

# Embedding Sustainability in academic departments: Deans as change makers

Results from the first year of the DECODE project

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## DECODE Literature Review



Embedding sustainability in academia:  
Deans as change makers  
Literature Review

Ben Jongbloed, Anete Veidemane, Di Hu  
Center for Higher Education Policy Studies

Enschede, October 2021

&

## DECODE Survey Reports



Embedding sustainability in academia:  
Deans as change makers

Survey of deans

Ben Jongbloed, Anete Veidemane  
Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente

Enschede, October 2021

University of Twente



Embedding sustainability in academia:  
Deans as change makers

Interview Analysis

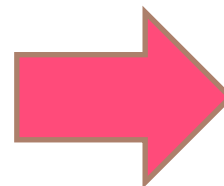
Mariacorbala Angrisani, Marina Albanese, Rita Ciminino

Centro "R. d'Ambrosio" Lupt della Federico II, University of Naples

October 2021

&

## DECODE Interview Report



## DECODE Integrated Report



Embedding sustainability in academia:  
Deans as change makers

Final Report

Ben Jongbloed, Anete Veidemane  
Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente

Enschede, October 2021

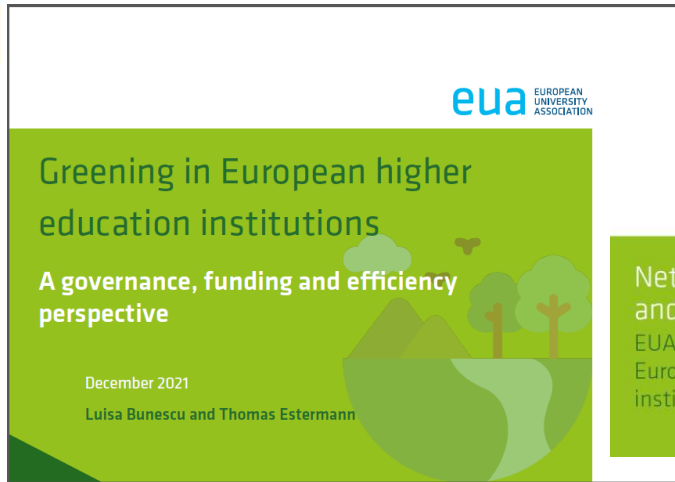
See: <https://decode-council.org/>



# More attention for SDGs in academia



Almost 9 out of 10 students (87%, n=10,315) say sustainable development is something that universities should actively incorporate and promote (Survey by National Union of Students (UK), March 2018)



## GREENING in European higher education institutions (Dec 2021)

A report by the European University Association

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eua  
EUROPEAN  
UNIVERSITY  
ASSOCIATION



# DECODE Project Goals → Focus on Deans

## Strengthening deans' role as change makers

- Identification of **key challenges and opportunities**
- Creating a vibrant "**sustainability community**" of deans (*Deans' Council for Sustainability*)
- **Empowering** deans to integrate Sustainability/Sust Dev't
- **Translate (*decode*)** the complex task of **Sust Dev't integration** in academia into a manageable tool-supported process

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European Deans  
Council For  
Sustainable  
Development

Designing A Future In And Through  
Universities

GET ENGAGED

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DECODE  
Sustainability

Learn more about **WHAT WE DO**  
through our introduction video



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## What is sustainability?

***Sustainability** is the capacity of the earth's natural systems and human cultural systems to survive, flourish, and adapt to changing environmental conditions into the very-long term future*



## Sustainable development?

***Sustainable development** is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*

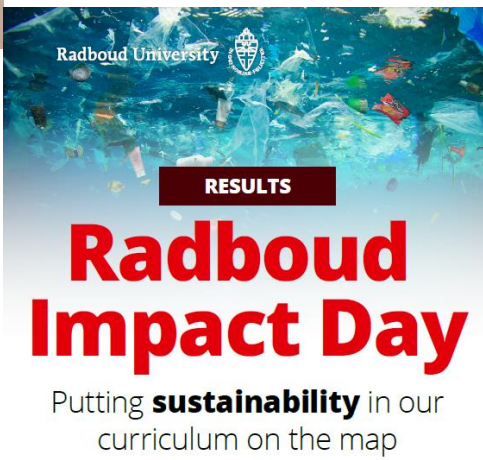




# Embedding sustainability comes in different shapes and forms

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# Tools for deans to promote sustainable development

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1. **Strategy:** create vision; build awareness
2. **Monitoring & learning:** to bridge gaps & get better
3. **Capacity building:** training & professional development
4. **Incentives:** rewards & sanctions
5. **Authority & Structures:** rules & platforms for action (incl. voluntary actions)

Adapted from Schneider  
& Ingram (1990)

## The DECODE interviews:

## 30 European Deans'/heads of department perspectives on embedding sustainability in their academic units (departments, schools, faculties)



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Laboratorio di Urbanistica e di Pianificazione Territoriale  
"Raffaele d'Ambrosio" (L.U.P.T.)





# DECODE Semi-Structured Interviews

## Aim

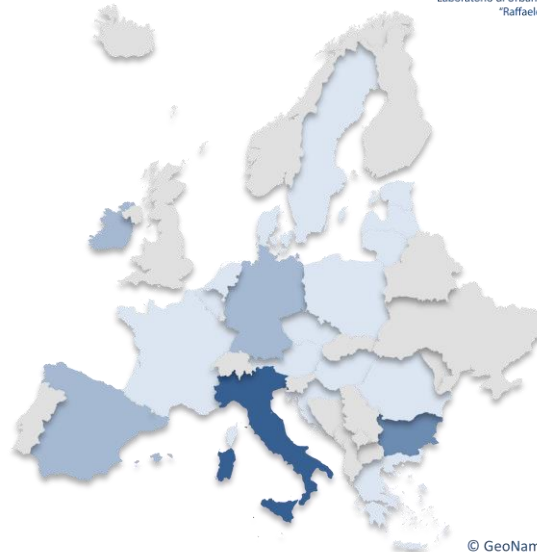
Identify opportunities and obstacles faced by leaders of academic units (deans) to embed sustainability in their unit's education, research, and societal engagement activities

## Interviewees:

- 30 leaders of academic units (deans, vice-deans or their delegates)
- 22 EU countries (50% - North, 27% - South, 23% - East)
- Some responsibility for sustainability within their academic unit



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# Interview themes based on analytical framework



Adapted from Schneider  
& Ingram (1990)



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# Develop Strategy:

## Some quotations from our interviews

### Challenges mentioned:

*"We have an SDG group within the faculty which is built taking into account our different activities and different offers so that we could **bridge all the strategy into all our activities**. I'm part of the group also, as a Dean, and I think that is important to be involved in such projects" (Dean -07, Spain)*

### Approaches mentioned:

*"[...] when we talk about sustainability in my department, we have to take a human-centered approach. We always have a citizen [...] that is part of our mission" (H of Dept-01, Denmark)*





# Building capacity:

## Some quotations from our interviews



### Challenges mentioned:

*"We are really quite inside our boxes [...]. We have to bring [...] change at the school level. We need to have [...] tools, [...] good practices"*

(H of Dept-02, Croatia)

### Approaches mentioned:

*"**Multidisciplinarity**, I think, is the key to become efficient in being sustainable. And I think that if we can establish a dialogue between all the disciplines, we can really be very effective"* (S Delegate-02, Greece)

A key success factor of the initiatives related to sustainability is the **interdisciplinary approach to both teaching and research**, although it can be a hard goal to achieve.



# Incentives:

## Some quotations from our interviews



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### Challenges mentioned:

*"The main obstacle is time. [...] It's very difficult to allocate time for staff and faculty members to be able to think about [...] the implementation of [sustainability] initiatives"*

(Dean-06, Hungary)

*"... it's always money"*

(Dean-09, Poland)

### Approaches mentioned:

*"We have a special university funding program and we have four lines of actions (...)"*

(Vice Dean-04, Spain)



# Authority & Voluntary Actions:

## Some quotations from our interviews



### Challenges mentioned:

*"Many of these initiatives need the authorization and the legal form of the central government"*

*"These obstacles [...] relate to the bureaucracy"*

(SD Delegate -02, Greece)

### Approaches mentioned:

*"A very useful decision was the [...] **Green Office**: a group of persons that are selected from students, from academic personnel, from the administrative staff, that together discuss [...] the priorities that we have developed in the area of environmental sustainability"*  
(SD Delegate-01, Italy)

*"We have a lot of **partnerships** because [...] things are usually done better in collaboration [...]. For example, the **Social Innovation Lab** is formed by the three universities of the country, social agents, and [...] innovative projects are [...] created"* (Dean 07, Spain)

*"Another one is a curricular sustainability program and also the creation of **synergy urban lab**"* (Vice Dean-04, Spain)



Before we show the outcomes of our survey,  
let's first hear your opinion



Which obstacles do you feel are preventing academics from embedding sustainability throughout your university's academic units?

*Please choose the 3 most important barriers:*

1. The mission overload
2. The lack of knowledge about sustainability
3. Investments required (time, money, people)
4. Absence of sustainability criteria in promotion policies
5. Lack of a clear sustainability strategy in our university
6. Lack of information about ongoing sustainability initiatives



Many deans and academics mentioned that students are an important source of inspiration for sustainability transformations.

What are, in your opinion, the best ways to engage students in sustainability transformations?

*Choose the 3 best alternatives*

1. Give voice in the University Council
2. Involve in university-wide steering committees
3. Establish a student-led Green Office
4. Discuss sustainability in the classroom
5. Provide awards & prizes for students' thesis work on sustainability
6. Student sustainability competitions



What are the most useful support mechanisms / initiatives to push the sustainability agenda of your department / unit?

*Choose the 3 best alternatives*

1. My university signing the global SDG Accord
2. My university enforcing regulation around sustainability
3. Our unit collectively deciding on our sustainability strategy
4. Our unit embedding sustainability in our teaching & research
5. Our unit engaging in staff training & peer learning, including leadership training
6. Financial rewards for staff to pursue sustainability initiatives



# The DECODE survey:

Deans'/heads of department perspectives on embedding sustainability in their academic units (departments, schools, faculties)

509 deans  
314 academics  
from 27 EU countries





## STRATEGIES & POLICIES

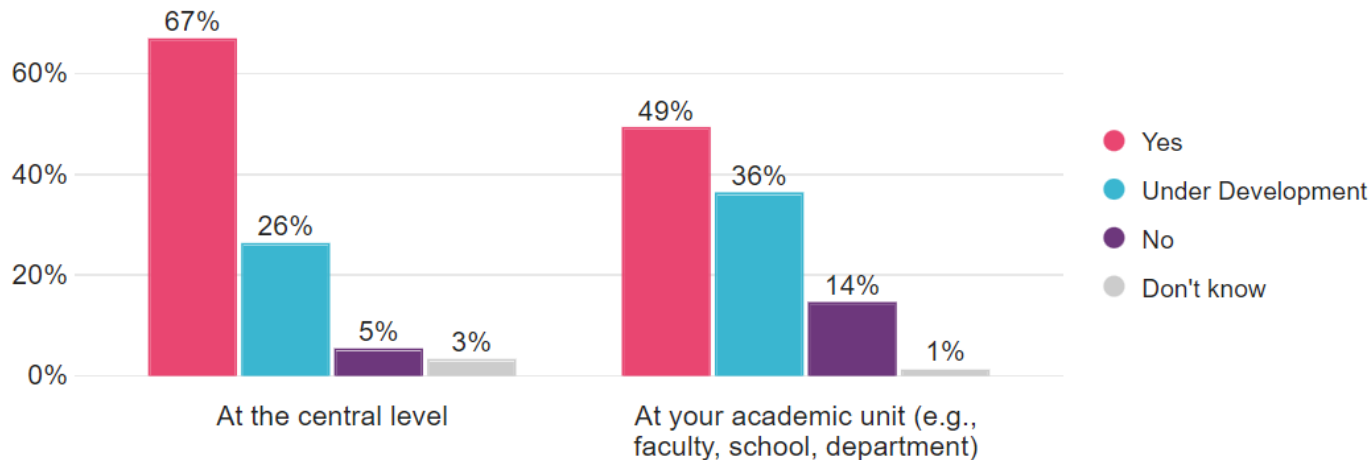
### Is sustainability addressed in the strategy or policy of your institution and/or academic unit?

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

619 Responses





## DRIVERS

### The key drivers to undertake sustainability (S) initiatives:

1. S is shared value
2. S is strategic priority
3. central leadership pushes S

### Our academic unit undertakes sustainability initiatives, because sustainability ...

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

is a **SHARED VALUE** amongst our staff



is a **STRATEGIC PRIORITY**



is requested by the **CENTRAL LEADERSHIP**



...

increases **EXTERNAL FUNDING**



increases **VISIBILITY** in international rankings



provides good **CAREER** opportunities



0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

373 Responses



# OBSTACLES

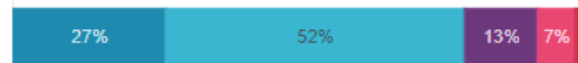
## The key obstacles to undertake sustainability initiatives:

1. Lack of time
2. Lack of funding for S-related education/research initiatives

For our academic unit, the key obstacles include the lack of...

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

**TIME** due to high workload



**FUNDING** for education (sustainability-related)



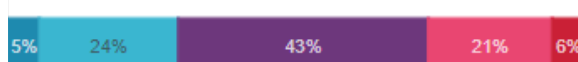
**FUNDING** for research (sustainability-related)



**CAREER** ambitions (sustainability-related)



**ACCREDITATION** & regulations for sustainability degrees



**SUPPORT** from the central leadership



0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

541 Responses

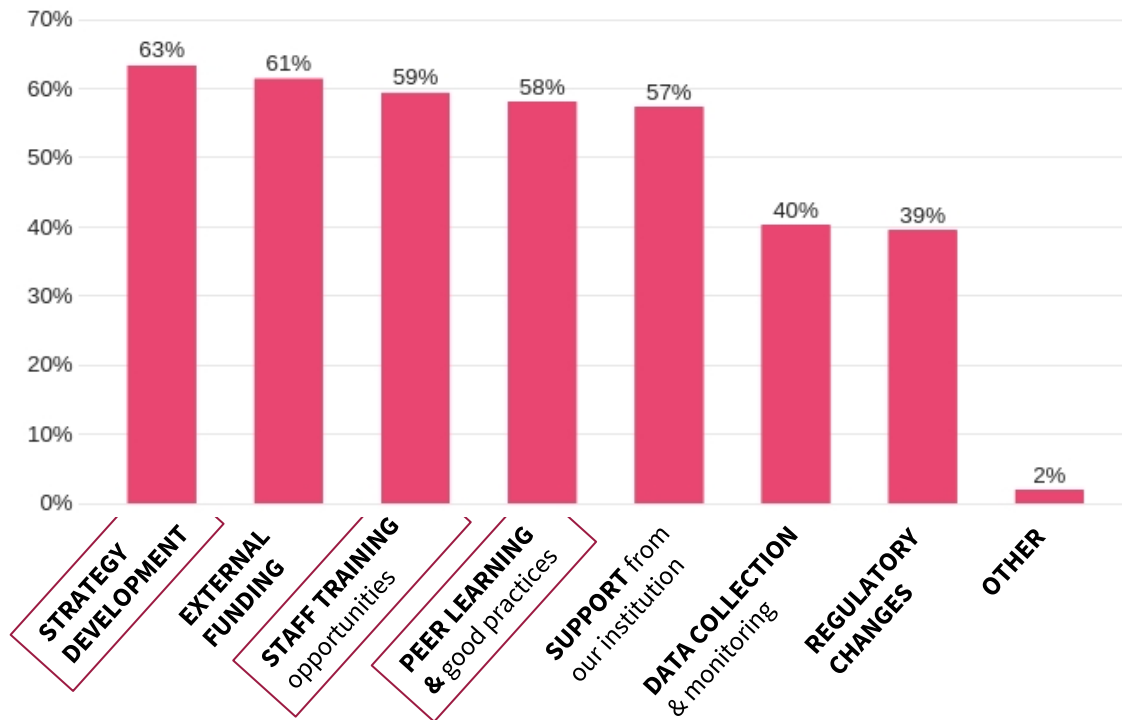


## SUPPORT MECHANISMS

What type of support is needed by deans to make progress on the S agenda?

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

532 Responses





# EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

Formal education linked to SDGs/sustainability topics is rather common (71%), ESD – not so much (46%)

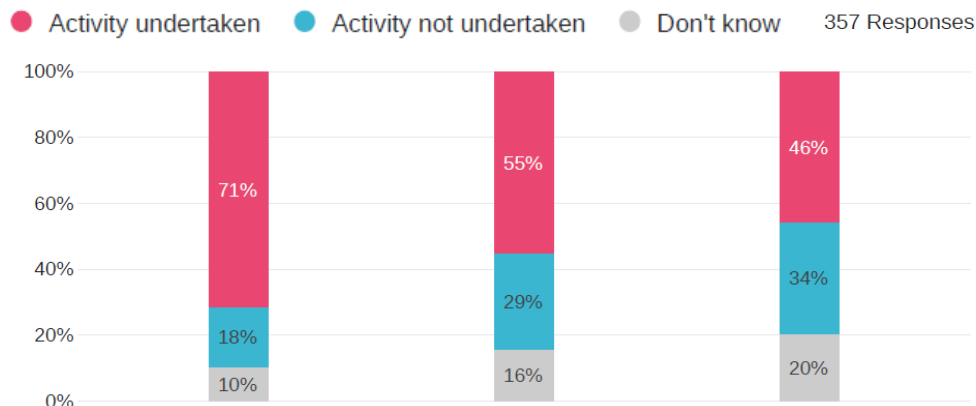


Education for

Sustainable Development Goals

Learning Objectives

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



**FORMAL EDUCATION\***  
linked to sustainability  
or SDG topics

Sustainability or SDG-  
related  
**EXTRACURRICULAR  
activities** available to  
students

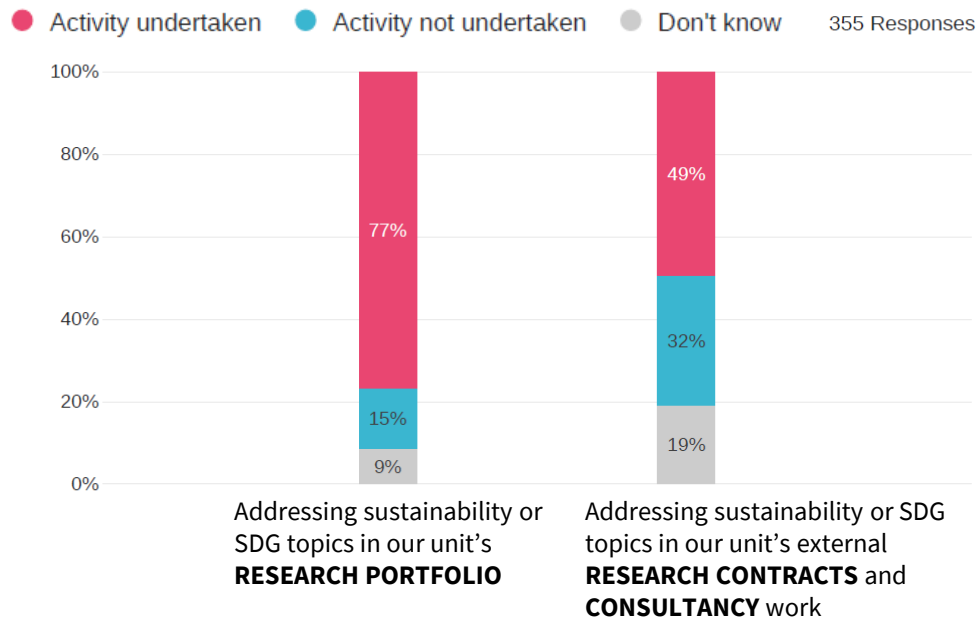
**FORMAL EDUCATION**  
(programs, minors,  
courses) based on  
*Education for Sustainable  
Development (ESD)*  
principles



## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the units  
address sustainability in  
their research portfolio,  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  in their external work

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





## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

While most deans believe that their students are motivated, students participate less often in decisions; Less than half are aware of the unit's sustainability strategy

Please rate the following statements:  
*Students at our academic unit are...*

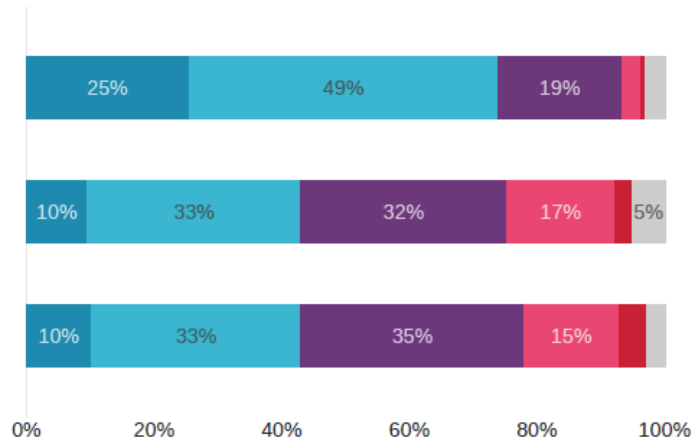
● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

472 Responses

**MOTIVATED** to learn more about sustainability topics.

**WELL-AWARE** of our unit's sustainability ambitions.

**PARTICIPATING** in our unit's **DECISION-MAKING** process.





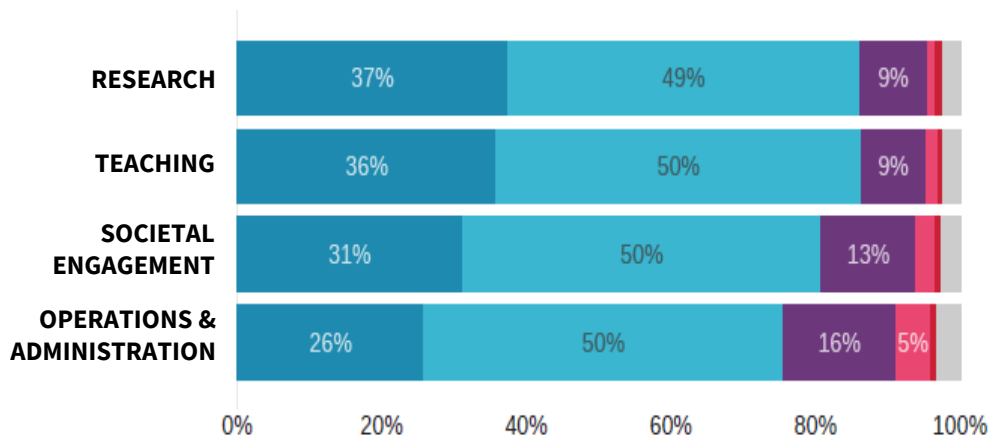
## FUTURE OUTLOOK

**More than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of deans (76-86%) believe that more attention will be paid to sustainability in their academic units across all functions**

Please rate the following statements:  
*Attention to sustainability or SDGs is likely to increase in the next five years in our academic unit's...*

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

510 Responses





# Concluding remarks on embedding sustainability in academia

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## Key success factors:

- Commitment of central leadership (52%)
- Involvement of my entire academic unit (45%)

*See the reports for more details*

## Need for:

- Support to develop unit's sustainability strategy (63%)
- External funding (61%)
- Professional development of staff (59%)
- Engaging in Peer2Peer Learning (58%)
- Support from the institution (57%)

## Challenges

- Lack of time (83%)
- Lack of financial resources (59-60%)
- Knowledge about sustainability topics (40%)

*There's no 'one-size fits all' approach.*



*"It's not easy being green"*



# Thank you!

[www.decode-council.org](http://www.decode-council.org)



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