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Sustainability Literacy as a Key to a Better Future: A Look at Higher Education

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Abstract: This study examines the sustainability knowledge of Slovenian students across environmental, social, and economic dimensions through an enhanced version of the ASK test. The results of 314 fully completed tests highlight foundational awareness of environmental impacts and sustainable development but also significant gaps in understanding the effectiveness of various sustainability practices. With a performance stratification analysis, educational gaps are identified, suggesting the need for curriculum adjustments. Moreover, using the ANOVA test, it is shown that students' academic levels and fields of study significantly affect their sustainability knowledge, underscoring the need for targeted educational approaches to better prepare students for future sustainability challenges. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on enhancing sustainability education, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers striving to enhance curricular effectiveness.

Keywords: sustainability knowledge; ASK test; environmental domain; social domain; economic domain

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1. Introduction

Every day, we face more and more environmental, social, and economic challenges. In 2015, the European Environmental Agency identified 11 megatrends that are expected to change the world in the coming decades [1]. One of these global megatrends is certainly the increase in the world's population. Namely, it is expected that there will be more than 9.6 billion people on Earth by 2050. The population will continue to age, the number of young people with higher education will increase, and they will change their consumption patterns. By 2050, 70% of people will live in cities, health challenges will increase, and technological changes will accelerate. The competition for natural resources will increase, as well as competition for land, and climate change will cause more and more floods, droughts, and other extreme phenomena. Global trends will have a strong impact on necessities such as water and food. We can only wonder what the next three decades will bring, as the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) asked ten years ago in its environmental forecast until 2050 [2]. These trends, such as increasing urbanization, technological advancements, and intensified competition for natural resources, provide a critical backdrop for exploring sustainability knowledge.

Education plays an essential role in fostering a sustainable society. It not only shapes individual values, behaviors, and worldviews, which are crucial for cultivating a culture of sustainability, but it also contributes significantly to the development of competencies, concepts, and tools necessary to combat climate change and curtail unsustainable practices. For example, incorporating sustainability education into school curriculums can equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to innovate and implement green technologies.

Furthermore, universities offering courses and degrees focused on environmental science and sustainable development can prepare future leaders to make informed decisions that prioritize ecological balance. Such educational initiatives underscore the transformative power of learning about and promoting environmental stewardship and advocating for policy changes that support a sustainable future.

By promoting education and training, the European Commission is trying to familiarize individuals with the advantages and opportunities of the transition to a low-carbon society so that they will know how to use and take advantage of them. In addition to the European Green Deal, there is a growing number of newer documents that contain a competence framework to help acquire knowledge about climate change and sustainable development. Examples are the European program of knowledge and skills for sustainable competitiveness, social justice, and resilience [3] and GreenComp—the European competence framework in the field of sustainability [4].

Here, it is important to highlight the Eco-Schools program [5], which is the only internationally recognized environmental education initiative, aligned with the criteria set by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), which aims at fostering and enhancing awareness of sustainable development among children and students through their educational programs and active participation in the local community. Annually, the most successful schools are awarded with the Green Flag, which not only recognizes schools' commitment to environmental stewardship but also encourages the integration of sustainability into educational practices and the broader community, reinforcing the program's mission to cultivate a sustainable future through education.

Measuring sustainability knowledge is crucial for effectively promoting sustainable development. By measuring sustainability knowledge, gaps can be identified, which can help educators refine education programs. Namely, several sustainability practices have often been misunderstood or inadequately addressed. For example, the general public commonly overestimates the impact of recycling programs without adequately recognizing the more significant benefits of reducing consumption at the source. Furthermore, the importance of sustainable agricultural practices is often underestimated, particularly in terms of their role in combating climate change and preserving biodiversity. This study acknowledges these gaps and aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding by exploring how well students grasp these complex issues, thus informing future educational strategies to address these persistent misunderstandings. Understanding the public's sustainability knowledge can inform the development of policies and initiatives that promote sustainable practices. In the end, measuring knowledge can highlight areas where increased awareness could lead to more sustainable behaviors among individuals and communities.

Upon reviewing the existing literature, a significant gap was identified in the measurement of student knowledge concerning sustainability across the environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Notably, no such study has yet been conducted in Slovenia. Therefore, the sustainability knowledge of students at eco-faculties in Slovenia was analyzed using a revised Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge, the so-called ASK test. This study aims to bridge this research gap and provide a comprehensive understanding of how well students are prepared to tackle sustainability challenges from a multidimensional perspective.

Moreover, the following two hypotheses were formulated, which are essential for understanding how different academic factors influence student success on the ASK test.

H1. *The level of study significantly influences students' success in solving the ASK test.*

H2. *The field of study significantly influences students' success in solving the ASK test.*

H1 is based on the premise that higher academic levels may correspond to greater maturity and a deeper understanding of complex sustainability issues, potentially leading to better test results. H2 posits that students from different fields of study may have different foundational advantages in understanding sustainability concepts. These two hypotheses aim to reveal how structural and pedagogical differences among programs and levels of study affect students' sustainability knowledge, which is needed for shaping educational practices aimed at enhancing better sustainability literacy. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test H1 and H2.

2. Measuring Sustainability Knowledge

Sustainability knowledge includes understanding the interconnection between environmental, social, and economic factors that contribute to long-term ecological balance, social equity, and economic feasibility. It involves awareness of sustainability issues, challenges, and solutions. Sustainability knowledge is categorized into the following three domains:

- Environmental knowledge: Understanding ecological processes, biodiversity, natural resource management, and environmental protection.
- Social knowledge: Awareness of social equity, community development, cultural diversity, human rights, and ethical considerations.
- Economic knowledge: Understanding sustainable economic practices, corporate social responsibility, sustainable development goals, and the economics of natural resources and environmental policy.

Measuring sustainability knowledge is essential for understanding how well individuals and/or groups comprehend the principles and practices of sustainability. This is important in various contexts, including education, business, and community development. It helps identify knowledge gaps, inform education and policy, and promote behaviors that contribute to sustainability.

The most common methods used for testing individuals' knowledge about sustainability topics are surveys and questionnaires. Qualitative methods to explore deeper insights into people's understanding and perspectives on sustainability are interviews and focus groups.

There are also several challenges in measuring sustainability knowledge. Firstly, individuals' perceptions and interpretations of sustainability can vary, influencing how knowledge is understood and applied. Furthermore, it is challenging to develop a comprehensive assessment tool since sustainability encompasses a wide range of topics across different disciplines. Moreover, sustainability issues and priorities can differ significantly across cultural and regional contexts, affecting the relevance and applicability of certain knowledge [6].

2.1. Instruments for Measuring Sustainability Knowledge

As mentioned above, several tools, including surveys and structured interviews, have been created to gauge sustainability literacy. Leiva-Bronde et al. [6] briefly summarized the main tests for assessing sustainability knowledge. One of the most widespread tools is the sustainability literacy test or the so-called Sulitest [7], which is used by universities, businesses, organizations, NGOs, citizens, etc., to evaluate and raise people's awareness and understanding of sustainability [7,8]. The questionnaire includes a set of global core questions that are drawn from a test bank and a set of questions that are customized for the particular testing site [9]. Another test, which is also among the most widespread ones, is the Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge or the so-called ASK test, which covers all three dimensions of SDGs: environmental, economic, and social [10–13].

In 2011, four sustainability competences were defined by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities. These key competencies are (1) the ability to critically apply knowl-

edge to real-world contexts; (2) the responsible use of resources; (3) active participation in community life; and (4) commitment to ethical principles [14]. Within these four sustainability competences, a test for students containing 18 questions was created [15]. Smaniotto et al. [16] prepared a survey for students entering Italian universities to measure how much knowledge they have about the SDGs. To assess students' prior knowledge of the SDGs, the source from which they learned about them, the connection between the SDGs, and the professions for which they are receiving training, Zamora-Polo et al. [17] created a questionnaire for a Spanish university.

To assess the sustainability understanding of Nigerian engineering students, Akeel et al. [18] prepared another sustainability literacy test. Similarly, Afroz and Ilham [19] created a survey that was given to students at the University of Malaya to assess their understanding of the SDGs. Yuan et al. [20] created a questionnaire to better understand Chinese senior high school students' knowledge about SDGs. Aginako et al. [21,22] assessed engineering students' perceptions of sustainable development in their curricula at the University of the Basque Country and the significance of students in their education process concerning the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability.

In Japan, Yamane and Kaneko [23,24] carried out two surveys; the goal for the first one was to compare different generations according to their sustainable lifestyles, and the second was intended for college students and examined how the activity of companies within the framework of SDGs affects the students' decision to choose a company.

Sekhar and Raina [25] studied the sustainability literacy of future managers in India. Aleixo et al. [26] prepared a questionnaire for students of Portuguese public higher educational institutions to explore their perspectives on sustainable development. Alomari and Khataybeh [27] prepared a questionnaire about SDG knowledge for students at Yarmouk University in Jordan.

Let us also mention the Sustainability Attitudes Scale (SAS) [19] and the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) [28], which were used in an effort to gauge attitudes towards sustainable development. Moreover, there are several surveys dealing with SDG awareness [14]. To gather feedback and expectations on sustainability and the SDGs, the Global Survey on Sustainability and SDGs [29] was distributed to private citizens as well as representatives from academia, business, politics, the media, and civil society around the globe. The MYWorld questionnaire [30] asks individuals whether they are aware of the SDGs and which 6 of the current 17 are urgent concerns for them.

Leal Filho et al. [31] prepared a survey to gather information about SDGs and integrating sustainability into the university teaching process. Furthermore, the Afrobarometer assesses Africans' experiences about topics which are covered by 12 out of 17 SDGs [32,33]. A questionnaire survey was created by Suzuki et al. [34] to explore public worries and interests in SDG-related problems. Ipsos conducted a study for the World Economic Forum in 2019 with participants from 28 countries to find out how familiar adults were with the SDGs and how much weight they placed on each one [35]. Ipsos carried out another survey in 2021 to gather feedback from the public regarding the most important SDGs to be addressed and how individuals feel about activities to achieve the SDGs [36].

The first global survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) was created in 2016 by the International Association of Universities as a showcase for the work that HEIs are conducting globally to promote sustainable development. The survey on HESD was revised and updated in 2019 [37].

Jati et al. [38] studied the awareness and understanding of SDGs at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Similarly, Omisore et al. [39] carried out a cross-sectional study in Southwest Nigerian University. Alvarez-Risco et al. [40] created a survey for students to assess their understanding of the SDGs, the importance of SDGs in their ca-

reers and research, and the significance of SDGs for post-COVID-19 economic growth. Ando et al. [41] conducted a survey among Kyoto University students about their attitudes towards SDGs, how well they know them, and where they learned about them. In 2017, the Vietnamese Center for Sustainable Development Studies prepared a questionnaire for citizens aged between 16 and 30 to determine their level of familiarity with the SDGs and to determine which SDGs will be the top priorities for young people to act upon [42].

2.2. Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge (ASK)

In 2014, the Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge (ASK) test with 16 questions was designed to assess general knowledge about all three dimensions of sustainability: (1) the influence of people on the ecosystem—environmental sphere; (2) utilizing resources to produce goods and services that improve people's lives—economic sphere; and (3) the linkage between environmental justice, corporate foresight, and human rights—social sphere [10–13]. Later, this instrument was increased to include 28 questions with an emphasis on providing a more thorough understanding of sustainability. After going through several rounds of surveying undergraduate students, the enlarged question set was narrowed down to 12 questions that are more balanced in question complexity [11]. The short number of questions correlates well with more general knowledge about sustainability. This is in line with the National Science Foundation's approach to evaluating how individuals understand science through a small number of questions [43]. Sustainability majors, seniors, and people who care more about the environment scored higher on the ASK, demonstrating its validity and efficacy in accurately measuring sustainability knowledge [10–13].

To assess sustainability knowledge across various levels and fields of study, the ASK test was utilized, which is commonly used to measure the efficacy of teaching and to compare the efficiency of various programs in teaching fundamental sustainability concepts. The ASK test was chosen because of its unique focus on measuring knowledge related to sustainability without conflating this measurement with behaviors. Its design is beneficial for evaluating educational programs' effectiveness. By concentrating solely on knowledge, the ASK allows for a clear assessment of what students have learned about sustainability concepts without the confounding effects of behavioral intentions or actions. This precision in measurement is crucial for accurately understanding the effectiveness of sustainability education.

3. Materials and Methods

To assess sustainability knowledge among students, an online questionnaire was used with the ASK test, which was revised to the local context of this study. Specifically, several questions originally tailored to the U.S. settings were modified to ensure relevance and applicability to European educational and environmental landscapes [10–13]. The questionnaire was distributed to students at eco-faculties in Slovenia in the spring semester of 2024.

In Slovenia, the Eco-Schools program has been implemented since 1996 under the DOVES Association—FEE Slovenia [44]. In 2014, the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana was the first faculty in Slovenia to be awarded the Green Flag. Today, nine faculties participate in the Eco-Schools program in Slovenia: two from the University of Ljubljana (the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Education), three from the University of Maribor (the Faculty of Logistics, the Faculty of Education, and the Faculty of Organizational Sciences), one from the University of Primorska (the Faculty of Education), and three private faculties (GEA College—the Faculty of Entrepreneurship; the Faculty of Design; and the Faculty of Information Studies in Novo Mesto). These faculties demonstrate their commitment to environmental education and sustainability practices.

With the help of the 1KA online survey tool, which allows for the efficient collection of responses, the questionnaire was distributed to 600 students. Of these, a total of 314 fully completed questionnaires were gathered, resulting in a response rate of approximately 52%. This rate underscores a substantial engagement and provides a solid basis for analysis.

All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before participating in the study. Moreover, approval by an ethics committee was not required for this study as the survey did not collect any personal data or sensitive information from the participants; it was designed to gather general knowledge without any identifiers that could link responses to individual participants. Consequently, this study posed no risk to the respondents, and all data were processed and analyzed in aggregate form to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

By focusing on a diverse array of student groups across various academic disciplines and years of study within the faculties, an attempt was made to ensure the representativeness of this study's sample. However, the results should be interpreted within the limitations of this sampling technique.

In the analysis, descriptive statistics was first applied to provide a basic overview of the data. According to Table 1, which summarizes the demographics of 314 individuals, 49% of respondents were women and 51% were men. The chosen age groups reflect typical educational and life stages, which helps in understanding different educational needs: 18–25 years (53%) for traditional college-age students, 26–33 years (44%) for early career professionals continuing education, and 34–40 years (2%) plus over 40 years (1%) for non-traditional students who often combine studies with other responsibilities. In terms of the level of study, the sample includes first-year undergraduates (29%), second-year undergraduates (25%), third-/final-year undergraduates (25%), and postgraduate students (21%). Moreover, the respondents were divided into five groups based on their field of study, considering the CERIF classification of fields [45]. The CERIF system categorizes academic disciplines into several domains, facilitating a structured approach to capture the diversity of research fields. This classification not only aligns with European standards but also ensures that the categorization of fields in this study is precise and comparable with other studies. The distribution was as follows: 29% of the respondents were studying in the field of social sciences, 25% were studying in the field of natural sciences and mathematics, 24% were studying in the field of technological sciences, and 22% were in the interdisciplinary field.

Table 1. Summary of demographic information (N = 314).

Demographic Characteristics	Options	Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	159	51%
	Female	155	49%
Age	18–25	166	53%
	26–33	139	44%
	34–40	6	2%
	Over 40	3	1%
Level of study	First-year undergraduate student	91	29%
	Second-year undergraduate student	78	25%
	Third-/final-year undergraduate student	79	25%
	Postgraduate student	66	21%

Table 1. *Cont.*

Demographic Characteristics	Options	Frequency	Relative Frequency (%)
Field of study	Social sciences	90	29%
	Natural sciences and mathematics	80	25%
	Technological sciences	75	24%
	Interdisciplinary studies	69	22%

The results of the ASK test were then analyzed. For each of the 12 questions, the number of correct answers and the most common responses were examined. The distribution of students was also analyzed based on the number of points received (ranging from 0 to 12), and a performance stratification analysis was conducted. Subsequently, H1 and H2 were tested using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test. This approach allowed us to assess the impacts of different study fields and levels of study on students' success in the ASK test, providing a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing academic performance.

4. Results

As written above, the revised ASK test was used to evaluate students' knowledge of basic sustainability concepts [10,11]. A combination of questions of varying complexity covered the environmental, economic, and social domains. Each item was given in a multiple-choice format with one right answer, three or two wrong answers, and a "Don't know" option. Table 2 contains the ASK survey questions, response choices, and results in percentages.

Table 2. Revised Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge (ASK) questions and answers (N = 314).

Question	Response Options *	Percentages
Environmental domain		
1. What is the most common cause of pollution of streams and rivers?	(a) **Surface water running off yards, city streets, paved lots, and farm fields**	**45%**
	(b) Dumping of garbage by cities	16%
	(c) Litter near streams and rivers	10%
	(d) Waste dumped by factories	23%
	(e) Don't know	6%
2. Ozone forms a protective layer in the earth's upper atmosphere. What does ozone protect us from?	(a) **Harmful UV rays**	**88%**
	(b) Acid rain	3%
	(c) Climate change	3%
	(d) Sudden temperature changes	2%
	(e) Don't know	4%

Table 2. *Cont.*

Question		Response Options *	Percentages
3.	Which of the following is an example of sustainable forest management?	(a) **Never harvesting more than what the forest produces in new growth**	**60%**
		(b) Setting aside forests to be off-limits to the public	18%
		(c) Producing lumber for nearby communities to build affordable housing	5%
		(d) Putting the local communities in charge of forest resources	4%
		(e) Don't know	13%
4.	Of the following, which would be considered living in the most environmentally sustainable way?	(a) **Reducing consumption of all products**	**60%**
		(b) Recycling all recyclable packaging	33%
		(c) Buying products labelled "eco" or "green"	1%
		(d) Buying the newest products available	1%
		(e) Don't know	5%
Social domain			
5.	Which of the following is the most commonly used definition of sustainable development?	(a) **Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs**	**76%**
		(b) Creating a government welfare system that ensures universal access to education, health care, and social services	9%
		(c) Setting aside resources for preservation, never to be used	5%
		(d) Building a neighbourhood that is both socio-demographically and economically diverse	1%
		(e) Don't know	9%
6.	Over the past three decades, what has happened to the difference between the wealth of the richest and poorest Europeans?	(a) **The difference has increased**	**83%**
		(b) The difference has stayed about the same	5%
		(c) The difference has decreased	4%
		(d) Don't know	8%

Table 2. *Cont.*

Question		Response Options *	Percentages
7.	Which of the following populations has the highest rate of growth?	(a) **Africa**	**47%**
		(b) North America	4%
		(c) Europe	1%
		(d) China	38%
		(e) Don't know	10%
Economic domain			
8.	Which of the following is the most commonly used definition of economic sustainability?	(a) **Long-term profitability**	**44%**
		(b) Maximizing the share price of a company's stock	5%
		(c) When costs equal revenue	26%
		(d) Continually expanding market share	4%
		(e) Don't know	21%
9.	Which of the following countries is the largest emitter of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide?	(a) **China**	**64%**
		(b) U.S.	10%
		(c) Brazil	9%
		(d) Japan	4%
		(e) Don't know	13%
10.	Which of the following is a leading cause of the depletion of fish stocks in the Atlantic Ocean?	(a) **Fishermen seeking to maximize their catch**	**38%**
		(b) Reduced fish fertility due to genetic hybridization	4%
		(c) Ocean pollution	32%
		(d) Global climate change	6%
		(e) Don't know	20%

Table 2. *Cont.*

Question	Response Options *	Percentages
11. Which of the following is the best example of environmental justice?	(a) **All stakeholders from an indigenous community are involved in setting a quota for the amount of wood they can take from a protected forest next to their village**	**55%**
	(b) Urban citizens win a bill to have toxic wastes taken to rural communities	4%
	(c) The government dams a river, flooding nature protection areas to create hydro-power for large cities	3%
	(d) Multi-national corporations build factories in developing countries where environmental laws are less strict	3%
	(e) Don't know	35%
12. Put the following list in order of the activities with the largest environmental impact to those with the smallest environmental impact: A. Keeping a cell phone charger plugged into an electrical outlet for 12 h. B. Producing one McDonald's quarter-pound hamburger. C. Producing one McDonald's chicken sandwich. D. Flying in a commercial airplane from Washington D.C. to China.	(a) **D, B, C, A**	**65%**
	(b) A, C, B, D	4%
	(c) D, A, B, C	11%
	(d) D, C, B, A	10%
	(e) Don't know	10%

* Correct answers are in bold and were given randomly. Domain titles (economic, social, and environmental) were not given.

From the above table, it is seen that less than half of the students (45%) identified surface water runoff as the primary cause of river pollution. On the other hand, most of them (88%) understood the protective role of the ozone against UV rays. Also, a significant number (60%) correctly recognized sustainable forest management as never harvesting more than what can be regenerated and identified reducing consumption as the most sustainable way of living.

In terms of the social domain, 76% of respondents agreed with the widely accepted definition of sustainable development. Moreover, 83% of students believed that the wealth disparity in Europe has grown over the past three decades. Knowledge of population growth shows some misconceptions, with students being divided between Africa (47%) and China (38%) as the regions with the highest rates.

The economic domain of sustainability seemed less understood, with only 44% of students correctly identifying long-term profitability as its definition. Moreover, 21% of students admitted they did not know the meaning of economic sustainability. The role of China as the largest emitter of CO_2 was recognized by 64%, showing awareness of global environmental impacts linked to economic activities. The question about the environmental impact of various activities highlighted a correct understanding by 65% of the students (long-haul flights have the most significant impact, followed by food production). However,

a large number of respondents (20/35%) chose "don't know" for complex issues like fish stock depletion and environmental justice.

The average score achieved by students is approximately 7.25 points with a standard deviation of 3.34, which means that most students scored within 3 points above or below the average, roughly between 4 and 10 points. The median is eight points, which highlights a slight skew in the distribution towards higher scores. The concentration of scores is around the range of 7 to 10 points, which is close to the mean. A smaller proportion of students achieved between zero and three points, showing that only a few struggled significantly with the answers. Conversely, a notable number of students achieved very high scores (11 to 12 points), indicating that some performed exceptionally well. In general, the distribution suggests that most students scored within a reasonable range, with a slight tendency towards stronger performances (see Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of student performance based on scores (N = 314).

Points	Frequency	Percentages
12	35	11.1%
11	24	7.6%
10	36	11.5%
9	34	10.8%
8	35	11.1%
7	27	8.6%
6	27	8.6%
5	27	8.6%
4	17	5.4%
3	19	6.1%
2	11	3.5%
1	13	4.2%
0	9	2.9%
∑	314	100

A performance stratification analysis was also conducted to categorize students into distinct groups based on their scores. To analyze the distribution of performance, the data were divided into quartiles, which allowed for the classification of students into four performance categories (Figure 1).

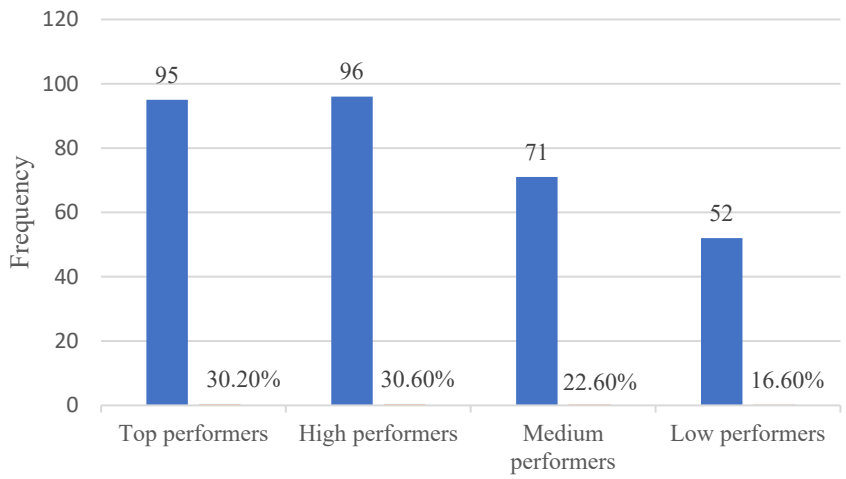


Figure 1. Performance stratification summary (N = 314).

- Low Performers (0–3 points): Students in this category demonstrated minimal understanding of the sustainability concepts covered in the test.

- Medium Performers (4–6 points): These students showed an average understanding, indicating partial knowledge of key sustainability issues.
- High Performers (7–9 points): Students in this group exhibited a strong grasp of sustainability concepts, reflecting a more comprehensive understanding.
- Top Performers (10–12 points): This group included students who excelled, demonstrating advanced knowledge and insights into sustainability practices.

The criteria for these categories were developed based on a combination of theoretical benchmarks in sustainability education and an empirical distribution of test scores. This stratification enabled a nuanced analysis of educational gaps by identifying the specific areas where students' performance varied most significantly.

Figure 1 summarizes the distribution of performance across four categories, highlighting that over 60% of the students achieved scores in the "High Performers" and "Top Performers" categories. This indicates a strong foundational awareness among the majority but also underscores the critical need for curriculum adjustments to address the gaps identified, particularly in the lower performance categories.

Testing H1 and H2

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test H1 and H2 regarding differences in students' ASK test scores based on level and field of study. This method is appropriate for analyzing a single categorical independent variable and a normally distributed, interval-level dependent variable. Here, the level and field of study were the independent variables, and the ASK test scores were the dependent variables. The results are presented below, rounded to two decimal places for clarity.

According to the above results of the ANOVA test (Tables 4 and 5), the *p*-value is $5.59 \cdot 10^{-26}$, which is less than the typical alpha level of 0,05. Therefore, H1 stating that the level of study affects students' success in solving the ASK test is confirmed.

Table 4. Summary of data for testing H1 (N = 314).

Level of Study	Frequency	Average	Variance
First-year undergraduate student	91	4.89	6.25
Second-year undergraduate student	78	6.31	10.11
Third-/final-year undergraduate student	79	9.01	8.37
Postgraduate student	66	9.39	5.75

Table 5. ANOVA for H1.

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	*p*-Value	F Crit *
Between Groups	1124.68	3	374.89	49.07	$5.59 \cdot 10^{-26}$	2.63
Within Groups	2368.26	310	7.64			
Total	3492.95	313				

* SS = Sum of Squares; df = Degrees of Freedom; MS = Mean Square. Results are rounded to two decimals.

Applying the ANOVA test for the second hypothesis (Tables 6 and 7), a *p*-value of $2.34 \cdot 10^{-10}$ is obtained, which is again less than $\alpha = 0.05$, thus confirming H2. This indicates that the field of study affects students' success in solving the ASK test.

Table 6. Summary of data for testing H2 (N = 314).

Field of Study	Frequency	Average	Variance
Social sciences	90	7.28	9.82
Natural sciences and mathematics	80	9.03	9.09
Technological sciences	75	6.99	12.82
Interdisciplinary studies	69	5.39	6.42

Table 7. ANOVA for H2.

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	*p*-Value	F Crit *
Between Groups	495.66	3	165.22	17.20	$2.34 \cdot 10^{-10}$	2.63
Within Groups	2977.43	310	9.60			
Total	3473.09	313				

* SS = Sum of Squares; df = Degrees of Freedom; MS = Mean Square. Results are rounded to two decimals.

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to indicate varying degrees of awareness among Slovenian students across different dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. Using an online questionnaire with the revised ASK test, it was found that a considerable proportion of students involved in the study have a good grasp of the immediate environmental impacts of human activities, as evidenced by their understanding of the primary sources of water pollution and the protective role of the ozone against UV rays. Most students also recognize that sustainable forest management involves ensuring that forest harvesting does not exceed regrowth, showing that the concept of renewable resources is well understood.

Although a majority of respondents appreciate the importance of reducing consumption, a significant number still view recycling as a comparably effective strategy. This suggests that while students are aware of actions to reduce environmental impact, there remains some confusion about the relative effectiveness of different sustainable practices.

Furthermore, the responses show that students are familiar with the broader definition of sustainable development. They show awareness of socio-economic issues, such as the widening wealth gap in Europe, indicating an understanding of social sustainability challenges. However, there is more variability in the understanding of economic sustainability among the students. While almost half of respondents can correctly define economic sustainability as long-term profitability, a notable portion of them are uncertain about how economic measures impact sustainable outcomes. This is further highlighted in their responses to the causes of fish stock depletion in the Atlantic, where there is a split between recognizing overfishing and pollution as major factors.

The overall results suggest that while students have a foundational knowledge of what constitutes sustainability, there are gaps regarding the deeper complexities of sustainable practices and policies. This mixed understanding underscores the need for enhanced educational initiatives that delve into the interconnectedness of sustainability's social, economic, and environmental aspects. More comprehensive education could help clarify how various actions and broader policies contribute to sustainability goals, equipping students with a more nuanced understanding necessary for making informed decisions that affect both present and future generations. This approach would ideally involve integrating discussions that explore the cascading effects of economic policies and social inequalities on the environment, thus fostering a more holistic understanding of sustainability among students.

A performance stratification analysis was also conducted to identify variations in student knowledge and to understand how scores are distributed across the sample. By grouping the scores into quartiles, insights into how many students fall into each performance group were gained, which help to highlight areas for potential academic intervention. The results show that the distribution is skewed towards the higher performance groups, with the "high performers" and "top performers" categories having nearly equal numbers of students. This suggests that the quiz results reflect a relatively high level of sustainability knowledge among the students. However, the presence of "low performers" (16.56%) suggests that there is still a small portion of students for which additional academic support is needed.

To understand the effectiveness of sustainability education more deeply, the results of this study were compared with those from the Ohio State Campus Sustainability Survey [46], which is a collaborative effort involving numerous campus partners, aimed at measuring current and longitudinal trends in undergraduate behaviors, beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge regarding sustainability. The report explores the results from the academic year of 2023–2024, gathered through online survey responses from 1482 undergraduate students. In their survey, the students demonstrated a high level of knowledge with an average of 8,6 items correct out of 12 and a standard deviation of 2.01. In this study, the average score achieved by students is slightly lower (7.25 points with a standard deviation of 3.34), suggesting that the sustainability education program at the Ohio State University may be more effective or that differences in student demographics could be influencing the results. Additionally, the broader range of scores in this study indicates a potentially more diverse student population in terms of prior knowledge and engagement with sustainability topics. A detailed question-by-question analysis provided further insights, revealing specific areas where students might benefit from focused educational efforts to enhance their understanding and awareness (see Table 8).

Table 8. A comparative analysis of the percentage of correct answers from students in Slovenia and from the Ohio State University (ASK test).

Question/Correct Answer	**Correct Answers in % (Slovenia 2024, N = 314)**	**Correct Answers in % (Ohaio State University 2023, N = 1482)**
Environmental Domain		
1. What is the most common cause of pollution of streams and rivers? Surface water running off yards, city streets, paved lots, and farm fields	45%	44%
2. Ozone forms a protective layer in the earth's upper atmosphere. What does ozone protect us from? Harmful UV rays	88%	93%
3. Which of the following is an example of sustainable forest management? Never harvesting more than what the forest produces in new growth	60%	78%

Table 8. *Cont.*

Question/Correct Answer	Correct Answers in % (Slovenia 2024, N = 314)	Correct Answers in % (Ohaio State University 2023, N = 1482)
4. Of the following, which would be considered living in the most environmentally sustainable way? Reducing consumption of all products	60%	74%
Social Domain		
5. Which of the following is the most commonly used definition of sustainable development? Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs	76%	84%
6. Over the past three decades, what has happened to the difference between the wealth of the richest and poorest Europeans? The difference has increased	83%	95%
7. Which of the following populations has the highest rate of growth?/Many economists argue that electricity prices in the U.S. are too low because. . . Africa/They do not reflect the costs of pollution from generating the electricity	47%	67%
Economic Domain		
8. Which of the following is the most commonly used definition of economic sustainability? Long-term profitability	44%	61%
9. Which of the following countries is the largest emitter of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide? China	64%	93%
10. Which of the following is a leading cause of the depletion of fish stocks in the Atlantic Ocean? Fishermen seeking to maximize their catch	38%	30%
11. Which of the following is the best example of environmental justice? All stakeholders from an indigenous community are involved in setting a quota for the amount of wood they can take from a protected forest next to their village	55%	85%

Table 8. *Cont.*

Question/Correct Answer	Correct Answers in % (Slovenia 2024, N = 314)	Correct Answers in % (Ohaio State University 2023, N = 1482)
12. Put the following list in order of the activities with the largest environmental impact to those with the smallest environmental impact: a. Keeping a cell phone charger plugged into an electrical outlet for 12 h. b. Producing one McDonald's quarter-pound hamburger. c. Producing one McDonald's chicken sandwich. d. Flying in a commercial airplane from Washington D.C. to China. D, B, C, A	65%	56%

Let us point out that the comparison with Ohio State University's sustainability education outcomes serves as a valuable benchmark for this study. By aligning the findings of this study with those from a well-established sustainability program, the performance of Slovenian students can be contextualized within a broader, international framework. Moreover, this comparative analysis enriches this study by offering insights into how different educational environments might influence student outcomes in sustainability, guiding us towards more tailored and potentially effective educational interventions in the Slovenian context.

In the environmental domain, the Slovenian students were closely aligned with students from the Ohio State University on basic environmental issues. However, gaps appear in more complex concepts like sustainable forest management and living sustainably, where students from the U.S. outperformed the others, suggesting a deeper integration of these topics in their curriculum. In the social domain, the differences are more pronounced. For example, 76% of Slovenian students correctly defined sustainable development compared to 84% at the Ohio State University. A significant gap is observed in understanding the economic disparities over the past three decades, which might reflect the broader emphasis on social justice issues in the curriculum at the Ohio State University. In the economic domain, differences in understanding economic sustainability and environmental economics are notable. Only 44% of Slovenian students correctly identified the most commonly used definition of economic sustainability compared to 61% at the Ohio State University. Similarly, students from the U.S. displayed a significantly higher awareness of global issues, such as the largest emitter of carbon dioxide and the best example of environmental justice. Interestingly, when asked to rank activities by their environmental impact, 65% of Slovenian students correctly ordered the given activities compared to 56% of students at the Ohio State University, indicating a strong understanding of practical environmental impacts among Slovenian students.

It is important to note that the Ohio State University has been conducting such surveys since 2018 through its Environmental and Social Sustainability Lab. This lab is a collaborative community of scholars dedicated to building a scientific understanding of environmental and social sustainability within an interdisciplinary context. This established

research initiative puts Ohio State at an advantage as it benefits from years of accumulated data, refined methodologies, and a deeply integrated interdisciplinary approach to sustainability education. This historical context and structured research environment contribute to the consistently higher awareness and understanding among their students, as reflected in the survey results.

Moreover, the results of this study confirm both H1 and H2, demonstrating significant differences in ASK test performance based on students' levels and fields of study, which suggests that educational strategies may need to consider these variables for targeted improvements in student learning outcomes. The data in this study show a clear trend of increasing average scores with advancing educational levels (from first-year undergraduates to postgraduate students). The variance also shifts, suggesting differences in score distributions across levels. The ANOVA results indicate a highly significant effect of the level of study on scores, and the *p*-value is much lower than the standard significance level of 0,05. Moreover, the data in this study also show varying averages and variances across different fields of study, implying that students' success also differs depending on their field. The ANOVA results further support this with another highly significant *p*-value, reaffirming that the field of study impacts students' performance in the ASK test.

6. Conclusions

The goal of this study was to explore the varying degrees of knowledge among Slovenian students across different dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. While this study confirms foundational knowledge of sustainability among students, it also highlights critical gaps and opportunities for deeper educational engagement. By utilizing a revised ASK test via an online questionnaire, it was deduced that most students understand the direct environmental impacts of human activities. On the other hand, some confusion persists about the relative effectiveness of different sustainable practices, such as reducing consumption versus recycling. This suggests that while students are conscious of the need for sustainable actions, the nuances between various practices remain unclear. Furthermore, this study revealed familiarity with the broader definitions of sustainable development and an awareness of socio-economic issues. However, the understanding of economic sustainability varied more among students, indicating a need for enhanced educational focus on how economic measures impact sustainable outcomes.

With the performance stratification analysis, valuable insights into student performance are provided that could inform decisions regarding curriculum adjustments or personalized interventions to further enhance learning outcomes. Additionally, the results of this study were compared with the results obtained from undergraduate students at the Ohio State University, which is crucial for developing future educational policies and practices that effectively prepare students to tackle sustainability challenges. Furthermore, using the ANOVA test, it was confirmed that students' levels and fields of study have an influence on the score obtained on the ASK test, which suggests that educational strategies may need to consider these variables for targeted improvements in student learning outcomes.

Let us point out that this study was primarily focused on Slovenian students and that it may not represent knowledge levels in different cultural or educational contexts. Future studies could expand the demographic and geographic scope to include a more diverse array of participants from various backgrounds. This expansion would provide a broader perspective on global sustainability education effectiveness. Different regions and cultures approach environmental issues and sustainability education from unique perspectives shaped by local environmental conditions, cultural heritage, and socio-economic factors. Additionally, incorporating diverse cultural backgrounds can provide insights into how cultural values and norms influence perceptions and behaviors related to sustainability. By

comparing these varied educational environments and student responses, future research could uncover patterns and nuances that are not apparent in more homogenously sampled studies. This broader approach might reveal innovative sustainability practices that are effective in specific cultural contexts but unknown or underutilized elsewhere. Further research could also explore the long-term impact of sustainability education on actual behavioral changes beyond theoretical knowledge.

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