

Topic: rethinking the curriculum

Format: research lab

Attitude towards sustainability: the role of studying economics

According to multiple studies, economics students behave more selfish (s.a. Frey & Meier, 2003; Bauman & Rose, 2011; Wang & Juslin, 2012). Since altruism is an important psychological component to a pro-sustainability orientation (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2015), we investigate the following question: Is there a difference in attitude towards sustainability between economics students and non-economics students? To analyse this question in an empirical way, we developed an instrument to measure the attitude towards sustainability. This instrument is based on the themes of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to cover all aspects of sustainability. The attitude scale therefore consists of 34 statements, two statements for each SDG, using a seven-point Likert scale. The survey was presented to VUB-students of all faculties and all degrees. The data collection ran from the 5th October 2021 till the 14th January 2022 and comprises 2475 respondents of which 1991 remains after data cleaning.

To calculate the attitude towards sustainability of the respondents, we took the mean of the score on the seven-point Likert scale, ranging from -3 to 3, of the 34 statements of the attitude scale. The study found that the attitude towards sustainability of economics students and non-economics students differ significantly, $t(527.356) = 9.850$, $p < 0.001$. Economics students (mean = 0.5865) have a less positive attitude towards sustainability than non-economics students (mean = 1.0023). We also found that men (mean = 0.5493) have a significantly lower attitude towards sustainability than women (mean = 1.1580) and people who don't identify themselves as men or women (mean = 1.5572), $p < 0.001$. Since the economic programs contain proportionally more men, the question arises whether the lower attitude towards sustainability of the economics students is due to a different gender distribution compared to the non-economics students. After controlling for the effect of gender, the ancova test shows that the difference in attitude between economics and non-economics students is still significant $F(1, 1988) = 44.48$, $p < 0.001$.

Noteworthy is that economics students indicate that sustainability is more often discussed during their courses at the university than what non-economics students indicate, $t(1646) = -2.87$, $p = 0.002$. But at home or during their spare time economics students are less often consciously concerned with sustainability compared to non-economics students, $t(1646) = 5,008$, $p < 0.001$.

To stimulate interaction with the audience, I designed a document where the participants can fill in the same questionnaire as used in this research. Based on their responses, a radar chart is presented where they can see their score on the different dimensions of sustainability present in the questionnaire (People, Planet, Prosperity, Partnership and Peace) and their average attitude towards sustainability. Further, a quiz will be played to make a prognosis on the results of the survey. For example: Who has a more positive attitude towards sustainability? Economics students or non-economics students? During or after the quiz we can discuss the results by asking the participants: what could be the cause of the difference in attitude, could there be a manner to erase this difference, where should further research focus on, etc.

References

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