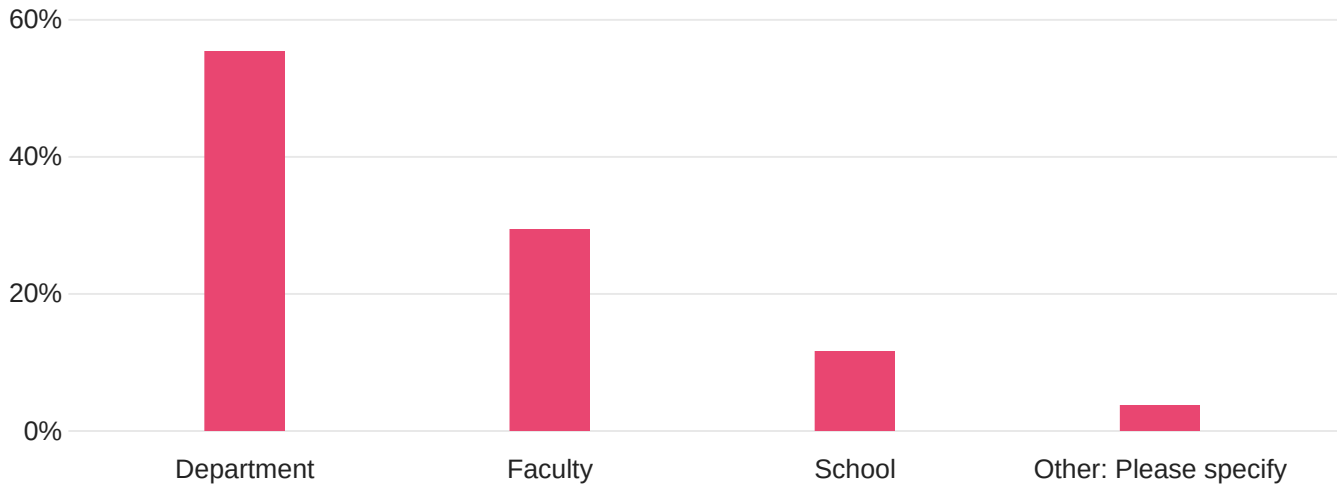


1.4 Academic unit level

This survey focused on the academic unit level, not the whole institution. Therefore, academics were asked to indicate the academic unit level of their analysis. The survey specified that, depending on the higher education system, the academic unit may refer to a faculty, school, department or a similar unit. More than half of academics responded on behalf of their departments (55%), followed by around one third (29%) reflecting on their faculties. A relatively small share selected schools as their reference point (12%), and even fewer picked other academic unit types (4%), specifying 'academy', 'research institute', 'graduate school' amongst other alternatives.

Q2 - Please indicate the level at which you would like to evaluate your academic unit.

459 Responses

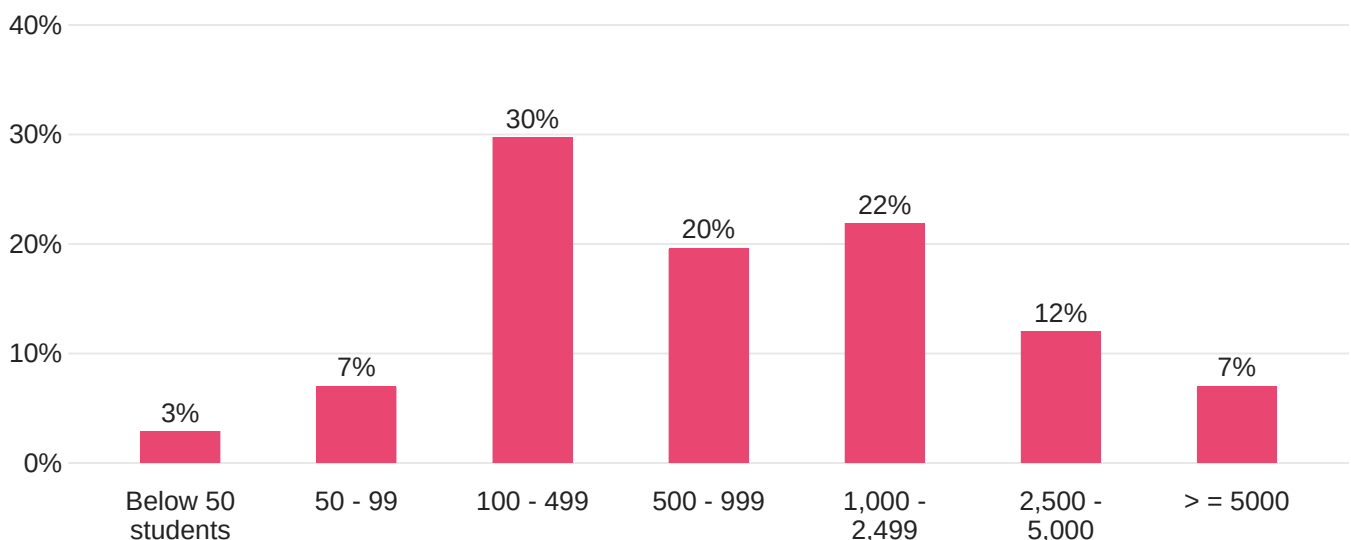


1.5 Academic unit size

The majority of academic units (72%) have between 100 and 2 499 students, while the remaining academic units were either rather large ($\geq 2\,500$) or small (>100). This aligns with the previous question on the level of an academic unit, where most respondents chose to respond on behalf of their department while relatively few selected their faculties or schools.

Q23 - How many students are enrolled in your academic unit (i.e., your faculty, school, department)? Please select the applicable range from the list below.

316 Responses



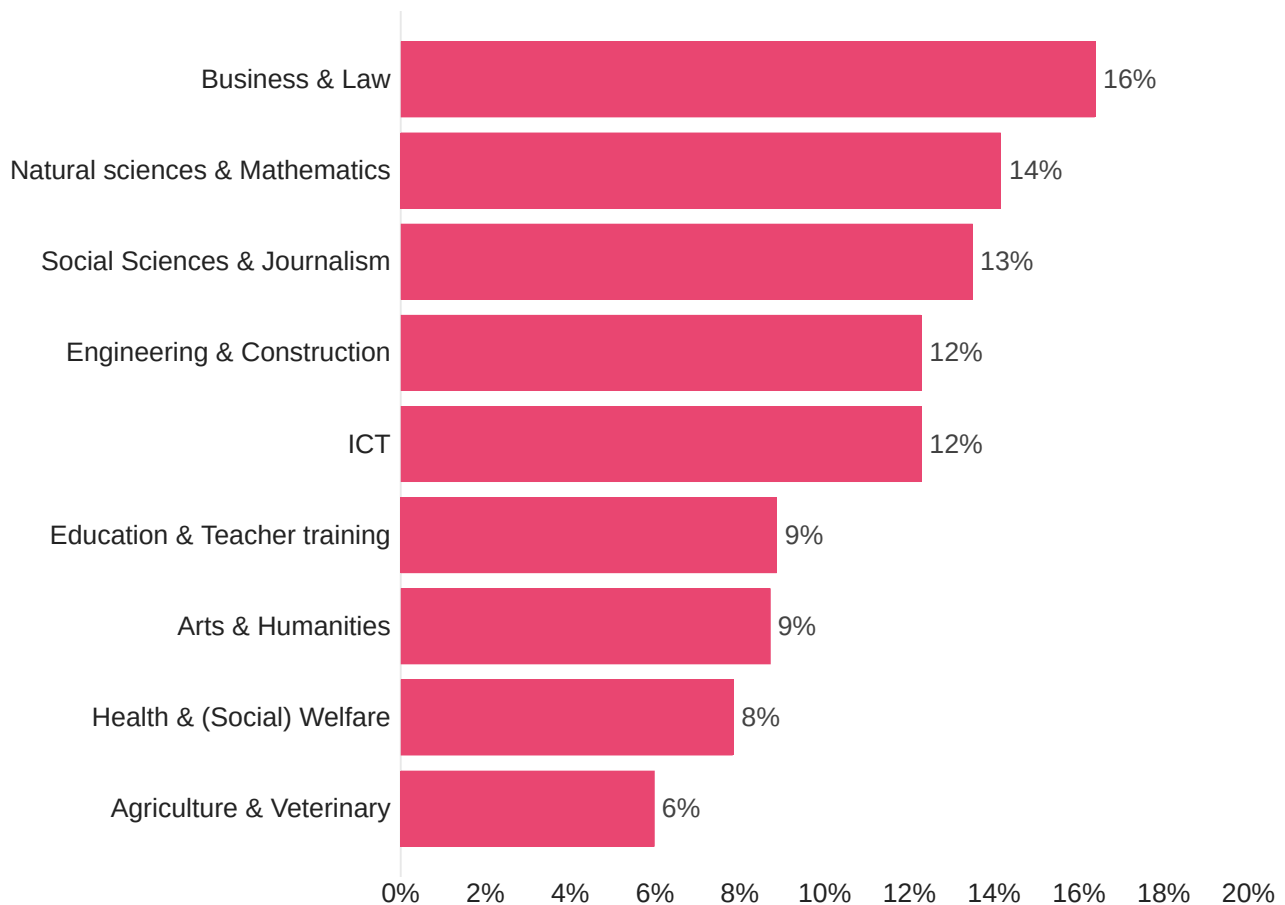
1.6 Academic unit specialisations

Each respondent could indicate all applicable disciplinary fields of their academic unit. Disciplines most represented amongst respondents were 'Business, Administration and Law' (16%), closely followed by 'Natural sciences, Mathematics & Statistics' (14%) and 'Social Sciences, Journalism & Information' (13%). Also 'Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction' (12%) and 'Information and Communication Technologies' (12%) are well represented. The least represented field was 'Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries & Veterinary'(6%).

Q22 - What are the broad disciplinary fields covered by your academic unit? Select all applicable.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

317 Responses

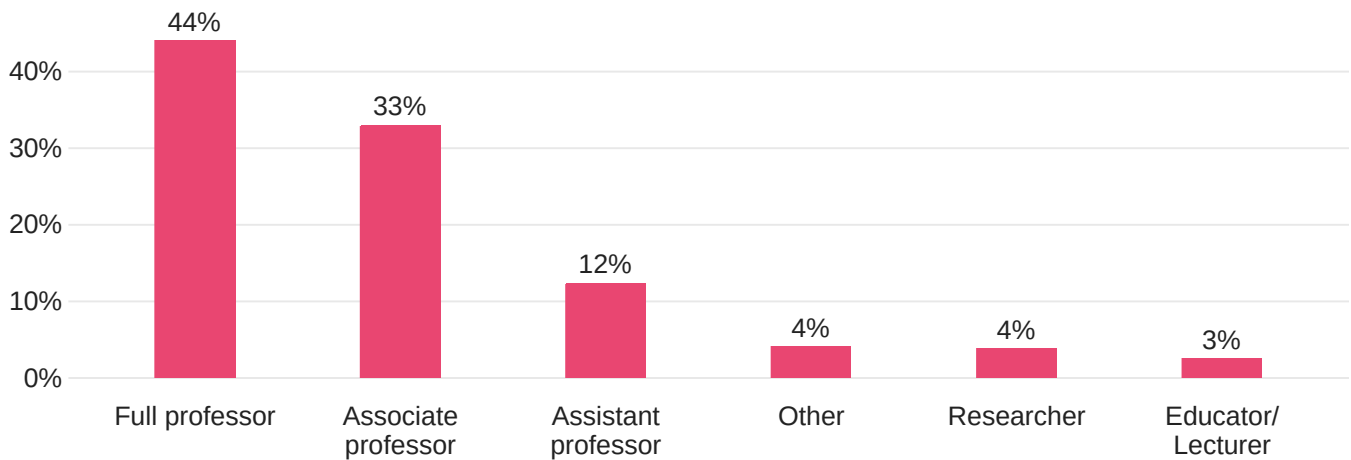


1.7 Function of respondent

More than three-quarters of respondents were either full or associate professors (77%), followed by assistant professors (12%). Relatively few respondents identified as researchers (4%), educators/lecturers (3%) or indicated other options.

Q24 -What is your main function in your academic unit?

315 Responses

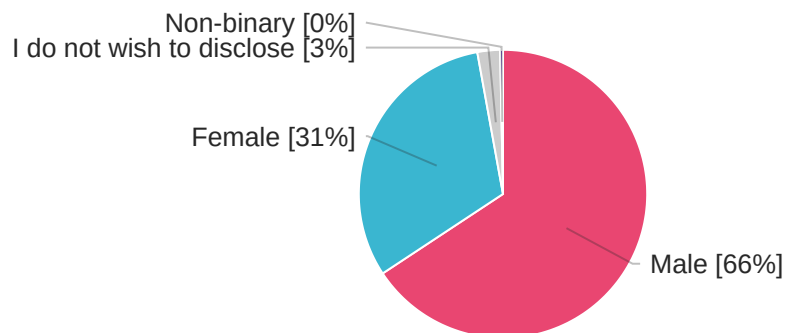


1.8 Gender of respondent

Two-thirds of respondents were male (66%), followed by females (31%), and a small minority either chose not to disclose gender (2.4%) or selected the nonbinary category (0.3%).

Q25 - Please select your gender.

315 Responses



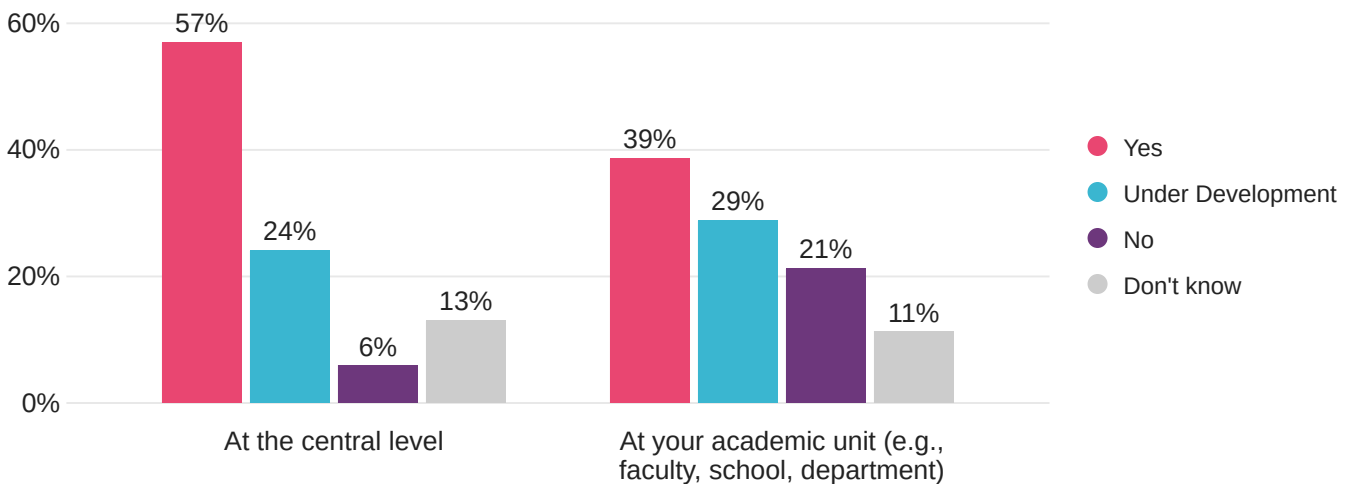
2. STRATEGIES & POLICIES

2.1 Central & academic unit level strategies

Strategy and policies play an important role in awareness building and establishing a common vision amongst the academic community. According to respondents, sustainability strategies or policies are more common at the central level than at the academic unit level (57% vs 39%). Moreover, many central and academic units have their strategies under development (24% and 29% respectively). Only a small proportion do not have sustainability strategies at the central level while at the unit level this applies to one-fifth of respondents (6% vs 21%). The rest of the respondents were not certain of such strategies.

Q3 - Is sustainability addressed in your institution's strategy or policies?

427 Responses

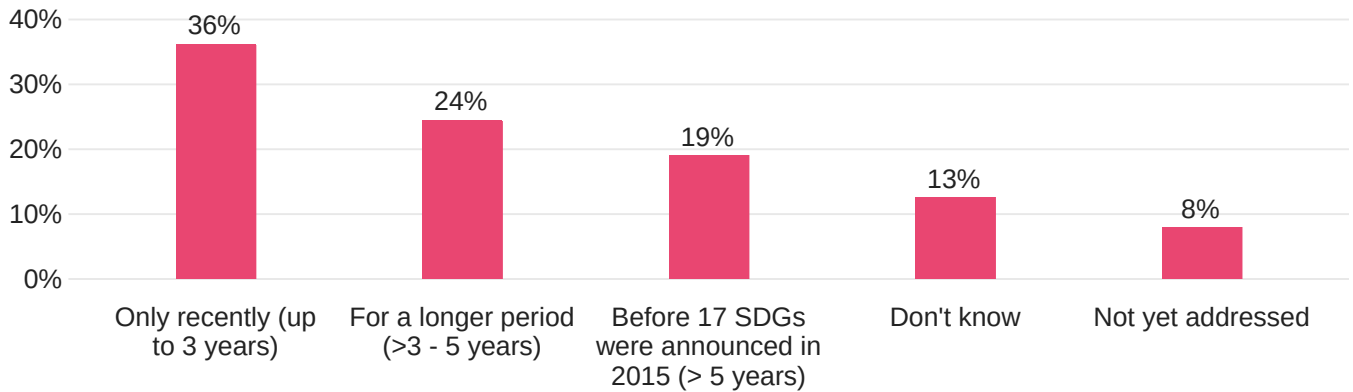


2.2 Duration of academic unit strategies

Most of the respondents indicated that sustainability has been addressed in their academic unit's strategy only recently, no longer than 3 years (36%). Yet a quarter (24%) selected above 3 to 5 years and around one-fifth (19%) said that sustainability was already addressed in their unit before 2015 when SDGs appeared on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thus, a relatively large share of respondents (43%) are quite familiar with unit-level sustainability strategies. A relatively small percentage did not know or indicated that it was not yet addressed. Additional analysis showed that the category 'not yet addressed' was selected by respondents who had previously replied that the unit-level strategy is under development. The graph below shows how long have the sustainability strategies been in place in respondents' academic units.

Q4 - [If Q3 - 'academic unit level' equals YES or Under Development.] How long has sustainability been addressed in the strategy or policy of your academic unit (e.g., faculty, school, department)?

279 Responses

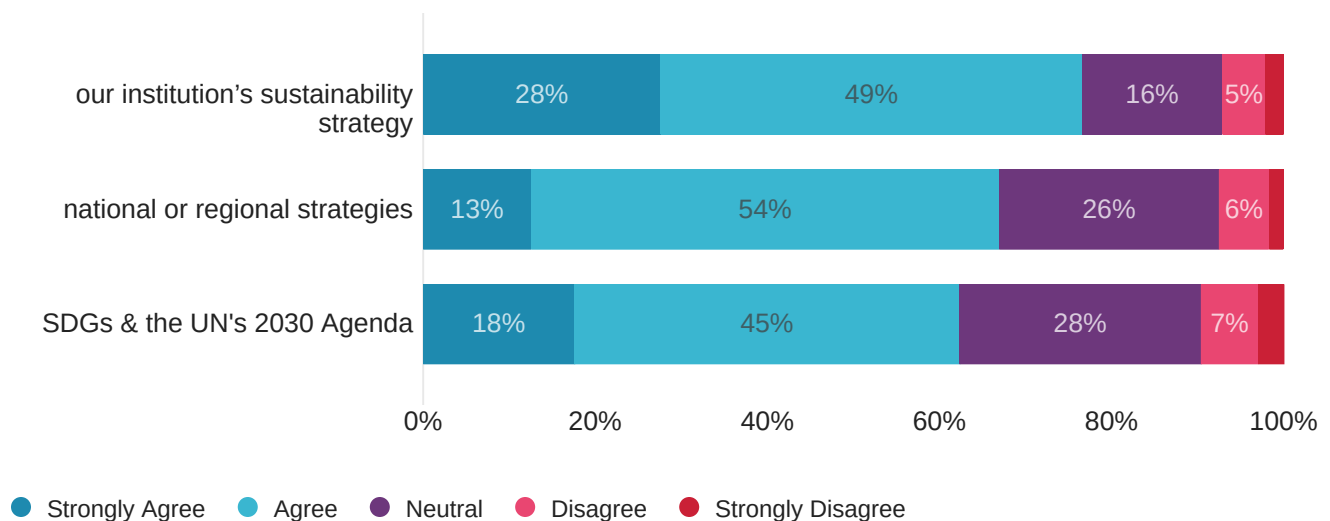


2.3 Influencers of academic unit level strategies

Most academics either strongly agree or agree (hereafter agree) that the strategy of their academic unit is influenced by their institution's sustainability strategy (77%). The majority also agrees that national and regional strategies (67%) and SDGs & the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (63%) have an influence on their academic unit's sustainability strategy. Only a very small share of respondents do not think that these external factors have influenced the strategy of their unit (7- 9%).

Q5 - The sustainability strategy of our academic unit is influenced by ...

239 Responses



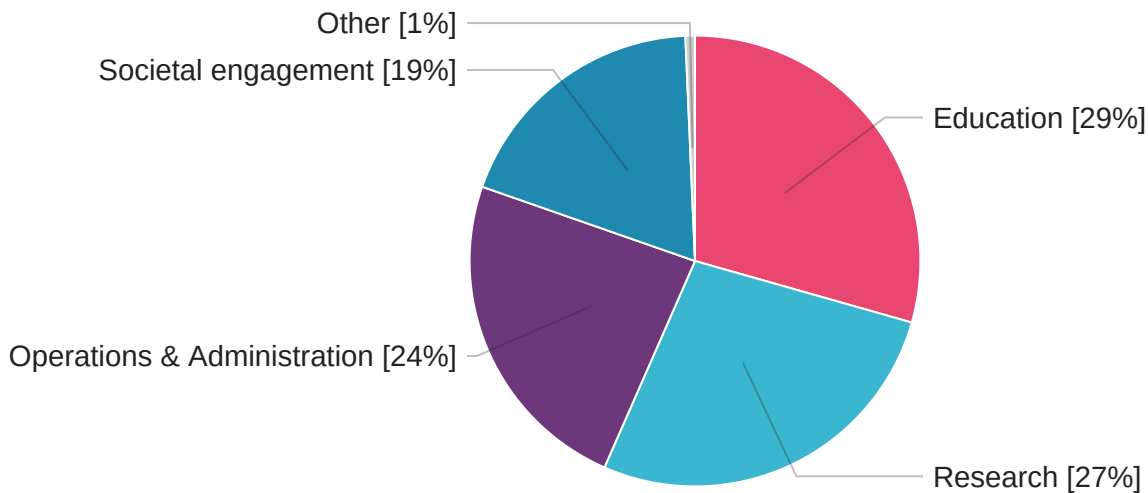
2.4 Areas addressed in academic unit strategies

Academics indicated that dimensions most commonly addressed in the academic unit's strategy included 'education strategy' (29%) and 'research strategy' (27%) objectives. It was followed by 'operational & administrative strategy (e.g., energy, waste management)' (24%) and 'societal engagement strategy' (19%). A very small share indicated other strategies (1%) such as communication strategy, travel policy. Respondents could select all applicable choices.

Q6 - In your academic unit, where is sustainability addressed exactly? Select all applicable.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

231 Responses



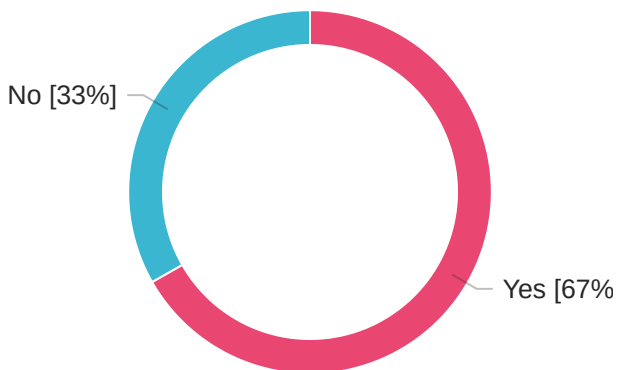
3. DRIVERS & OBSTACLES

3.1 Sustainability activity profile

Identifying drivers and obstacles is critical when an institution undergoes organizational change processes. In our analysis of drivers, we distinguish between representatives of HEIs who are already undertaking sustainability initiatives and representatives that would like to pursue sustainability initiatives in the future but have not done so yet. The graph below indicates that two thirds (67%) of responding academics are already pursuing sustainability or SDG-related initiatives. From those, who are not pursuing the initiatives, the majority (60%) would like to pursue such initiatives in the future.

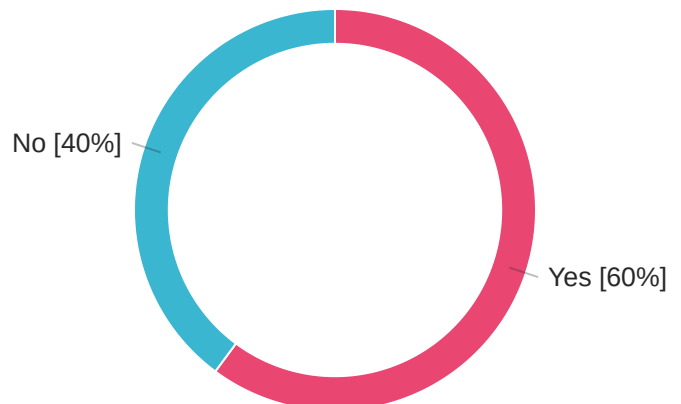
Q7 - Do you as an academic undertake any sustainability or SDG-related initiatives?

388 Responses



Q9 - [If Q7 equals NO] Do you as an academic have the ambition to pursue sustainability or SDG-related initiatives in the future?

128 Responses



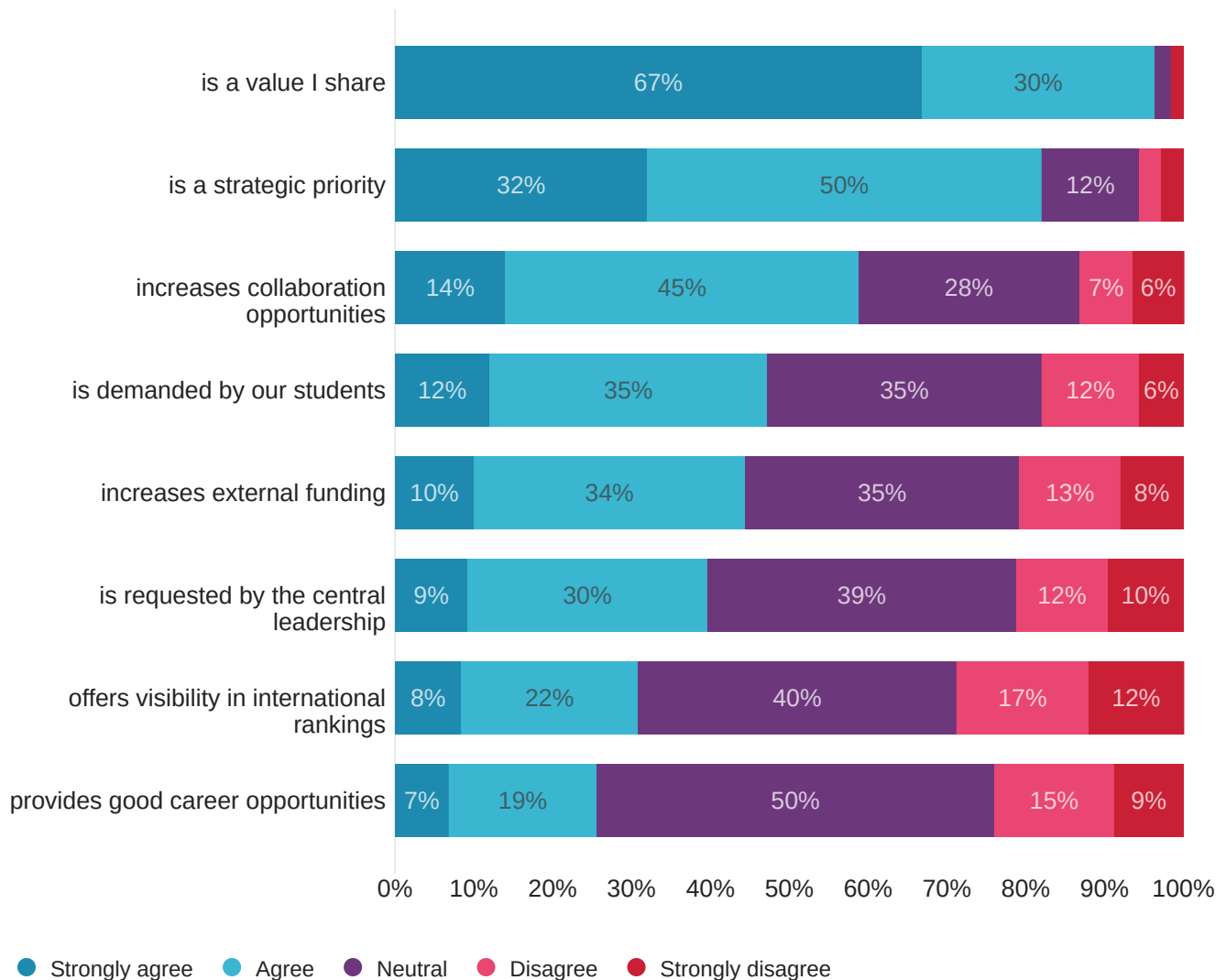
3.2 Drivers - activities already pursued

Nearly all academics who already pursue sustainability initiatives at their academic units, either agree or strongly agree that sustainability is a value they share (97%), suggesting strong intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, the majority agrees that it is a strategic priority (82%) and 'provides more collaboration opportunities with external partners (e.g., NGOs, citizens, industry)' (59%). Almost half (47%) emphasize that it is demanded by students (47%) and 'increases external funding opportunities (e.g., EU, national)' (44%). The three least supported drivers were requests from the central leadership (39%), visibility in international rankings (30%), and good career opportunities (26%).

Q8 - What are the key drivers for you as an academic to undertake sustainability initiatives?

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

250 Responses



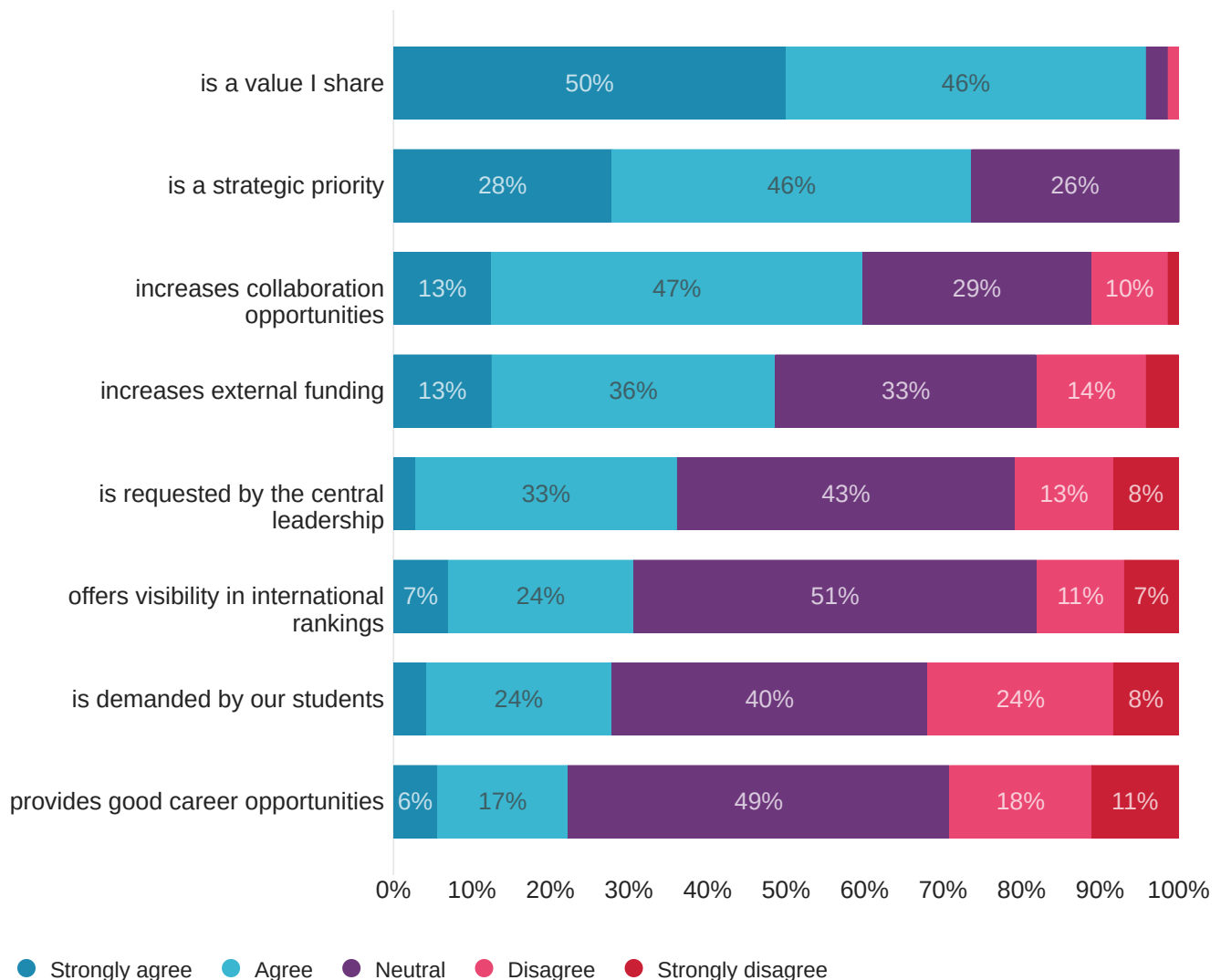
3.3 Drivers - ambition to pursue activities

Amongst academics who aspire to pursue sustainability initiatives, the majority considers sustainability to be a shared value (96%) and a strategic priority (74%). They also think that it 'increases collaboration opportunities with external partners (e.g., NGOs, citizens, industry)' (60%) and have given the lowest score to good career opportunities (23%). In contrast, this group gives lesser priority to student demand (28% versus 47% for the group above), prioritizing 'increased external funding opportunities (e.g., EU, national)' (49%), requests by central leadership (36%) and visibility in international rankings (31%).

Q10 - [If Q7 equals NO & Q9 equals YES] What are the key drivers for you as an academic to undertake sustainability initiatives in the future?

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

72 Responses



Respondents were also given an opportunity to select the "other" category for drivers and specify their answers. In total, 13 respondents provided additional responses. Amongst other drivers, respondents indicated pragmatic and work-related considerations as well as strategic and value-driven considerations. Amongst pragmatic and work-related reasons (n=4), respondents stressed that "it is an interesting research area " or a "core research field/research object" and "helps to save money".

Amongst more strategic reasons (n=4), respondents emphasized that sustainability is "a sectoral priority for higher education", "EU influence at a personal level", it "is central to all citizens and universities should be leaders in this field" and it is "important for our students, who will have to consider sustainability in their future as managers and decision-makers". Most of these reasons can be seen as a mix of strategic considerations strongly aligned with personal values. Multiple respondents (n=5) also emphasized reasons directly linked to personal values and beliefs such as sustainability being a "way of living", "moral imperative", "there is no other alternative", "because I love it". On a more critical note, one of the respondents indicated that *"Sustainability has always been the essence of civil engineering. Nothing to do with the empty concept that is fashionable at the moment"*.

3.4 Obstacles

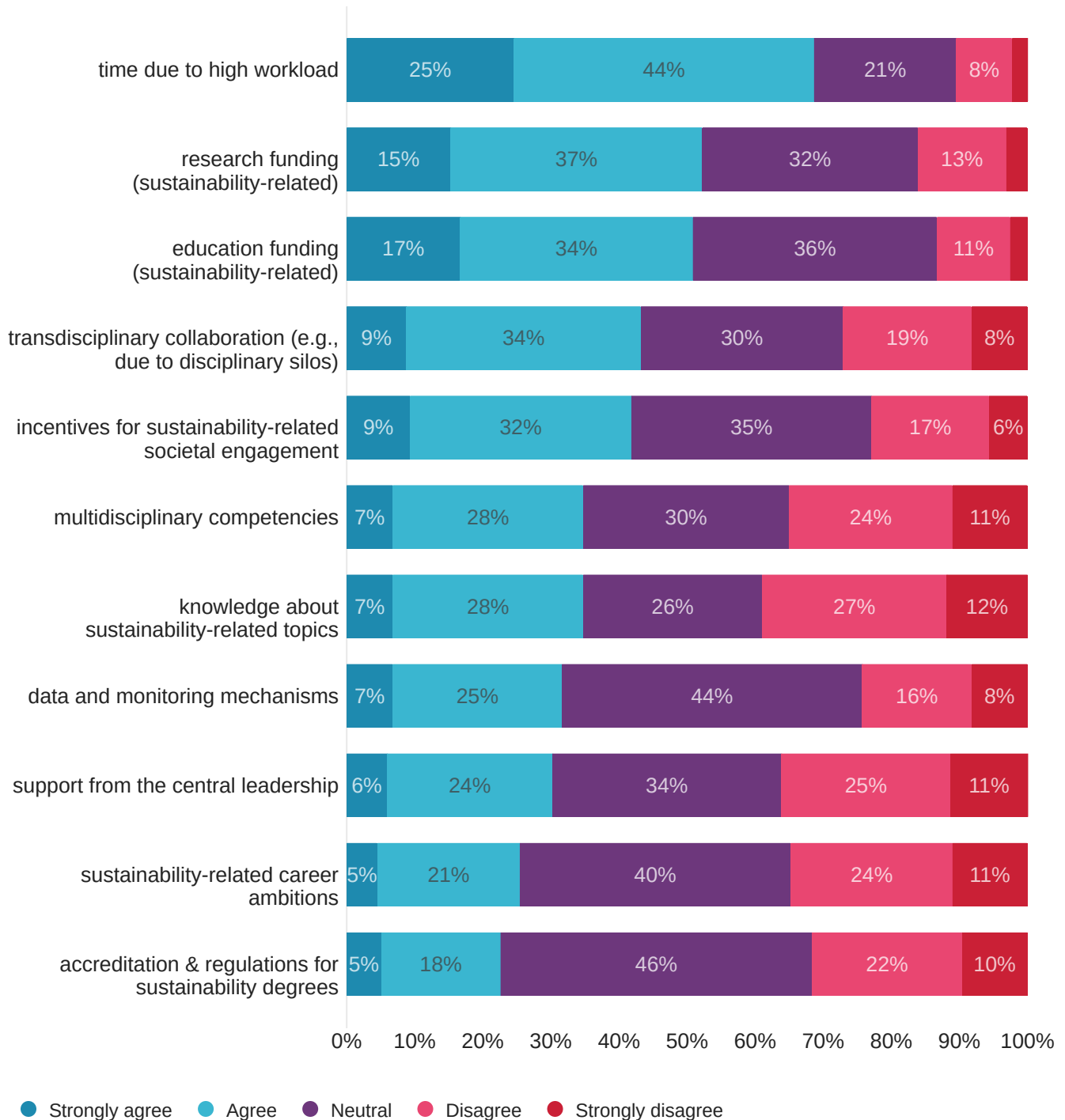
We asked all respondents about obstacles encountered irrespective of whether they already pursued sustainability initiatives. The majority (>50%) agreed on three key obstacles. The main obstacle was lack of time due to a high workload (69%), followed by sustainability-related research funding (52%) and education funding (51%). Nearly half emphasized a lack of transdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., due to disciplinary silos) (43%) and incentives for sustainability-related societal engagement (41%). The obstacles of lesser importance to respondents (bottom 4) were lack of data and monitoring mechanisms (32%), lack of support from central leadership (30%), lack of sustainability-related career ambitions (31%) and only 23% agreed that 'accreditation and regulations around sustainability-related degree programmes' are a major obstacle for pursuing sustainability initiatives.

Q11 - What are the key obstacles that stand in your way as an academic to undertake sustainability initiatives at your academic unit?

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

FOR ME, THE KEY OBSTACLES INCLUDE THE LACK OF...

354 Responses



In total, 13 respondents mentioned other obstacles, which could be classified into four types: strategic, structural, perception-related and knowledge-related. Under strategic obstacles (N=3), respondents mentioned "lack of strategy", "lack of support from the central system", and "strategic priorities not being communicated clearly enough". For structural issues, respondents (N=3) mentioned that their "academic subject is not suitable for this", they are "active in basic science", or it is "unclear how this applies to my field". Other structural issues (N=3) included "disciplinary funding mechanisms", "K12 education and early attitudes developments" and being "close to retirement". For perception related issues, respondents (N=2) emphasized, "lack of true understanding by deans about what sustainability entails leading to greenwashing", " general perception that "sustainability" is just buzzword". Finally, for knowledge-related obstacles (N=2), "general knowledge level among employees" and "missing understanding of the situation of emergency and gradualist beliefs" was mentioned.

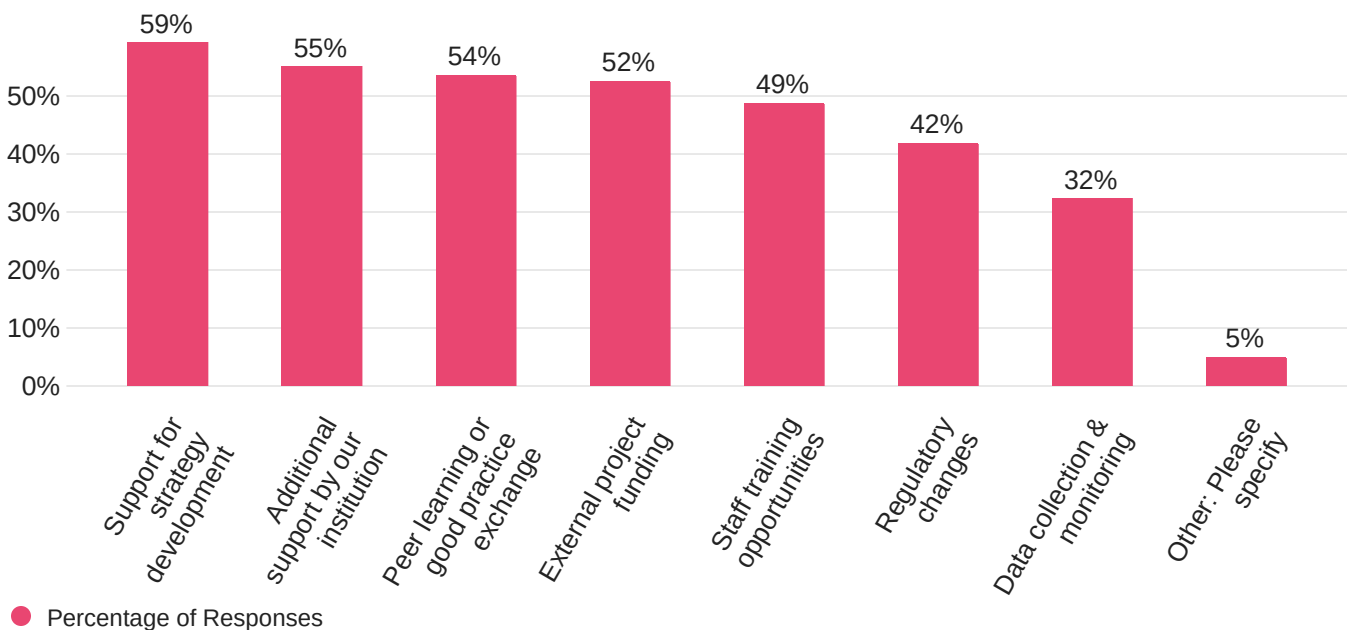
3.5 Support Mechanisms

When asked about support mechanisms for promoting sustainability initiatives, all support mechanisms were seen as valuable. Yet most academics prioritize support to further develop their unit's sustainability strategy (59%) followed by additional support provided by the institution (e.g., funding) (55%), peer learning and exchange of good practices (54%) and external project funding (52%).

Q12 - What type of support would be necessary for you to make progress on the sustainability agenda at your academic unit? Select all applicable.

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349 Responses



4. SUSTAINABILITY ACTIVITIES

4.1 Education activities

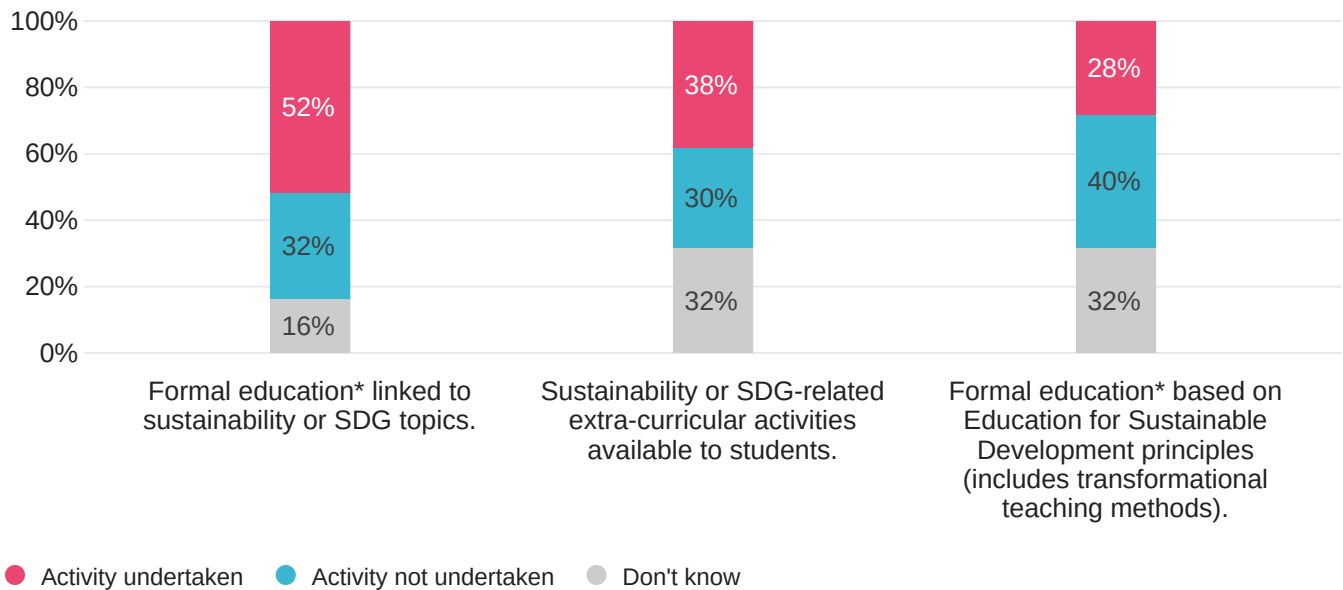
The majority (52%) of academics reported pursuing formal education linked to sustainability or SDG topics. More than a third (38%) stated that their unit undertakes sustainability or SDG-related extra-curricular activities. Lastly, just over a quarter reported undertaking formal education based on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles, which, beyond content focused on sustainable development, also includes transformational teaching methods.

Amongst other answers, respondents (n=8) indicated 'master and PhD dissertations [...]', 'SDGs topics embedded in courses that are not explicitly about SDGs', 'business challenges connected to sustainability addressed in elective module', 'formal education based on Education for Sustainable Development principles (not including transformational teaching methods [...])', 'digital classroom concepts', 'assessments, seminars'.

Q13 - Which sustainability-related education activities does your academic unit undertake? Select all applicable. (*Formal education includes educational programs, minors, courses.)

EDUCATION

341 Responses



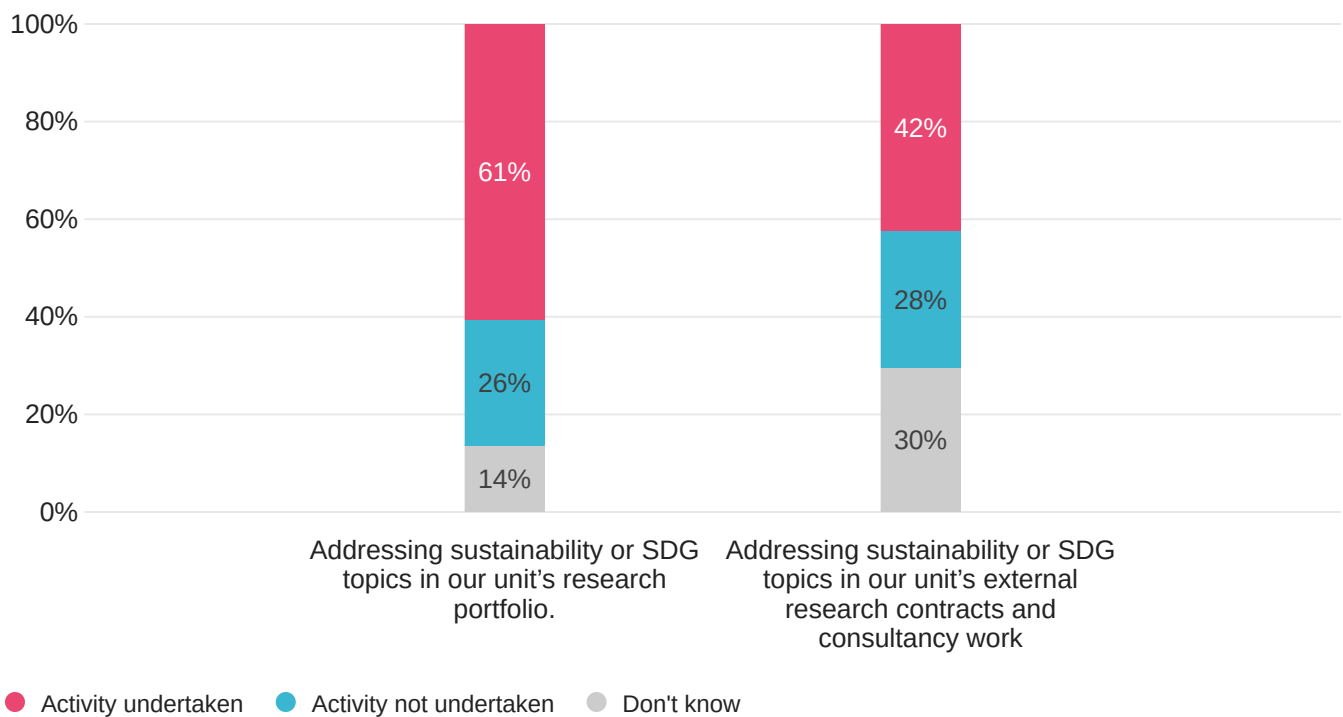
4.2 Research activities

The majority of academics (61%) responded that sustainability or SDG topics are addressed in their unit's research portfolio. Over 40% addressed sustainability or SDG topics in their unit's external research contracts and consultancy work. Moreover, a small number of respondents (n=3) filled in the "other" option, indicating such activities as 'setting up a special research unit', 'individual researchers' projects' and 'travel grants'.

Q14 - Which sustainability-related research activities does your academic unit undertake? Select all applicable.

RESEARCH

335 Responses



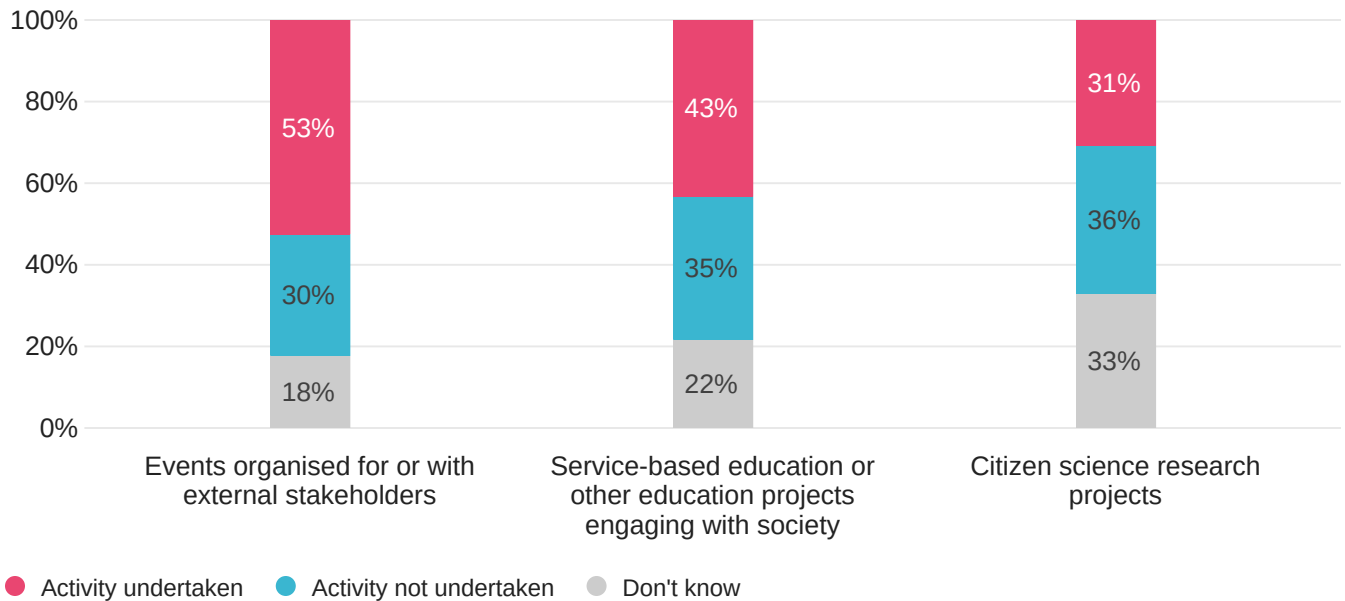
4.3 Societal engagement activities

The majority of respondents indicated that their academic units organise sustainability-related events for or with external stakeholders (53%), followed by service-based education or other education projects engaging with society (43%). Around one third (31%) said that their units engaged in citizen science projects. No 'other' activities were specified.

Q15 - Which sustainability-related societal engagement activities does your academic unit undertake? Select all applicable.

SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT

331 Responses



5. STAFF & STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

5.1 Staff engagement

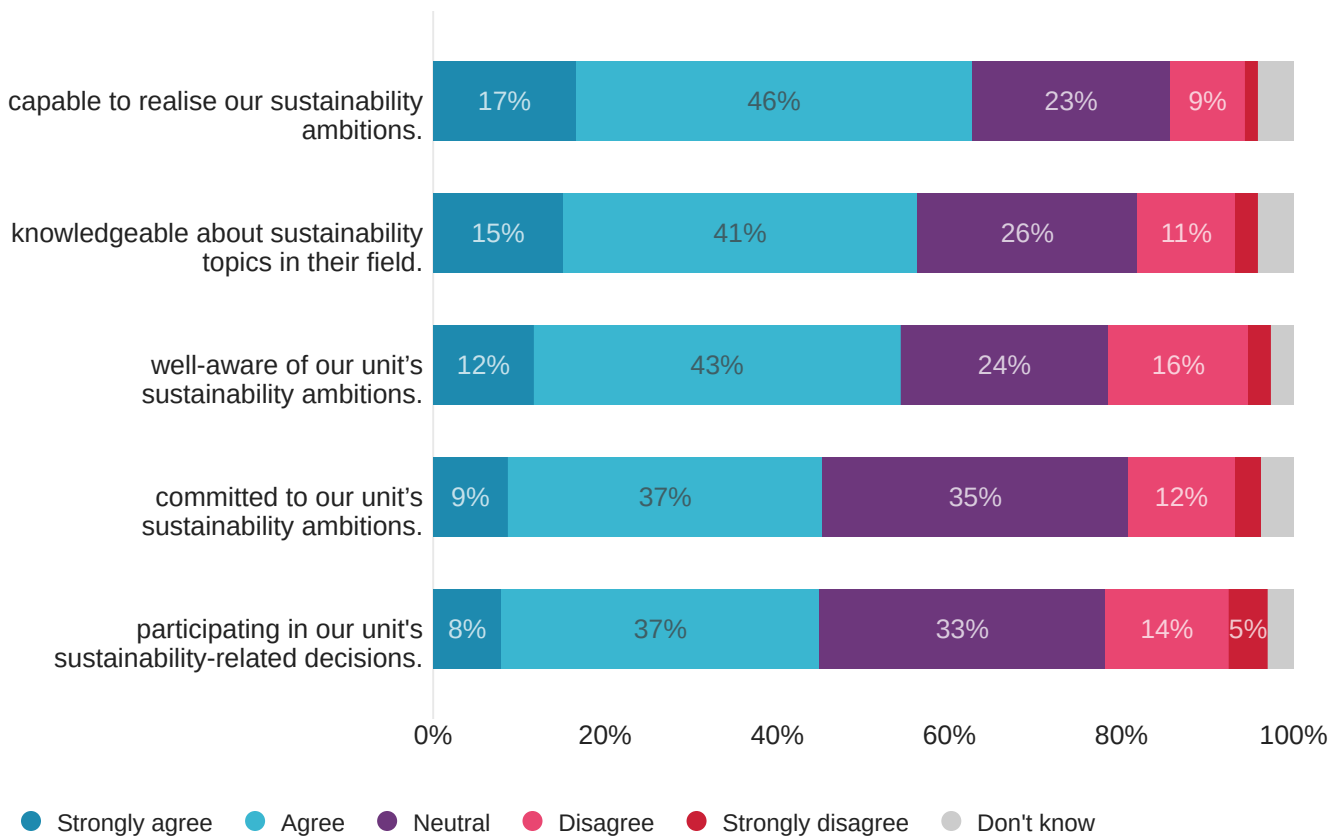
Overall, the heads of academic units think that their academic staff is quite engaged with the unit's sustainability ambitions. The majority of respondents believe that academic staff at their unit are capable to realise the unit's sustainability ambitions (63%). Moreover, over half think that academics at their unit are knowledgeable about sustainability topics in their field (56%) and are well-aware of their unit's sustainability ambitions (55%). Slightly less than half stated that academic staff at their unit is committed to the unit's sustainability ambitions (46%) or that they are participating in the unit's sustainability-related decision-making process (45%).

Q17 - Please rate the following statements:

*Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.

ACADEMIC STAFF AT OUR UNIT ARE...

265 Responses



5.2 Student engagement

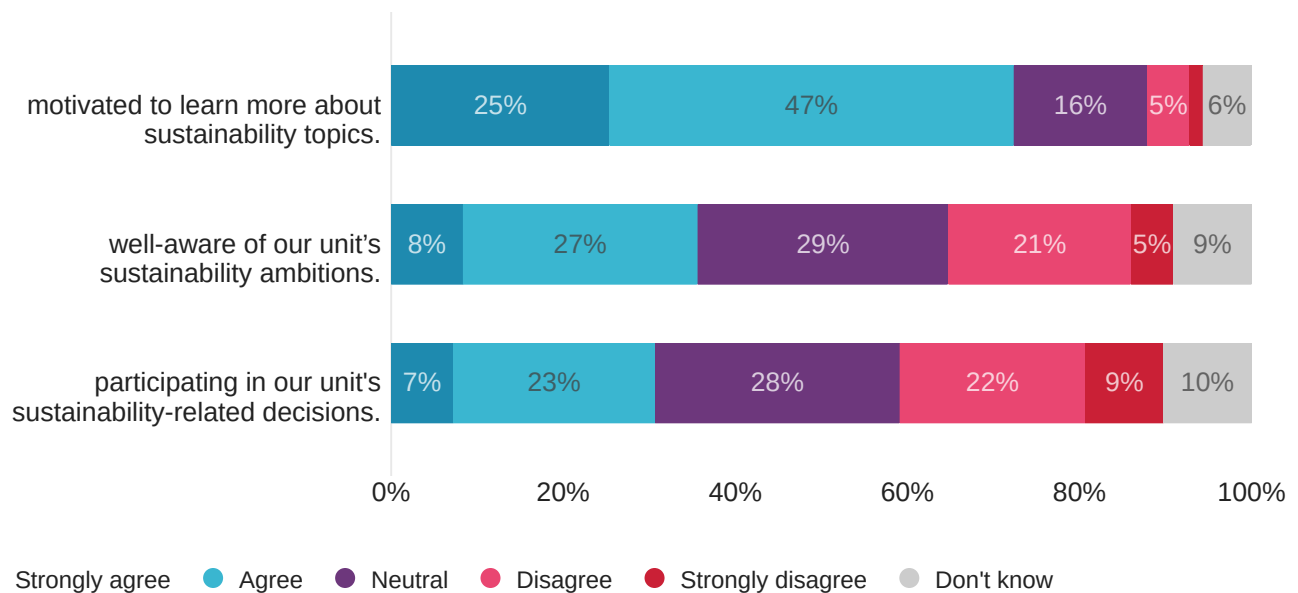
Nearly three-quarters of respondents believe that students at their academic unit are motivated to learn more about sustainability topics (73%), but only around one-third thought that students were well-aware of their unit's sustainability ambitions (35%) or participated in the unit's sustainability-related decision making (30%). This indicates that even though students appear to be highly interested in sustainability topics, their involvement at the academic unit level is rather limited.

Q18 - Please rate the following statements:

*Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.

STUDENTS AT OUR ACADEMIC UNIT ARE...

264 Responses



6. PROGRESS & FUTURE OUTLOOK

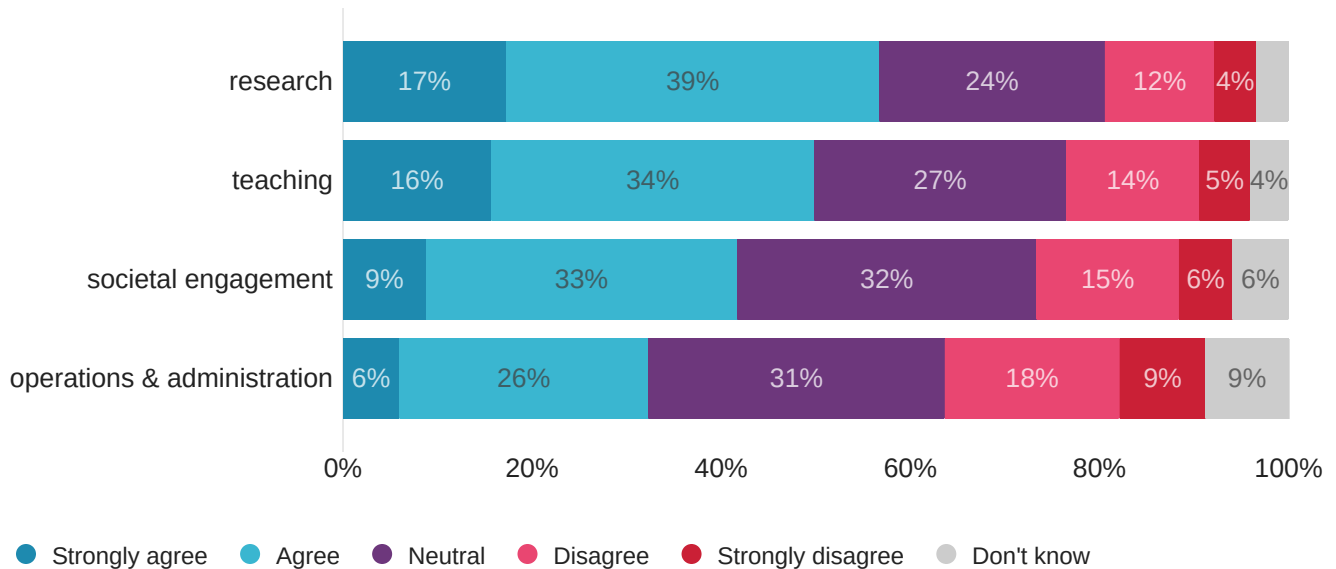
6.1 Progress attained

Around half of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their unit has made good progress over the last three years towards embedding sustainability in their unit's research (56%) and teaching activities (50%). Less than half agreed that they have made good progress in embedding sustainability in their societal engagement activities (42%) or operations & administration (32%).

Q19 - Please rate the following statements:

Over the last three years, our academic unit has made good progress towards embedding sustainability in the following activities:

319 Responses



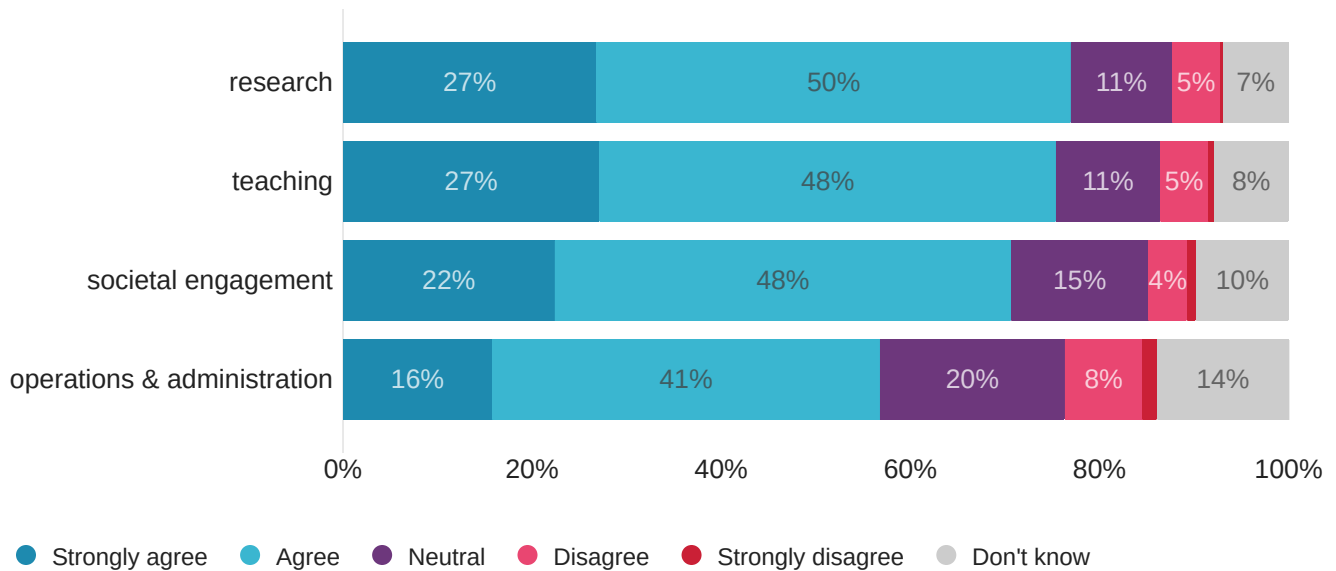
6.2 Future Outlook

The majority of respondents believe that attention to sustainability or SDGs in their academic unit will increase across all four dimensions in the next five years. The agreement is stronger for core missions of higher education - research (77%) and teaching (75%), but most respondents think that it will also increase for societal engagement activities (70%) and operations and administration (57%).

Q20 - Please rate the following statements:

Attention to sustainability or SDGs is likely to increase in the next five years in our academic unit's...

317 Responses



SUPPLEMENTARY PART

After completing the core part, respondents were invited to complete the supplementary part. Out of 314 respondents who completed the core part, 155 proceeded to the supplementary section (49.3%) and 150 completed it (completion rate = 96,8%). Partial responses (5=155-150) were included.

7. CAPACITY BUILDING

7.1 Education-oriented

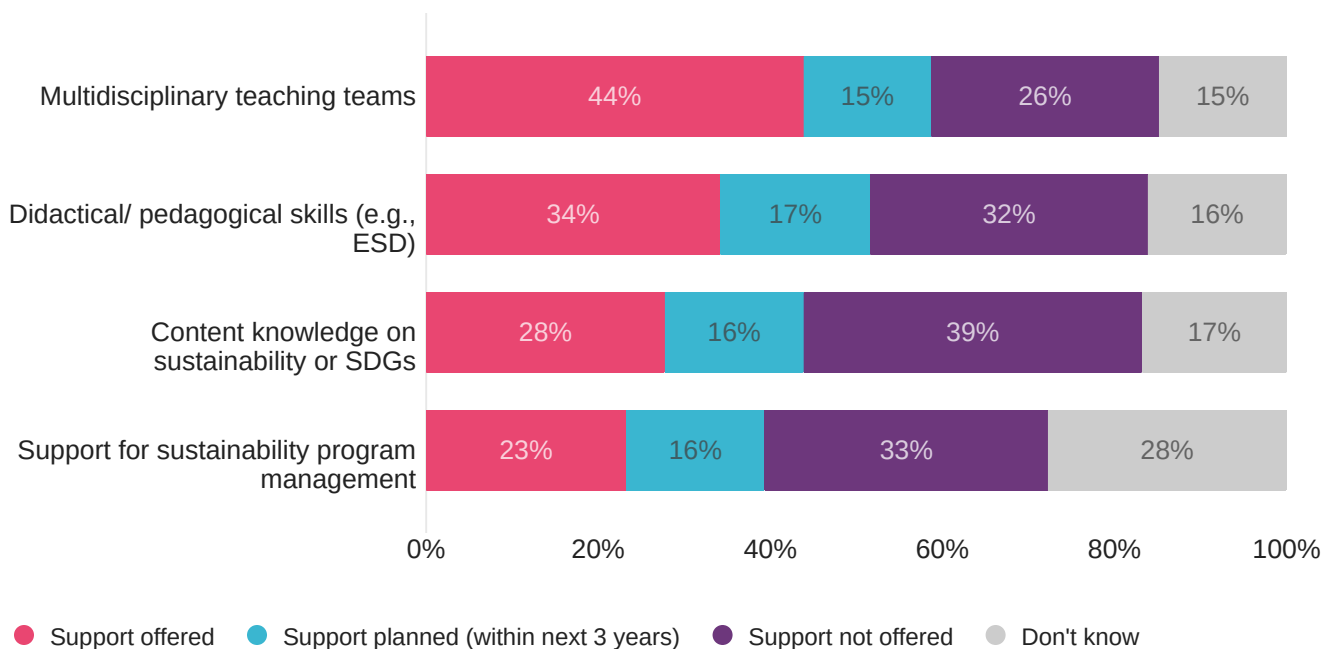
When reflecting on education-oriented support for capacity building, most academics said that their units offer 'opportunities to engage in multidisciplinary teaching teams' (44%) followed by 'didactical/ pedagogical skills-building (e.g. ESD, challenge-based learning linked to SDG topics)' (34%). Fewer development opportunities were provided for acquiring 'content knowledge on sustainability or SDG topics ' (28%) and receiving 'support for sustainability-related program management (e.g. partners, learning environments)' (23%).

Q29 - Which professional development opportunities does your academic unit offer to you?

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EDUCATION-ORIENTED

155 Responses



7.2 Research-oriented

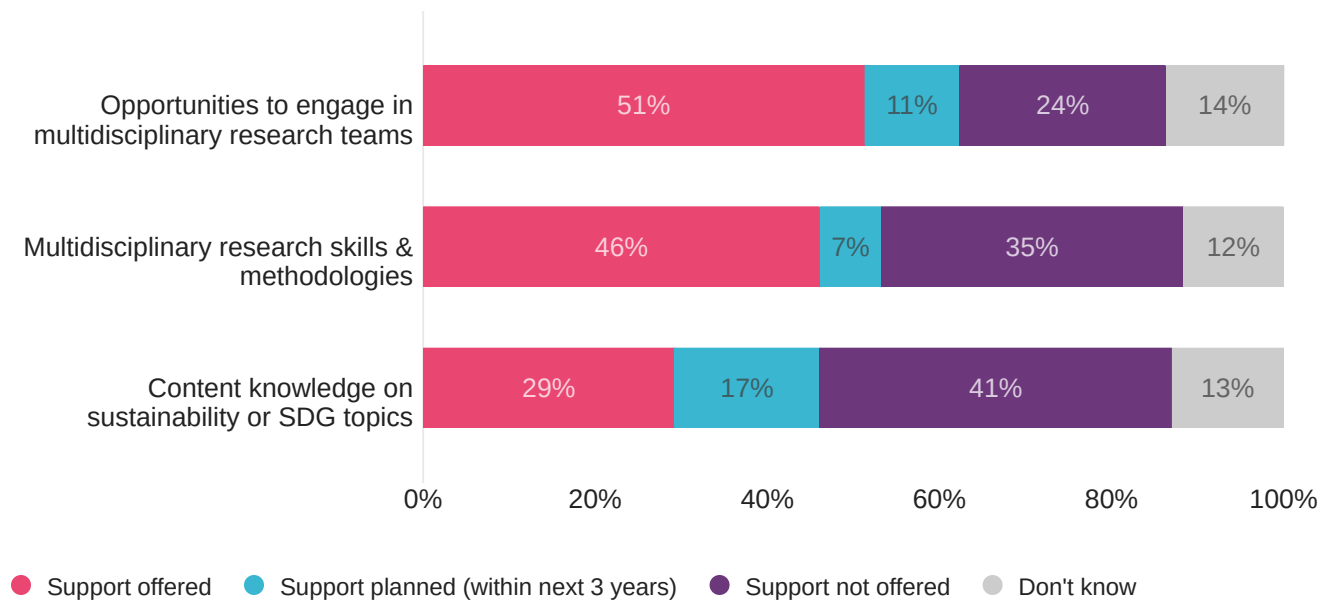
With respect to research-oriented capacity building, more than half of the academics respondent that their units provide 'opportunities to engage in multidisciplinary research teams' (51%) and offer support in 'multidisciplinary research skills & methodologies' (46%). Around the third also receive support for acquiring 'content knowledge on sustainability or SDG-related topics' (29%). In addition, respondents specified other research-oriented development opportunities such as 'support to develop excellent research (sustainability-oriented or not)', 'investment of the management to support professors, researchers and students to join international conferences and network memberships' and the need for further funding. One of the respondents indicated that the question does not fit their profile since their school does not provide any capacity building activities, but the faculty is free to engage in them if they like.

Q30 - Which professional development opportunities does your academic unit offer to you?

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

RESEARCH-ORIENTED

154 Responses



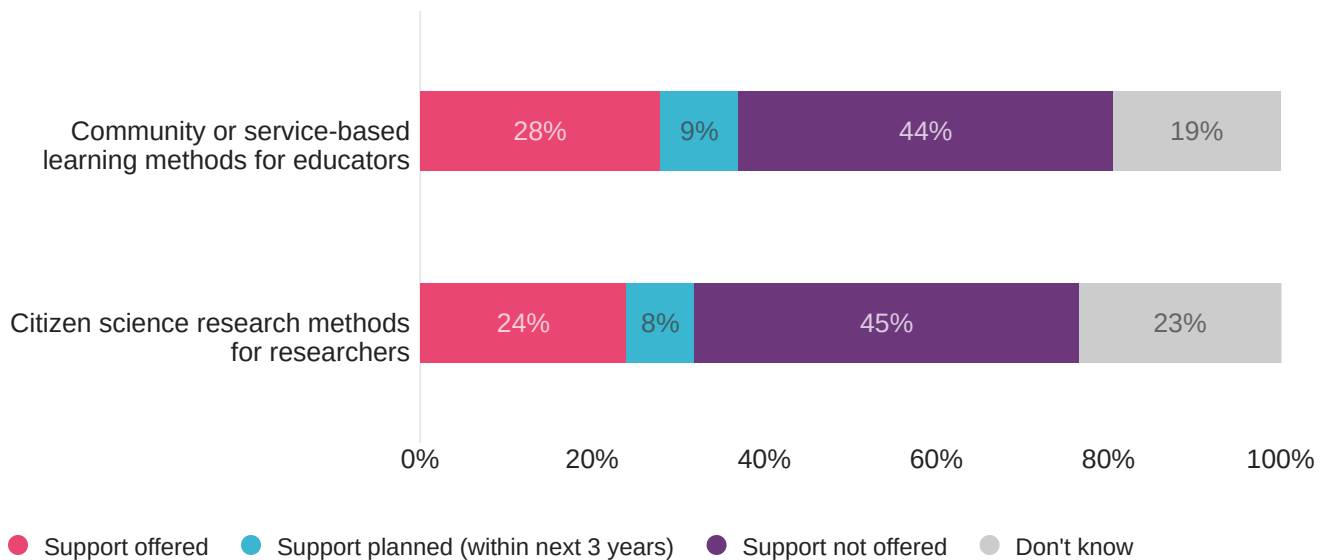
7.3 Societal engagement-oriented

Compared to education and research, capacity building activities for societal engagement are less common. Less than a third of respondents indicated that their unit offers any support. Most support is provided for community or service-based learning methods for educators (28%) followed by citizen science research methods for researchers (24%). Only a small share of respondents (9% or fewer) indicated that such support is planned in the near future. Respondents suggested a few other capacity building possibilities for societal engagement such as 'special investment program to provide time for researchers to join external communities', 'support to maintain a fruitful societal relationship with the professional sector (sustainability-oriented or not)', 'events such as "the Researcher Night" to help citizens understand the research activities about sustainability' carried out at their department and establishing partnerships.

Q31 - Which professional development opportunities does your academic unit offer to you?

SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT

154 Responses



8. INCENTIVES & REWARDS

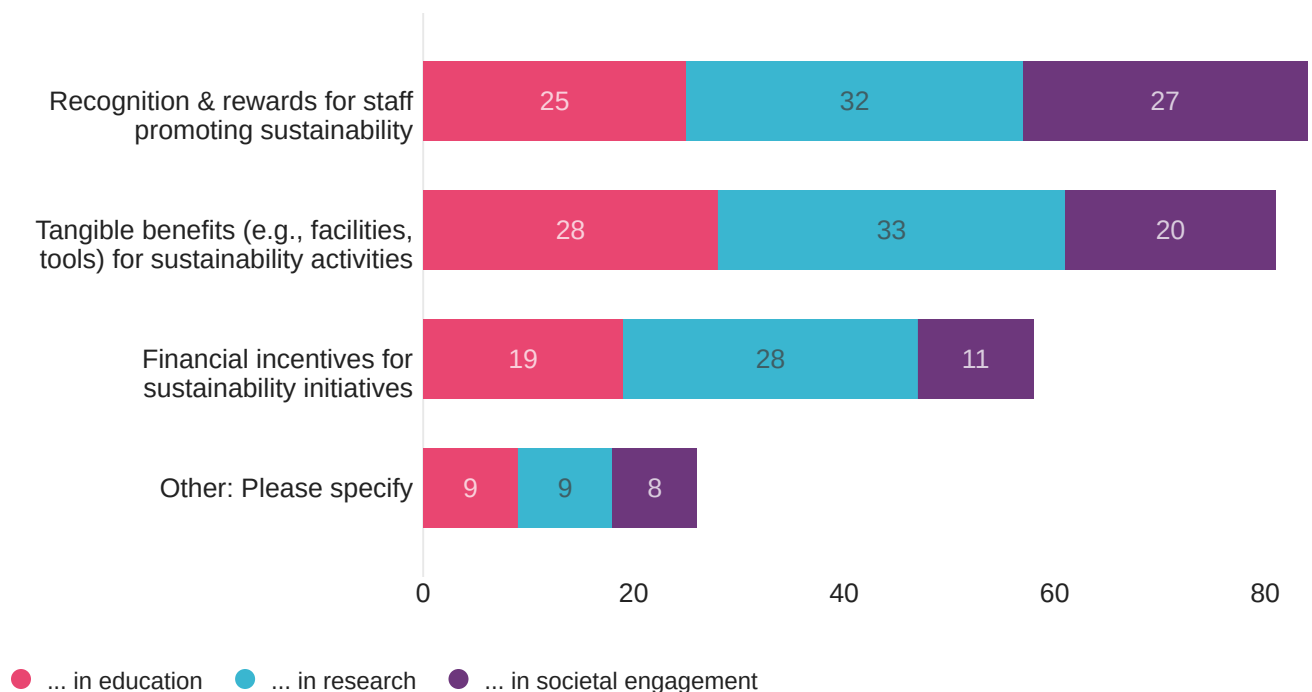
8.1 Incentives & rewards for academic staff

The use of incentives was reported by 49% of respondents (76 out of 154 who opened the question). The most commonly mentioned incentive amongst all three categories was 'recognition & rewards such as prizes, awards, and symbolic gifts for staff who promote sustainability in their academic work' (N=84), followed by 'tangible benefits such as access to facilities, tools, or platforms for sustainability activities' (N=81). Slightly less common were 'financial incentives for advancing new or existing sustainability programs & initiatives' (N=48). However, in the education and research categories, the most frequently mentioned incentives were tangible benefits. Academics also reported several other incentives such as key achievements being mentioned in annual sustainability reports, having 'room for new ideas', the career being improved, or simply 'being allowed to work on sustainability or SDG initiatives. One of the respondents expressed 'serious doubt that financial incentives and other tangible benefits will foster the sustainability' since 'gain values crowd out moral motives' in most institutions.

Q34 - What incentives & rewards (if any) does your academic unit use to encourage sustainability and SDG-related initiatives amongst your staff? Select all applicable.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

76 Responses



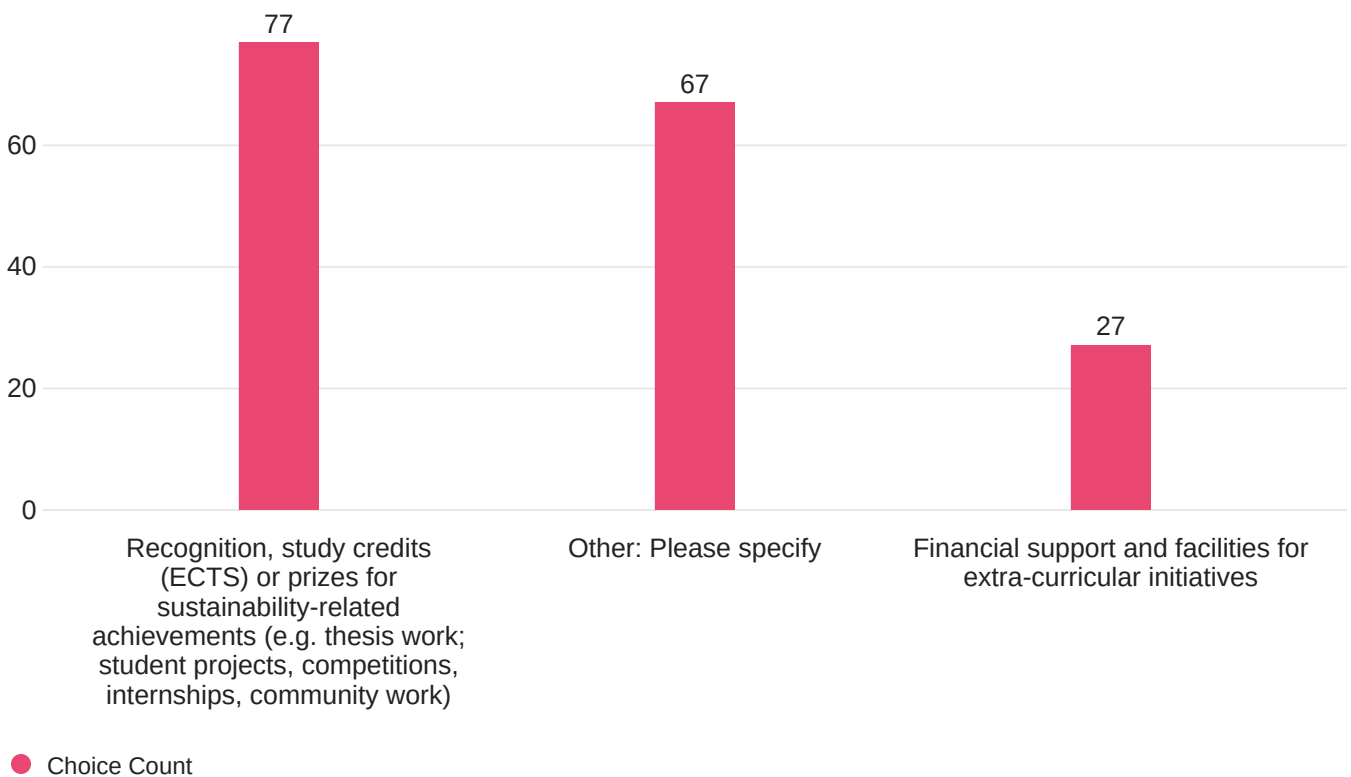
8.2 Incentives & rewards for students

The use of incentives was reported by 154 respondents. The most common incentive was 'recognition, study credits (ECTS) or prizes for sustainability-related achievements (e.g. thesis work; student projects, competitions, internships, community work)' (N=77), followed by 'financial support and facilities for extra-curricular sustainability initiatives' (N=27). Several respondents provided examples under the 'other' category, mentioning prizes for student projects, students organizing symposia supported by the department, inviting guest speakers that would engage students.

Q35 - What incentives & rewards (if any) does your academic unit use to encourage sustainability-related initiatives amongst your students or student associations? Select all applicable.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

154 Responses



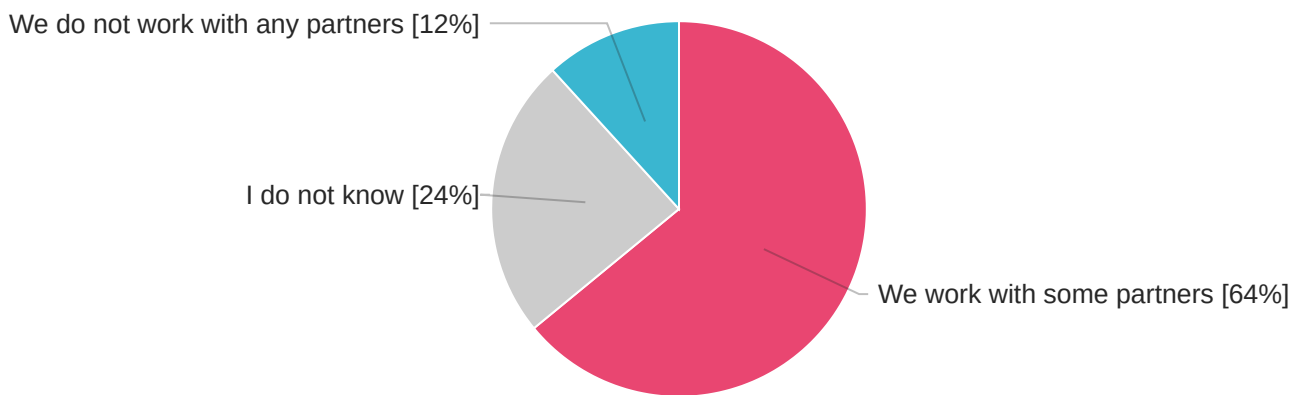
9. PARTNERSHIPS

9.1 Working with partners

Approximately two-thirds work with partners (64%), a quarter does not know (24%), and a small share says that they do not work with any partners (12%).

Q36 - Do you work with partners or external stakeholders to realise sustainability initiatives or projects?

153 Responses



● We work with some partners ● I do not know ● We do not work with any partners

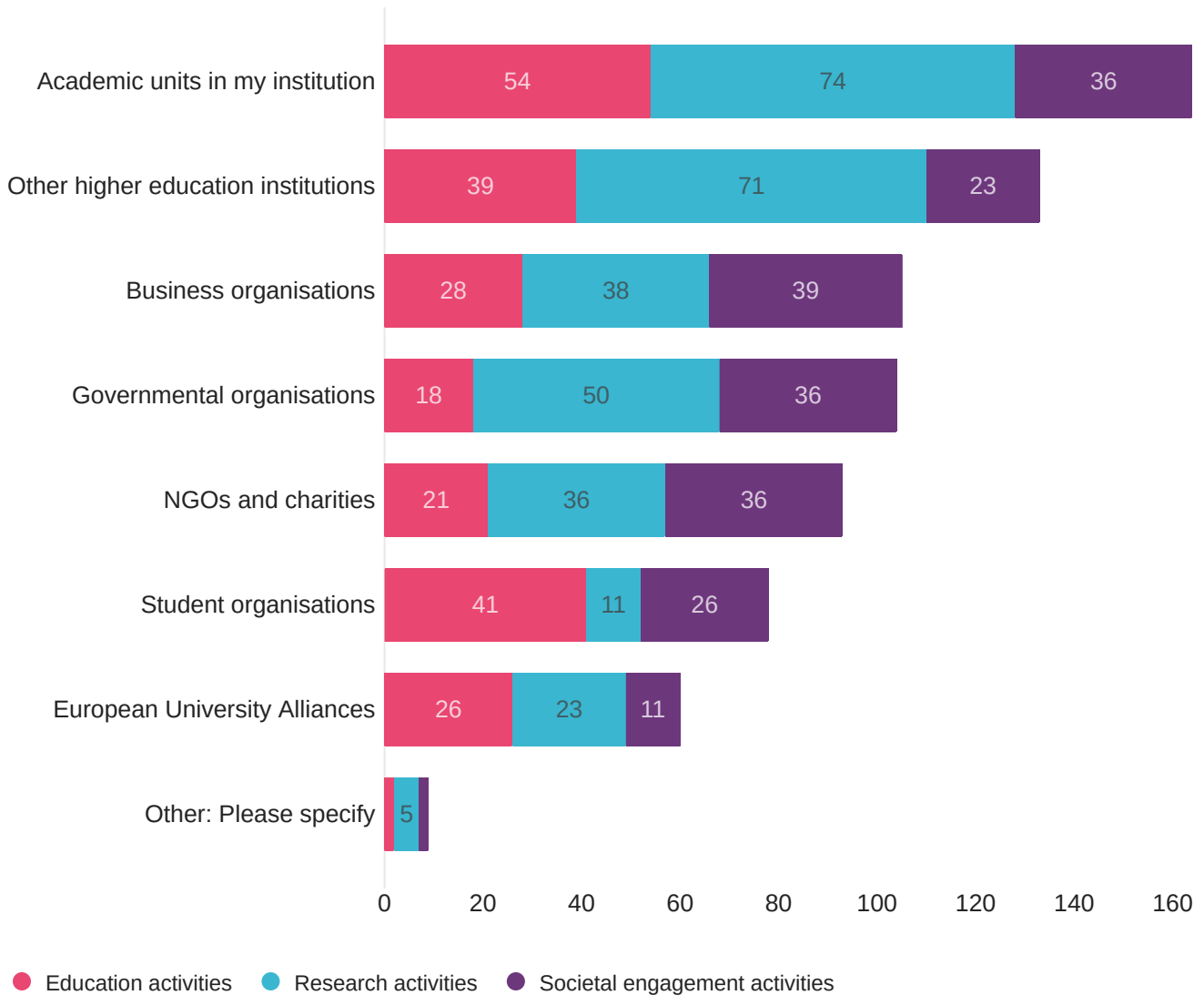
9.2 Most common partners

The most popular partners across all functions were 'other academic units in my university/institution' (N=164), followed by other higher education institutions (N=133) and 'business & employer organisations' (N=78). When looking at most popular partners per function, for education and research the most popular partners were also 'other academic units in my university/institution' (N=54, N=74) while for societal engagement activities these were business & employer organisations (N=39). The least common partnership was European University Alliances. However, given that these alliances are limited to less than 300 institutions across Europe, the alliance was still quite prominent in the sample (n=60).

Q37 - Please indicate your academic unit's partners for realising sustainability-related initiatives or projects (e.g., in education, research, and societal engagement activities). Select all applicable.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

96 Responses



10. SUCCESS FACTORS & GOVERNANCE

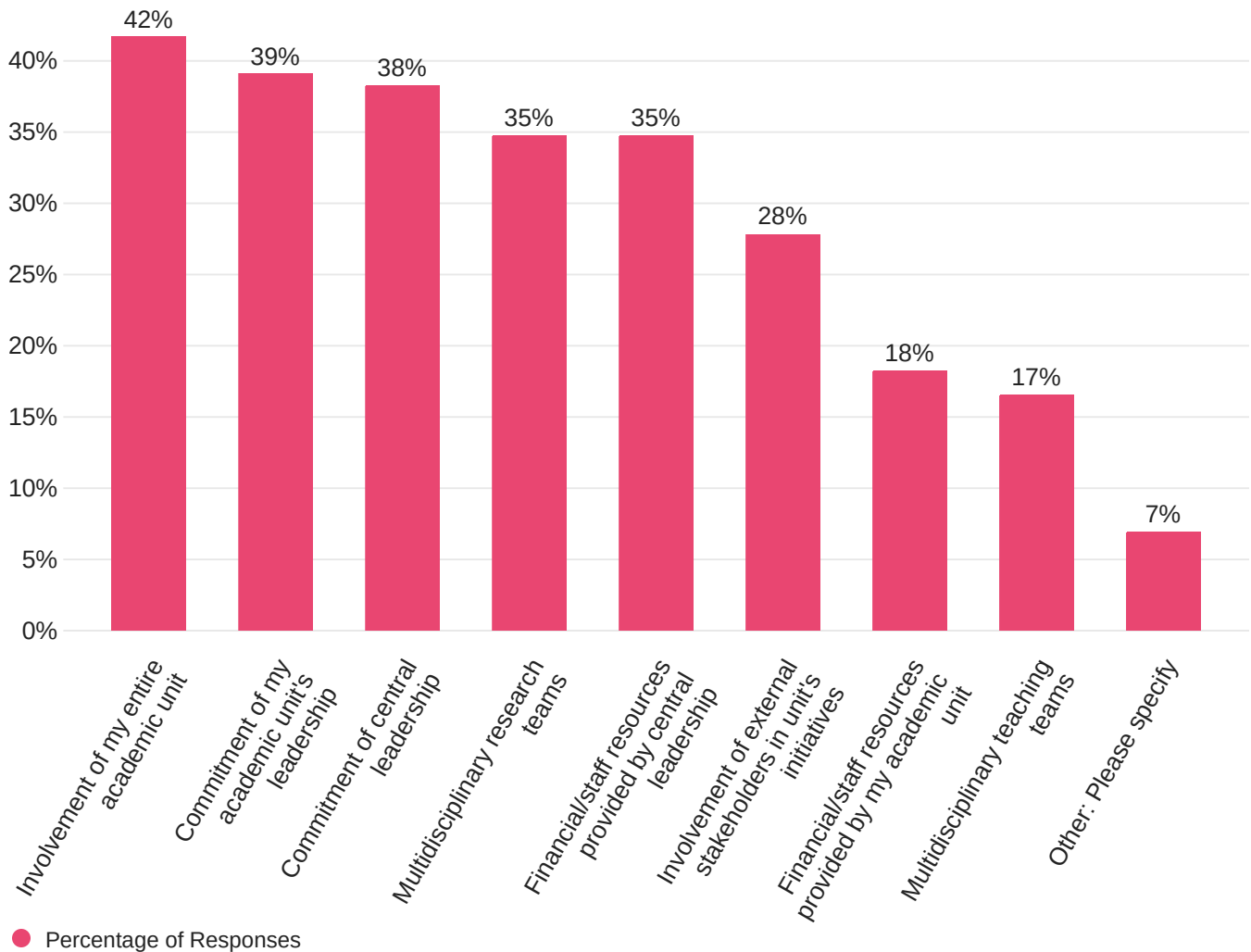
10.1 Success factors

The two most important factors were 'Involvement of my entire academic unit (staff, students, alumni)' (42%) and 'commitment and support of my unit's leadership' (39%), emphasizing the important role of the academic unit. This is followed by 'commitment and support of central leadership' (38%).

Q32 - What are the critical success factors that enable you as an academic to undertake sustainability initiatives? Select up to 3 answers.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

115 Responses



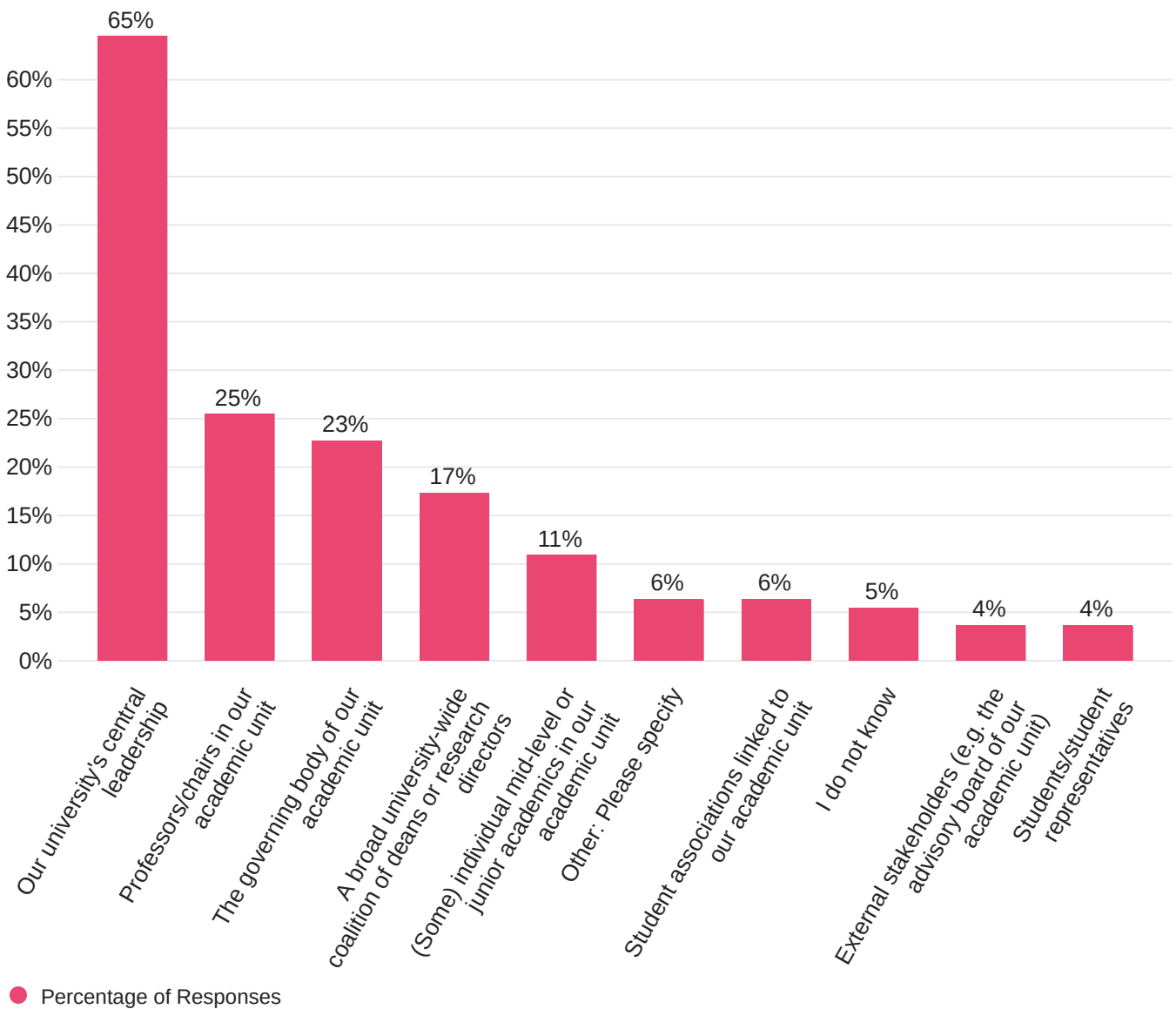
10.2 Governance

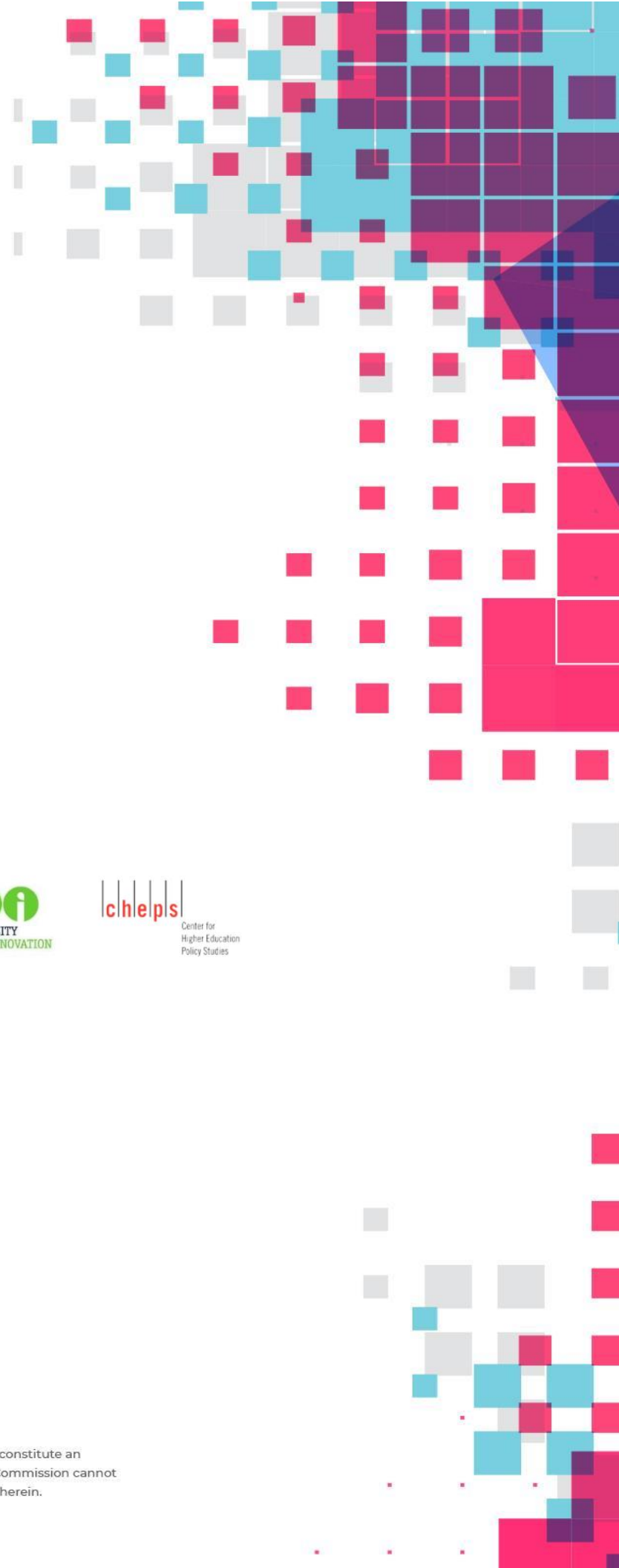
The answers suggested that sustainability strategy was frequently initiated by the university's central leadership (mentioned by 65%), followed by professors and chairs from the academic unit (25%), and a governing body of the academic unit (23%).

Q28 - Who took the initiative in formulating your academic unit's sustainability strategy? Select up to 3 options.

**Some answers in the graph are truncated; see the description above for a complete version.*

110 Responses





Project Partners



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