

## Sustainable Graduate Employability and Careers: A framework for future research

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### Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### Abstract

Higher education is increasingly recognized as pivotal in preparing graduates to address global challenges, encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions. However, while universities have emphasized sustainability through various activities, there's been limited attention to its integration with graduate employability. This gap may reflect neoliberal agendas shaping higher education, which prioritize economic returns. Calls to broaden the concept of employability to include sustainable outcomes persist, yet individualistic views anchored in economic return dominate. This paper adopts a systematic review approach to critically examine how different bodies of work address sustainability in relation to graduate employability and careers. In doing so we highlight diverse understandings of sustainability and consider implications for reconceptualizing graduate employability and career outcomes.

### Full paper

It is widely acknowledged that higher education has a role to play in creating sustainable futures through ensuring graduates are ready for addressing the global challenges that the world faces (including but not limited to environmental, economic and social factors) (QAA, 2020). This is not simply teaching students about sustainability and sustainable development but underpinned by an Education for Sustainable Development pedagogy, encouraging them to consider concepts of global citizenship, environmental stewardship, social justice, ethics and wellbeing in the context of their own discipline and in their future professional and personal lives both now and in the future (UNESCO, 2017).

To date universities have mainly approached sustainability through sustainability focused activities in teaching, research, campus operations and community engagement, with a broad range of approaches emerging (Bessant et al., 2015). Despite significant emphasis on sustainable development in Higher Education, there has been limited attention on the concept of sustainability and sustainable development in relation to graduate employability and careers. This perhaps reflects the broader neoliberal agendas that have shaped Higher Education and served to narrow the focus of employability to economic value and return (McArthur, 2011). Arguably the increased emphasis on achieving responsible and sustainable futures for all, might help to expand conceptualisations of “what good graduate outcomes look like” by moving beyond objective markers of success (wage level, occupational

classification, employment status) to broader conceptualisations which recognise difference and place value on how different careers contribute to a sustainable regional, national, global futures or not. Whilst there have been ongoing calls to reconceptualise graduate employability and outcomes to move beyond economic values and consider sustainable outcomes for individuals and wider society (Tomlinson, 2023; Hooley, 2016) -individualistic views anchored in economic return continue to dominate research, policy and practice.

An emerging body of research has begun to explore links between sustainability and graduate employability (Alimehmeti et al., 2024), in particular if increased sustainability literacy and the development of sustainable development competences can have positive impact on employment outcomes of graduates. However, focus has been on the relationship between curricula and 'objective' measures of employability rather than rethinking employability in the context of sustainability. In parallel, career development literature begun exploring the notion of sustainable careers, emphasizing factors like happiness, health, and productivity (de Vos et al., 2020). Additionally, the concept of sustainable career ecosystems has emerged to account for contextual factors impacting individuals (Donald et al., 2024), while career development practice responds to calls for integrating green guidance (Hooley, 2021). Meanwhile, economists (Albertson et al, 2021) warn of the global shrinkage and disruption to labour markets in order to move to greener economy. It is implied that policy commitments to net zero will require radical solutions, e.g, a move to a four day week to meet a reduced need for labour in developed countries. Such a vision of the future of work challenges traditional notions of graduate success, emphasizing the need for broader perspectives on graduate employability and career outcomes in a changing world.

Using a systematic review methodology (Tight, 2024, Pettigrew and Roberts, 2008) this paper will critically review how different bodies of work address the notion of sustainability in relation to graduate employability and careers. In doing so we will highlight the significant diversity in understanding of sustainability. We consider the implications of these different bodies of work for reconceptualising graduate employability and career. We present a framework for future research.

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