Student Research Report

Fostering Student Engagement with the AMS Sustainability Action Plan (ASAP)

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Executive Summary

The current UBC AMS Sustainability Strategy lacks goals that the contemporary student body prioritizes, and can be improved by the integration of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). This study aimed to obtain student feedback to analyze the focus areas most valued by those the AMS represents, and what information dissemination methods students prefer with regards to sustainability progress within the AMS. A Qualtrics survey was distributed via social media and email newsletters, and was completed by 93 UBC students and alumni. The survey included questions asking participants to report familiarity with sustainability focus areas, AMS sustainability initiatives, the UNSDGs, and their perceived importance of sustainability focus areas. Participants were also asked to report preferred information dissemination methods. After conducting paired-sample *t* tests, we found that students did not place greater importance on focus areas that directly impacted student wellbeing, such as economic and social sustainability, but found that students were not familiar with these focus areas and current AMS sustainability initiatives. We also observed that participants preferred the most convenient dissemination methods. These findings suggest that lack of familiarity with sustainability focus areas may impact their perceived importance, and if information is made easily accessible, students are more likely to engage.

Fostering Student Engagement with the AMS Sustainability Action Plan

Introduction

An extensive literature review of the sustainability plans of Canadian university student societies was conducted to assess the inclusion of both student input and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) into the framework of existing sustainability plans (United Nations, 2015). The initial intention of this literature review was to generate ideas about ways of engaging students in the creation of the AMS Sustainability Action Plan (ASAP) and of embedding the UNSDGs into the ASAP. However, this literature review revealed that none of the comparative student societies in focus stated either the inclusion of the UNSDGs or of student engagement in the creation of their sustainability plans. Of the top 10 doctoral universities in Canada according to Maclean's 2020 rankings, which includes prominent universities such as the University of Toronto, McGill University, University of Alberta, McMaster University, University of British Columbia, and several others, UBC's Alma Mater Society (AMS) is currently the only student union with a student-informed sustainability action plan (DSU, 2017; FAÉCUM, 2018; Laurent, 2018; Maclean's, 2019; MSU, 2018; Queen's AMS, 2017; SSMU, 2018; SU, 2018; UASU, 2011; UTSU, 2019; Western USC, 2018). Additionally, several societies do not provide any mention of sustainability plans outside of brief information about sustainability committees (DSU, 2017; FAÉCUM, 2018; Western USC, 2018).

While this literature review did not provide new idea generation for the content of the ASAP, a variety of the current goals already included in the ASAP were found in existing sustainability plans, such as the mention of providing sustainability workshops or events to engage students with sustainability concepts (SSMU, 2018, UTSU, 2019). Additionally, this literature review provided our client with a fundamental understanding of the broad context in which the AMS is operating, and the unprecedented inclusion of both the UNSDGs and student involvement in the ASAP.

Additional literature was reviewed to foster an understanding of the inclusion of the UNSDGs into organizational frameworks, such as into the curriculum and mechanisms of the University of Toronto. The University of Toronto (as an institution) analyzes existing co-curricular and extracurricular activities and categorizes which of the 17 UNSDGs each activity addresses (Brugmann et al., 2019). This linkage between existing activities and the UNSDGs then illustrates the strengths, gaps, and areas of opportunity in the university's programming: a concept which can be applied to the ASAP to evaluate the quality of inclusion of the UNSDGs.

In formulating the new ASAP, this study aimed to obtain student feedback to research what sustainability issues students at UBC value most, and what information dissemination methods UBC students prefer in regards to hearing about sustainability progress within the AMS. Research indicates individuals tend to engage in temporal discounting, where they postpone losses to the future, and are more invested in focus areas that have direct, instantaneous consequences to themselves (Rogers & Bazerman, 2008; Zhao, 2020, slide 26). Individuals are also less likely to act upon environmental issues if they lack attribution of immediacy and immorality, and more likely to react to issues that are perceived as having instantaneous, imminent, and immoral impacts (Zhao, 2020, slide 18). On top of this, people tend to participate more in sustainability initiatives if there are fewer perceived obstacles to participation, or if the initiative is more convenient to the participant (DiGiacomo et al., 2018).
Based on these psychological insights, we hypothesized:

1) Participants would place greater importance on focus areas of the ASAP that directly impact student wellbeing, which we operationalized as economic sustainability, social sustainability, increasing student access, and increasing organization collaborations.
2) Students would prefer information methods that are convenient and have the least perceived barrier to accessibility, such as progress report via email, or a display in an AMS space.

Methods

Participants. A Qualtrics survey was distributed with the goal of reaching the widest (UBC) participant sample possible, including students and faculty, in order to collect data generalizable to those the AMS represents and serves. The survey was distributed through email newsletters and social media pages, such as Facebook groups titled "UBC Class of 2020". During the timespan the survey was live (7 weeks), we received 102 responses. After excluding 9 incomplete datasets, we retained a sample size of ninety three (62 female, 30 male, 1 identified as 'Other'), from 16 to 64 years old (75.5% in the 20-29 age range), with 46% in 4th year or above, and 21% in 3rd year ($M = 3.06$). Frequency of use varied widely, with 31.4% using AMS services 0-1 days per week, 41.2% using AMS services 2-4 days per week, and 26.5% using AMS services 5-7 days per week.

Conditions. Aiming to research whether students would place greater importance on focus areas that directly impact student wellbeing, we divided focus areas into two categories: those with indirect impacts on student wellbeing and those with direct impacts on student wellbeing. Focus areas participants had to rate perceived importance on included: Environmental Sustainability (within AMS facilities), Environmental Sustainability (regarding food services), Economic Sustainability, Social Sustainability, Increasing Student Access, and Increasing Organization Collaborations. Social Sustainability, Economic Sustainability, Increasing Student Access, and Increasing Organization Collaborations were classified as focus areas with direct impacts on student wellbeing, and included examples such as providing more affordable food options and reducing stigma around marginalized AMS services like the Sexual Assault Support Centre (SASC). Environmental Sustainability (facilities) and Environmental Sustainability (food) were operationalized as focus areas with indirect impacts on student wellbeing.

Measures. The Qualtrics survey collected several points of information. Firstly, basic demographic information was collected, including age, gender, year of study, UBC affiliation, and frequency of use of AMS services, such as Speakeasy, Safewalk, or the Nest. A set of questions were then asked assessing current familiarity with AMS sustainability initiatives, UNSDGs, environmental sustainability and social sustainability. Participants responded on a 10-point familiarity rating scale. Although 10-point scales rely on participants to make precise decisions with less gradation definition, we opted for the 10-point scale considering the fact that many people are familiar with the notion of rating "out of 10" (Dawkes, 2008). Next, we assessed the participants' perceived importance of the proposed ASAP sustainability goals, specifically, the six focus areas. Importance was assessed on a 10-point rating scale, with a score of 1 graded as *'Not at all important'* and a score of 10 graded as *'Extremely important'*. Then, a multiple-choice question asking for preferred information dissemination methods was posed, where participants could select multiple preferred dissemination methods. This was followed by

a *'Y/N'* question gauging willingness to provide ongoing feedback to the AMS. Finally, an open response text box asked for any other feedback pertaining to the project.

Procedure. The survey was mainly distributed through online email newsletters sent from the AMS to all students in the student body. The survey was also distributed through various online student groups on the social media platform Facebook, such as "UBC Class of 2020". Initially, in-person survey response collection was planned to take place in the AMS nest to increase the sample size and receive feedback from students that are most affected by changes in AMS policy. Unfortunately, due to the changing circumstances as a result of COVID-19, in-person responses could not be collected. Therefore, all participants voluntarily filled out the survey on their own time through the links sent out virtually, and the survey took roughly five minutes to complete. Participants gave informed consent before continuing to the rest of the survey. Because participants were left to fill the survey on their own, several survey responses were either incomplete or inappropriate; as such, we discarded said entries and excluded them from our data analysis. The survey accepted responses from February 6, 2020 to March 24, 2020, for a total of 47 total days.

Results

Hypothesis 1. To explore our first hypothesis, the potential ASAP focus areas data were aggregated into two categories: areas that have a *direct* impact on student wellbeing and areas that have an *indirect* impact on student wellbeing. Variables were categorized by the content of their descriptions on the Qualtrics survey, in which *direct* variables clearly stated that they benefited students economic or general wellbeing (Appendix B). A two-tailed paired-sample T-test was then conducted in JASP (Version 0.11.1) between the two aggregate variables to determine any statistical significance between the aggregate means.

The results of the paired sample T-test failed to reject the null hypothesis, and therefore showed no statistical significance in the results for *direct (M = 7.65, SD = 2.26)* and indirect (*M = 8.40, SD = 1.99*), conditions; $t(185) = +/-1.98$, $p = 0.05$. Therefore, we cannot conclude that students prefer ASAP focus areas that directly impact their wellbeing.

Hypothesis 2. Our hypothesis on information dissemination methods preferred by students was tested with a multiple-choice question in which students selected multiple methods to which they preferred to receive AMS sustainability information. As participants were allowed to select multiple methods, we counted the total number of selections made for each choice survey option and accumulated the totals to find the most preferred methods of information dissemination. As we hypothesized, the more convenient methods of email updates and physical displays in student union buildings were selected the most, with 64 and 54 votes for either respectively. The option for updates through the official AMS website was also frequently selected, receiving 51 votes. AMS sustainability events, as the most inconvenient information dissemination method with the most barriers to accessibility, had the fewest selections with 31 votes, supporting our hypothesis that more convenient dissemination methods would be preferred. Additionally, we included an open-ended option for participants to provide their own suggestions for other methods. Through this open-ended section, participants generated options such as social media updates (12 responses), posters (2), in-lecture announcements (2), and magazine and student newspaper updates (2). Through the majority of responses selecting methods that had fewer accessibility barriers and are therefore more convenient, we found support for our second hypothesis.

Additional Results. In addition to exploring our hypotheses, we performed various post-hoc analyses of data trends that may be of interest to our client. Firstly, our data set regarding *familiarity with concepts* suggested that students reported lower *familiarity with current AMS initiatives* than familiarity with the other polled concepts. This lack of familiarity with AMS sustainability initiatives indicates a precedence for increasing student access to information, and we therefore decided to explore the statistical significance of this data. To analyze this, we conducted a Repeated Measures ANOVA (RMANOVA) to test the significance between familiarity levels. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated and therefore, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used. In addition to the RMANOVA, a post-hoc Bonferroni test was conducted to reduce type 1 error as suggested by JASP. The RMANOVA and Bonferroni correction indicated statistical significance between the means of *all* familiarity variables ($t_{(92)}$=+/-1.67, p = 0.05), indicating that we can reject the null hypothesis and state that *familiarity with AMS sustainability initiatives* is significantly lower than the other three values.
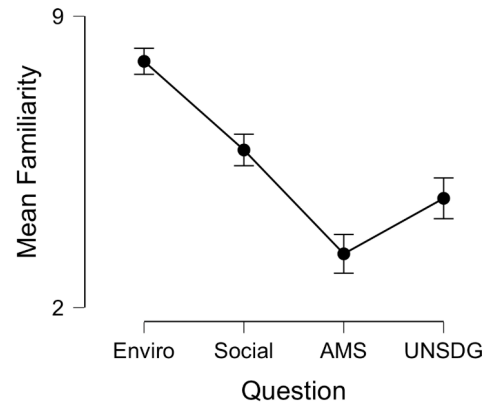
   Secondly, a correlation matrix was run between all of the quantifiable variables (Appendix B). Several correlations of interest were found. Among them was correlation between the reported familiarity with environmental sustainability and a number of the concepts gauged, including; familiarity with social sustainability (r=0.47), familiarity with UN sustainable development goals (r=0.53), and perceived importance of the following; environmental sustainability relating to facility operations (r=0.46), environmental sustainability relating to food (r=0.26), and social sustainability (r=0.24). This would suggest with greater self-reported knowledge of sustainability, participants also placed greater importance on the proposed ASAP goals. Additionally, there was a small but significant correlation (r=0.21) between familiarity with the UNSDGs and the familiarity of the current AMS sustainability policies. This may suggest that participants who are interested in broader sustainability goals are more interested in the practices of the university.

   Finally, 68% of respondents stated interest in providing ongoing feedback to the AMS regarding sustainability; suggesting that implementing a convenient student feedback interface would encourage continuing student engagement in AMS sustainability initiatives (Appendix B).

Discussion

   The main objective of our study is to gather feedback from students to examine and determine the focus areas most important by those the AMS represents, as well as the information dissemination methods students prefer the most with reference to sustainability initiatives currently being practiced by the AMS. The results of our study suggest that students are unaware of current AMS sustainability initiatives. However, this cannot be attributed to lack of familiarity with sustainability in general, as familiarity with current AMS sustainability initiatives was statistically lower than familiarity with current UN Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, students care about AMS Sustainability Action Plan focus areas that may not have a direct impact on them but are favourable for everyone, such as the environmental sustainability of AMS buildings and food services. Our study has two important limitations that

need to be discussed in order to further understand and create improvement for the same study. Firstly, additional measures or questions regarding which sustainability focus areas participants recognized as most directly impacting their social and economic wellbeing should be included. Another limitation of our study is the limited population of our sample, which was recruited through social media (such as Facebook *UBC Class of 2020* group page), the AMS newsletter, and peers. Given the small sample size, it is challenging to create a more complex suggestion for AMS Sustainability Action Plan that is favourable for the over 50,000 students UBC Vancouver has (UBC, 2019). For future studies, we recommend putting a greater emphasis on information dissemination, especially given the lack of knowledge around current AMS sustainability initiatives. An experimental study can be conducted to test the efficacy of different methods of information dissemination. Finally, to keep the Sustainability Action Plan informed by students, we suggest conducting focus groups with samples from the student body to continuously collect feedback on sustainability initiatives.

Recommendations

       Most students are unfamiliar with the AMS's sustainability initiative, which suggests that the methods of information dissemination the AMS is currently using is ineffective. First, convenience should have a great factor in creating the AMS Sustainability Action Plan because students prefer methods that can be accessed easily and readily available. Although the AMS sends out an email newsletter to the student body at the beginning of each month, we found that it is not the most suitable platform when reaching out to students for three important reasons: a) the newsletter provides an immense amount of information regarding everything AMS has done, is currently doing, and its future projects, b) it does not focus on one certain topic, and c) it is sent as a mass email, which usually goes through as a spam message rather than the primary mailbox. Social media is one of the most ideal mediums for information dissemination given that most students are usually more active on their social media platforms. Second, AMS should have resources that can provide students information with respect to ongoing sustainability initiatives and encourage feedback and discussions. As mentioned earlier, many students are unaware of the sustainability initiatives of the AMS, but the study suggests that students are willing to contribute feedback and ideas that are beneficial for everyone.

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Appendix A: *Qualtrics Survey*

The AMS is currently drafting a Sustainability Action Plan (ASAP) which aims to create a comprehensive outline that acts as a vision for the Society to be a leader in sustainability. The ASAP works to combine sociocultural, economic, and environmental factors of sustainability into an actionable vision that intersects with AMS priorities involving advocacy, operations, and student services.

This document will update the current Student Driven Sustainability Strategy to create actionable goals that apply to all aspects of AMS operations. Additionally, the ASAP will incorporate the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a framework from which to formulate key priorities.

Student input is integral to the creation and direction of this vision, and we would greatly appreciate your input regarding the focus areas, goals, and methods of conveying information to the student body.

This survey will take less than 5 minutes to complete.

(Consent form omitted)

Consent

- ◯ I consent to participate in this study
- ◯ I do not consent to participate in this study

Which of the following categories best describes you?

- ◯ UBC Student
- ◯ UBC Faculty Member
- ◯ UBC Staff
- ◯ UBC Alumni
- ◯ Other (please specify) [   ]

If you are a UBC student, what year of study are you currently in?

- ◯ 1st
- ◯ 2nd
- ◯ 3rd
- ◯ 4th or above

Which of the following age categories apply to you?

- ◯ 16-19
- ◯ 20-29
- ◯ 30-64
- ◯ 65 and above

What gender do you identify as?

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Other

How often do you utilize AMS facilities or services?

- ◯ 0-1 day per week
- ◯ 2-4 days per week
- ◯ 5-7 days per week

On a scale of 1 - 10, please rate your familiarity with the given topics

Not at all					Somewhat				Very familiar	
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

How familiar are you with concepts of environmental sustainability?

How familiar are you with concepts of social sustainability?

How familiar are you with the AMS' current sustainability initiatives?

How familiar are you with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

On a scale of 1 - 10, how important are the following focus areas to you?

Not at all important   Moderately important   Extremely important

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Increasing the environmental sustainability of AMS buildings and operations through energy use, waste management, greywater recycling etc..

Improving economic sustainability by advocating for affordability of education costs, student housing, and by providing affordable food options.

Pursuing social sustainability by increasing policies and resources available to support student safety, health, and rights (existing programs include SASC, Safewalk, Vice, etc.)

Increasing student access to AMS services by increasing the availability of skill development programs and reducing barriers to stigmatized services.

Improving the environmental sustainability of AMS food services through local/ethical sourcing, reduction of single-use items, container sharing initiatives, etc..

Increasing collaborations with organizations that aim to promote a better quality of life for students such as SEEDS, USI, C+P

Do you have any other focus areas/goals/initiatives that you would like to see the AMS implement into their Sustainability Action Plan?

Which of the following mediums do you think would be effective ways for the AMS to provide information about their sustainability initiatives and progress.

☐ A progress report via email
☐ A display in the upcoming sustainability hub in the AMS LIFE Building
☐ Reported on the AMS website
☐ Through AMS hosted sustainability events
☐ Other mediums (please provide any ideas you have)

Would you be willing to provide ongoing feedback about the direction of AMS sustainability initiatives if a feedback platform was easily available?

○ Yes, I would be interested in providing feedback
○ No

Would you be interested in attending a focus group session regarding the ASAP in March?
(If yes, please provide your email for updates)

○ Yes, I would be interested in attending a focus group
○ No thanks

Appendix B: *Results*

Direct and Indirect variables:

Direct		Indirect
Economic Sustainability Improving economic sustainability by advocating for affordability of education costs, student housing, and by providing affordable food options.	**Social Sustainability** Pursuing social sustainability by increasing policies and resources available to support student safety, health, and rights (existing programs include SASC, Safewalk, Vice, etc.)	**Environmental (Buildings) Sustainability** Increasing the environmental sustainability of AMS buildings and operations through energy use, waste management, greywater recycling, etc
Increasing Access to Services Increasing student access to AMS services by increasing the availability of skill development programs and reducing barriers to stigmatized services.	**Organization Collaboration** Increasing collaborations with organizations that aim to promote a better quality of life for students such as SEEDS, USI, C+P.	**Environmental (Food) Sustainability** Improving the environmental sustainability of AMS food services through local/ethical sourcing, reduction of single-use items, container sharing initiatives, etc.

Paired sample T-test Results:

Variable	N	Mean	SD	SE
Direct	372	7.653	2.263	0.117
Indirect	186	8.403	1.985	0.146

Hypotheses	Test	t	df	p
$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$, $H_0: \mu_{dif} = 0$	Direct -Indirect	-1.183	185	0.238

RMANOVA and Bonferroni Results: (Summarized)

Level 1	Level 2	Mean Difference	SE	t	p Bonferroni	t critical (df=92, p = 0.05)
AMS	Environmental	-4.624	0.263	-17.610	< 0.001	+/- 1.67
AMS	Social	-2.495	0.303	-8.224	< 0.001	+/- 1.67
AMS	UNSDGs	-1.333	0.368	-3.626	0.003	+/- 1.67

Correlation Matrix Between Familiarity and Importance Variables

**Correlation Matrix**

Correlation Matrix

		fam_environmental	fam_social	fam_AMScurrent	fam_UNgoals	imp_environmentalfac	imp_economic	imp_social	imp_studentaccess	imp_environmentalfood
fam_environmental	Pearson's r	—								
	p-value	—								
fam_social	Pearson's r	0.465 ***	—							
	p-value	<.001	—							
fam_AMScurrent	Pearson's r	0.165	0.202	—						
	p-value	0.114	0.052	—						
fam_UNgoals	Pearson's r	0.530 ***	0.497 ***	0.211 *	—					
	p-value	<.001	<.001	0.042	—					
imp_environmentalfac	Pearson's r	0.461 ***	0.047	0.049	0.080	—				
	p-value	<.001	0.657	0.639	0.443	—				
imp_economic	Pearson's r	0.259 *	0.172	−0.036	0.062	0.140	—			
	p-value	0.012	0.100	0.731	0.556	0.181	—			
imp_social	Pearson's r	0.240 *	0.234 *	0.079	0.110	0.376 ***	0.547 ***	—		
	p-value	0.021	0.024	0.454	0.294	<.001	<.001	—		
imp_studentaccess	Pearson's r	0.061	0.143	0.107	0.058	0.181	0.497 ***	0.676 ***	—	
	p-value	0.560	0.170	0.306	0.579	0.082	<.001	<.001	—	
imp_environmentalfood	Pearson's r	0.260 *	0.063	0.054	0.064	0.658 ***	−0.017	0.252 *	0.278 **	—
	p-value	0.012	0.550	0.606	0.539	<.001	0.872	0.015	0.007	—
imp_orgcollabs	Pearson's r	0.223 *	0.161	0.064	0.195	0.468 ***	0.317 **	0.526 ***	0.388 ***	0.344 ***
	p-value	0.031	0.122	0.544	0.061	<.001	0.002	<.001	<.001	<.001

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Preferred Information Dissemination Methods Results:

Progress Report via Email	64 votes
Display in AMS Space	54 votes
Webpage on AMS Website	51 votes
Sustainability Event	31 votes
Other	4 votes

Preferred Information Dissemination Methods
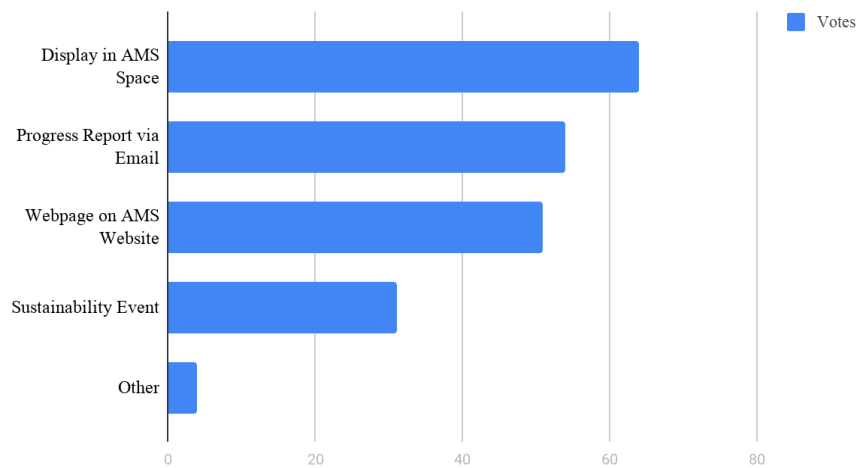
Interest in providing ongoing feedback results:

Interest in providing ongoing feedback

Number of Responses