



Policy Brief



Social Responsibility
and Sustainability
Academic Network

Engaging Academics:

Investigating PhD participation in the SRS Academic Network

Summary

The interdisciplinary nature of Social Responsibility and Sustainability means that it is fundamentally important that academics in these fields have access to knowledge sharing and collaborative research opportunities¹. This is why the SRS academic network was set up. Through our own research we uncover that PhD students are currently being failed by the network. This Policy Brief will argue that there needs to be more effective, targeted promotion and enhancement of the network to better engage this group of academics. The University already has a reputation as a leader in sustainable development research, with more effective means of collaboration, this can only improve.

What is the network?

The Department of Social Responsibility and Sustainability (SRS) Academic Network aims to unite academics across all disciplines with an interest in any topic related to these areas. It currently takes the form of an email list that facilitates two-way conversations regarding possible research projects, funding opportunities, teaching, student placements, event organisation, or any other relevant theme. Such information originates from many sources, the purpose of the network is to collate, filter and target it, thereby saving PhD's time from their busy schedules.

Why is it important?

Networking enables the sharing of research with wider audiences thereby helping academics find new avenues of research, novel methodological approaches and/or suggestions of case studies². It also provides support and helps to guide University policy and practice³. The subject of sustainability does not fit neatly into any one discipline, therefore networking and inter-disciplinary research are key to advancing sustainable development.



Problems & Solutions from PhDs in the Network

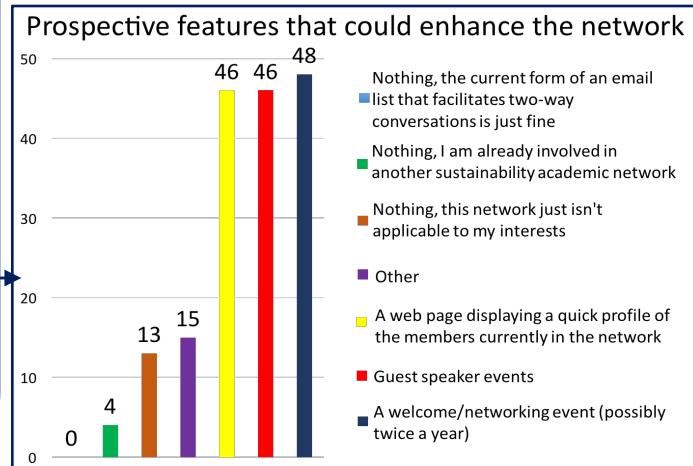
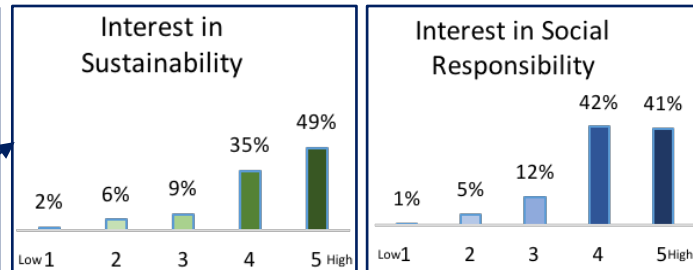
Of the University's 4500 PhDs, only 18 individuals are currently in the network, this illustrates a clear lack of engagement from this group since its inception. To gain an understanding of the reasons, we conducted 5 informal and semi-structured interviews with PhD students in a range of disciplines who were already part of the network. One of the main outcomes was confusion over the use of the term 'academic', with many respondents unsure if this applied to students as opposed to lecturers or researchers. While they approved of the email list, they also felt that this alone was not enough. Most expressed apprehension about sending an email to network members they didn't know. Some were unsure about the nature of network; whether it was strictly formal, or was more informal chat permitted? Ultimately, 4 main ideas emerged as desirable features:

- A web page with personal profiles so that they could see who was in the network
- A social event held once or twice a year to welcome new members and meet up with existing ones
- Guest speaker events that would also allow some face-to face meetings
- Include Alumni

Survey

A survey was then conducted to gather the opinions of the wider PhD student population on their feelings towards the network

- **132** responses from **12** different schools
- Interest in both social responsibility and sustainability were **very high**, even though only **1 in 3 students** had PhD's related to these topics
- **88%** of PhDs had never heard of the network
- **25%** of were interested in joining, with a further **50%** open to the idea
- **Large numbers** supported the ideas put forward by existing members to enhance the current network
 - **No one** felt that the current form of the network was adequate
- There is a competing network: **GESA**, but **only 11** people indicated they are part of it



Reasons for not joining

Of the respondents who indicated no interest in joining, a recurring reason was lack of time. This is understandable as PhD students are usually very busy people, sometimes fitting their studies in with raising families, holding down jobs etc. They may anticipate that being in the network brings too much superfluous information, but it can also provide details of opportunities that they might otherwise miss. The University of Cambridge has subdivided its sustainability network into different categories. If SRS did likewise, then PhD's may be more likely to get involved if they feel the information and research opportunities were more focused towards them. Cambridge also incorporated a subsidiary alumni network⁴, as suggested by the PhDs in the interviews. It provides a vital link with the world outside academia, where research regarding sustainability can be most effective.



Recommendations

Based on the evidence from the research carried out, it is clear that the network needs:

- More **effective promotion targeted specifically at PhD students**
- To be **expanded and employ more features**:
 - The most important addition is a **web page** which should clearly explain how PhD's have a role in the network
 - It should contain the **personal profiles** of those in the network
 - It should split to include **areas of interest** as this would enable busy users to limit their notifications
 - Organise occasional guest speaker and social **events**
- To consider the **inclusion of alumni** to provide an important link to business and industry, either as part of the existing setup or as a subsidiary network

These relatively easy-to-implement solutions can make a big difference by boosting network size and productivity, helping academics collaborate in the quest for sustainable development.

References

¹Jordan, K., 2014. Academics and their online networks: Exploring the role of academic social networking sites. *First Monday*, 19(11).

²Pacheco-Vega, R., 2012. *On the importance of networking in academic settings*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.raulpacheco.org/2012/08/on-the-importance-of-networking-in-academic-settings/> [Accessed 2 April 2016].

³Ramírez Montoya, M. S., 2012. Academic networks and knowledge construction. *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 70(251), pp. 27-43.

⁴Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2016. *Alumni*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/alumni> [Accessed 3 April 2016].