

Sustainability in Canadian Post-secondary Institutions: The Leaders, the Laggards and Where They Live

Signing a sustainability declaration doesn't always mean commitment to sustainability.
A post-secondary institution's sustainability practices are strongly influenced by its provincial context.

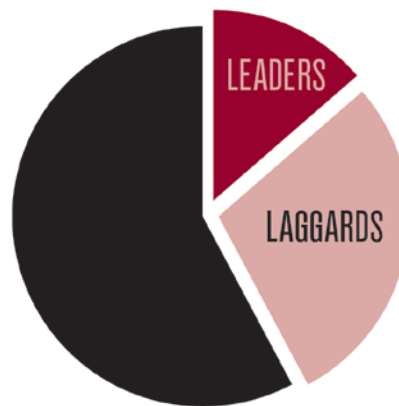
These are two key findings from a research study done by the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) which assessed leadership on sustainability initiatives in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Engagement with sustainability is on the rise among post-secondary institutions, with many institutions developing policies and practices to further sustainability.

SEPN analyzed and scored all 220 accredited post-secondary institutions in Canada on their uptake of four high-level Sustainability Initiatives (SI):

1. Undertaking a sustainability assessment
 2. Signing a national or international environmental or sustainability declaration
 3. Having a sustainability office or officer
 4. Having sustainability policies
- An institution received one point for having a sustainability initiative in each category.

SI Leaders = SI score of 4.
Institutions with all four sustainability initiatives.

SI Laggards = SI Score of 0.
Institutions with no sustainability initiatives.



30/220 SI Leaders

Québec and British Columbia had the highest number of SI leaders (9 and 6 institutions respectively). Higher scoring institutions appeared more frequently in larger cities, although SI scores in Québec's larger centres were only marginally higher than its smaller centres.

63/220 SI Laggards

Saskatchewan and the territories had the lowest average SI scores.

SI Score Averages & Number of Institutions by Province

Province	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PE	NL	YT	NT	NU	CA
Leaders	6	4	1	3	4	9	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	30
Laggards	6	6	9	5	18	6	2	5	1	2	1	1	1	63
SI score Avg	2.1	1.7	0.6	1.4	1.5	2.4	1.0	1.3	1.3	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
Total # of Institutions	27	21	15	9	59	59	7	13	3	4	1	1	1	220

(De) linking declarations

This research identifies strong linkages between the three sustainability initiatives of assessment, office(r), and policy, suggesting that the uptake of one might encourage the uptake of others. In contrast, there was a weak relationship between signing a declaration and undertaking other sustainability initiatives. Of the 99 institutions that signed a declaration since 1990, one third had not undertaken any other sustainability initiative. This suggests that institutions critically reflect on their purpose and intentions in signing a declaration, and if commitment to sustainability is a true objective, that they identify what additional sustainability initiatives will be taken after signing a declaration. As well, policy actors developing and championing sustainability declarations could consider what measures might be put in place to help signatories engage in other high-level sustainability initiatives after becoming declaration signatories. The existence of sustainability-specific policies was strongly related to province, with the majority of institutions in both Québec (85%) and British Columbia (67%) having sustainability policies. In contrast, only 14% institutions in New Brunswick and 13% in Saskatchewan had policies, and none of the three institutions in the territories had policies.

Do provincial political cultures influence sustainability in education?

This raises interesting questions about the role of provincial policies and cultures around sustainability. In particular, it was the higher engagement levels in BC and Québec's smaller communities that resulted in those provinces having the highest average rates of sustainability initiatives. This means it is more than simply the characteristics of large urban centres that match up with sustainability issues, but that there also may be unique factors existing in smaller Québec and BC communities, or that they are part of a broader provincial culture that encourages sustainability initiatives. A potential example of the leadership role that provinces can play through provincial policy can be seen with Québec's Cégep Vert program, which in turn played a significant role in influencing the uptake of sustainability initiatives at the institutional level. In the Québec education system, Cégeps are general and vocational colleges that offer two or three year programs bridging secondary school and university. Among all institution types (Universities, Colleges, and Cégeps), Cégeps had on average the highest sustainability initiative scores.

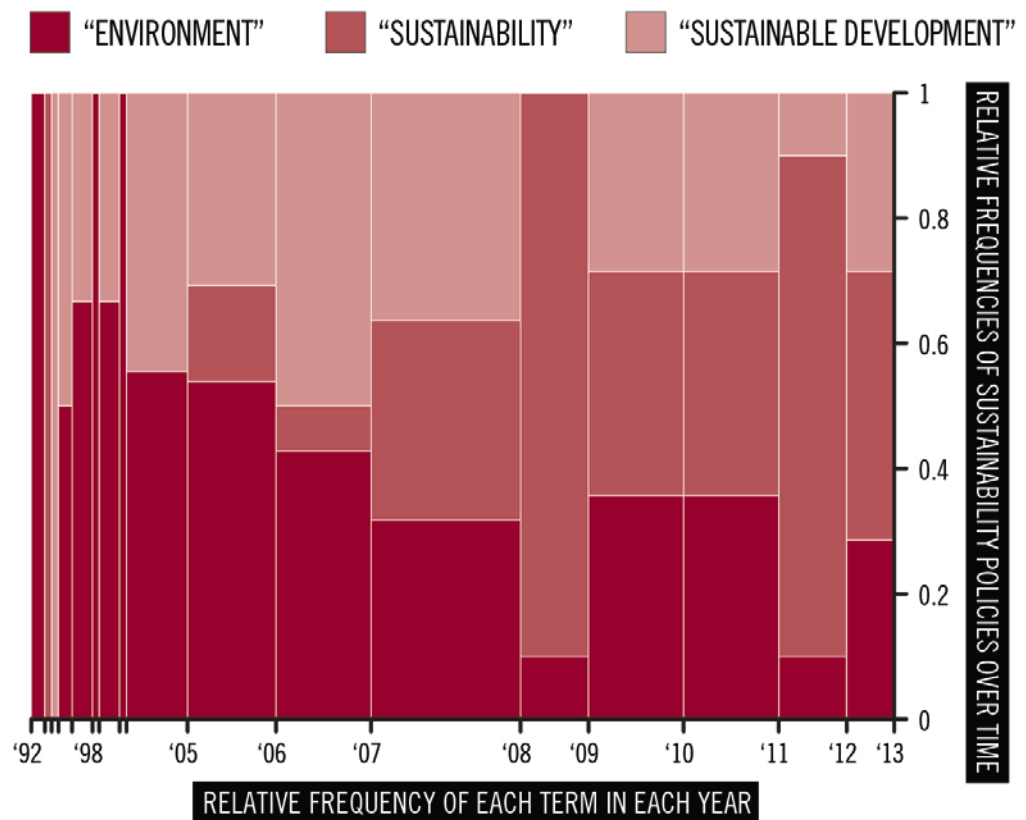
Shifting from 'environment' to 'sustainability'

The study also identified a change in terminology used in policies over time, with the term 'sustainable development' decreasing slightly in use over time, with a more substantial drop in the number of policies using the terminology of 'environment.' Since 2005, there was a marked increase in the use of the term 'sustainability' in policy. Use of the term also increased as community population size increased, as well as being the term of choice in Ontario and the three Prairie provinces.

Making decisions on sustainability

Beyond the high-level leadership initiatives researched in this study, other important elements of sustainability uptake in post-secondary institutions can include active student sustainability groups, sustainability champions in specific units of institutions, and operational innovations. These were not analyzed in this study, but will be included in the next phase of research that will explore how sustainability is being advanced in education policy and practice through site analyses. SEPN has also developed an interactive mapping tool that

enables viewers to move deeper into the research content via the SI scores of specific universities. Identifying these types of sustainability initiatives as well as the SI score rankings are important indicators for students and university leadership as they make decisions about enrollment, recruitment, and investment in further sustainability initiatives.



SEPN PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
 David Suzuki Foundation
 Learning for a Sustainable Future
 Sierra Youth Coalition

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
 Canadian Federation of Students
 Global Youth Education Network
 Métis National Council
 Sustainability Solutions Group

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