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From Awareness to Action: University Students' Perceptions of Sustainability in Project Management

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Introduction and research aim

Sustainability has become an increasingly important dimension of project management, requiring future project professionals to consider economic, social and environmental consequences alongside traditional project objectives. Higher education therefore plays an important role not only in building sustainability awareness, but also in developing students' ability to translate sustainability principles into project-related decisions.

The aim of the study was to examine university students' perceptions of sustainability in project management, with particular attention to their understanding of the concept, perceived importance, key sustainability dimensions, implementation barriers, self-assessed competences and readiness for future professional practice.

Research questions

1. How do students perceive the importance of sustainability in project management?
2. Which sustainability dimensions and implementation barriers do they consider most relevant?
3. To what extent do they feel prepared to integrate sustainability principles into future project practice?

Research methods

A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted among 322 university students from two Polish universities: Krakow University of Economics (n = 244; 75.8%) and Rzeszów University of Technology (n = 78; 24.2%). The sample included 238 first-cycle students and 84 second-cycle students. A total of 113 respondents (35.1%) reported previous project experience, whereas 209 (64.9%) had no such experience. The questionnaire covered students' understanding of sustainability, key sustainability dimensions, its perceived priority in project management, barriers to implementation, self-assessed ability to integrate sustainability principles and readiness to apply them in future professional practice. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations.

N = 322 students

2 universities

244 | 78 UEK | PRz

238 | 84 first-cycle | second-cycle

113 with project experience

209 without project experience

Study focus: understanding how aware, prepared and practically ready students are to apply sustainability in project management.

Results and discussion

81.7%
high / very high priority of sustainability

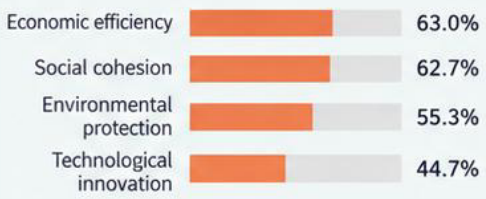
59.3%
good / very good understanding

36.0%
good / very good ability to integrate sustainability

64.3%
high readiness for future professional practice

Students demonstrated relatively high sustainability awareness and attributed considerable importance to its integration into project management. 59.3% assessed their understanding of sustainability as good or very good (M=3.63; SD=0.64), while 81.7% considered sustainability a high or very high priority in project management (M=3.92; SD=0.70). However, only 36.0% rated their ability to integrate sustainability principles into project management as good or very good (M=3.17; SD=0.90). At the same time, 64.3% declared relatively high readiness to apply sustainability principles in their future professional work (M=3.75; SD=0.91). The findings indicate a noticeable awareness–competence gap: students recognise the importance of sustainability and expect to apply it professionally, but feel less confident about translating sustainability principles into project management practice.

Key dimensions of sustainability in project management



Perceived barriers to implementation



Main insight: students know and value sustainability, but feel less confident about applying it in practice.

Conclusions

1. Sustainability is already perceived by students as an important component of project management.
2. High awareness and perceived importance do not automatically translate into confidence in practical application.
3. Project management education should place greater emphasis on practice-based learning, real project cases, stakeholder trade-offs and the application of sustainability criteria throughout the project life cycle.
4. The main limitations include self-reported data, the inclusion of students from two universities and the cross-sectional design.

References

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