

# 2020 Sustainability Survey: Executive Summary and Recommendations



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

The Sustainability Team | Campus Services

## Introduction

The University of Melbourne's Sustainability Survey is undertaken biennially and was first completed in 2012. Below is a summary of key findings from the 2020 Sustainability Survey.

Please note that this report has been divided into two documents; the Report which provides an analysis of the data collected from the 2020 Sustainability Survey and this Executive Summary and Recommendations which summarise the key insights and opportunities identified through the analysis.

## Purpose

The Sustainability Survey gauges University of Melbourne student and staff views, awareness and behaviours towards sustainability relative to the University's sustainability targets and objectives, and to sustainability issues in general. The results are used to evaluate the University's existing sustainability initiatives and the development of future initiatives, ultimately informing the priorities and targets of the University's Sustainability Plan 2021–2025.

## Sample and methodology

An online survey open to all University of Melbourne staff and students was conducted from 25 May to 19 June 2020. A total 1216 staff and students participated. Whilst all attempts were made to achieve an unbiased and representative sample, a self-selection sample bias towards those with a pre-existing interest in sustainability should be noted.

## Key findings

- Awareness of sustainability issues has increased both in general and within the University context. Overall, 92% of respondents rate their awareness of sustainability issues in general as 'high' or 'moderate', however, when referring to sustainability in the University context, only 61% rate their awareness as 'high' or 'moderate'. Despite the latter being a high percentage, this highlights the gap in knowledge between sustainability issues in general and at the University specifically. Staff report significantly higher levels of awareness than students. Postgraduates report higher levels of awareness than undergraduates.
- Concerns about climate change and natural disasters have increased significantly since 2018. Consistent with all surveys since 2012, respondents view climate change and environmental sustainability as the top two issues facing Australia.
- Also consistent across all survey results since 2012, reducing the University's carbon footprint and reducing waste outputs remain respondents' top priorities for improving sustainability at the University. Although waste reduction clearly remains a top priority, notably its relative importance has decreased since 2018. This finding is reflected in increased satisfaction with the University's waste reduction efforts and is likely attributable to new waste initiatives such as the popular Choose to Reuse Plate Program. Overall, the University's waste reduction, reuse and recycling efforts rank highest for respondent satisfaction.
- Just over half of respondents believe that sustainability is a 'top priority' for the University. This is a slight decrease on 2018, but an increase overall compared to pre-2018 results. Fewer students than staff believe that the University sees sustainability as a top priority.

- More respondents agree that the University is successfully addressing its Sustainability Plan targets than in 2018. However, a significant number (30%) report no awareness of whether targets are being met, albeit a lower percentage than in 2018 (i.e. more staff and students are aware of the plan in 2020).
- There are high levels of dissatisfaction around the University's Sustainable Investment Framework (34%) and its response to the modern slavery act through the University's supply chains (28%). Notably, the modern slavery act ranks equal third as a priority area for improving sustainability at the University. A further third of respondents reported no awareness of the University's efforts in either of these areas.
- Other areas viewed as high priority for improving sustainability at the University are the use of campuses as testing grounds/showcases for sustainability and embedding sustainability into the curriculum. Satisfaction with efforts in both areas is mixed: both have relatively high dissatisfaction levels (25% and 33% respectively) that mark them as key areas of focus and opportunity; at the same time, both enjoy similarly high satisfaction levels (35% and 29% respectively). This likely reflects the varying degrees to which sustainability is championed and integrated across faculties, courses and campuses.
- Staff are significantly more likely than students to be aware of and participate in the University's sustainability initiatives/events. This is likely because students are transient and therefore require highly visible communication methods to reach them. Furthermore, students are more likely to engage in personal undertakings that support sustainability (e.g. minimising paper and energy consumption).
- Although staff and students both identify a sense of altruism as the main factor motivating their participation, students report more motivation to participate in general.
- Staff and students experience the same key barriers to personal participation: convenience, expense and a need for more information and/or technical support. An interesting trend is reflected in the increased number of staff and students who identify 'other peoples' participation' as a motivating factor, coupled with an increase those who note 'not enough people are making sacrifices and I can't solve the problem alone' as a barrier. This highlights the value of peer group-based and peer-to-peer approaches for already engaged, as well as passive individuals, from an engagement and education point of view.
- Around half of respondents are satisfied with efforts to raise awareness of sustainability issues in the University community, and around a third are satisfied with efforts to increase participation and personal undertaking through engagement.
- Word of mouth and on-campus posters are top sources of the University's community awareness of sustainability initiatives overall, and for undergraduate students in particular. The Sustainability Team's opt-in e-newsletter has high engagement from staff and postgraduate students, and Staff News is a key source for staff. The volume of competing information and comparatively transient nature of the student community presents a challenge for communications 'cut through'. Raising the profile of sustainability at the University via a highly visible strategic communications campaign that leverages the Vice Chancellor or other senior leadership as spokespersons would help address this barrier
- Given its physical presence in a high traffic area of the Parkville campus, the Farmers Market remains the University's most popular sustainability initiative, with very high levels of awareness and participation across staff and students. The Choose to Reuse Plate Program ranked second highest for participation (30%) with strong overall awareness (50%), an excellent outcome given the program launched less than 12 months prior to the survey.
- The majority of respondents (87%) believe Green Impact has increased the level of sustainable activity in their department or work area, and around one in five actively participated in the program.
- The profile of the Farmers Market presents an excellent opportunity to increase awareness of other sustainability initiatives by leveraging the market as a promotional platform. Additionally, several other initiatives experienced high participation levels relative to their comparatively low awareness levels, presenting an opportunity to increase overall participation through efforts to promote these initiatives more broadly.

# Staff and student recommendations

Survey respondents were invited to suggest improvements in two key activity areas:

- 1) How to better communicate and/or engage the University community on sustainability issues
- 2) How to improve sustainability practices at the University

The major themes from this feedback are summarised below.

## **A. Have University-wide sustainability-based communications:**

- More communications from University senior leadership to raise the profile of sustainability across the University, particularly in the student community, and embed messaging into existing channels.
- Provide clear, consistent, University-wide messaging that communicates the sustainability vision, inspires individuals to take action, and communicates progress towards goals.
- Revise methods and tactics to reach and connect with a wider audience, including a higher social media profile and more induction-style outreach to new cohorts of staff and students.

## **B. Increase and/or incentivise ways to participate in sustainable practices:**

- Make sustainable practices the easier, cheaper option and promote them as such.
- Increase volunteering opportunities and a 'take action' based approach to communications.
- Focus on waste, an area that individuals can easily contribute to. Consider new zero-waste initiatives, sustainable procurement practices, a University-wide organic waste stream and circular food network using compost in campus gardens.
- Integrate participation in University sustainability initiatives into curriculum offerings and staff position descriptions.

## **C. Provide education to support participation:**

- Provide informational resources and guidance to student and staff groups.
- Provide education around food waste and composting; sustainability in supply chains and product life cycles.

## **D. Demonstrate leadership and model behaviour:**

- Lead by example. More transparency from senior leadership and middle management regarding the University's progress towards set targets.
- Elevate awareness of the links between Indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices, through curriculum integration and research funding.
- Create collaborative projects between faculties and divisions, encouraging action that is visible and accessible to as many staff and students as possible.
- Create and leverage sustainability champions/ambassadors in each faculty/division.

## **E. Improve environmental practices:**

- Become carbon neutral and commit to divestment from fossil fuels.
- Make the sustainable option the only option, wherever possible.
- Improve sustainability practices of on-campus food vendors; increase vegetarian/vegan options.
- Support biodiversity equally across all campuses.
- Support and encourage more sustainable, active transport options to/from campuses.

## **F. Act to embed sustainability across all aspects of University operations:**

- Integrate sustainability across all University campuses and all courses.
- Introduce sustainability targets/KPIs for faculties/departments.
- Mandate sustainability best practice in all relevant policy and procedures.
- Introduce sustainability training modules and induction sessions for students and staff.