



Key Findings

The researcher used materiality principle to identify key SRS issues that UoE should be focusing on in their upcoming SRS strategy. The following five topics have been identified through reading internal department documents and analysing collected data from interviews, the surveys, and the workshop that were conducted for the purpose of this research:

1. Learning and Teaching.
2. Community Engagement.
3. Responsibility.
4. Investments.
5. Climate Change .

UoE at a Glance

Year of Establishment	1582
Num. of Students	36,491
Num. of Staff	4,152
QS Ranking	19 World Ranking
Website	www.ed.ac.uk

An Evidence – Based Approach to Understanding the Evolving Role of Social Responsibility & Sustainability in United Kingdom Universities.

“Where do we go from here? “

The purpose of this brief is to summarize and report the research results of the author’s dissertation. The presented document will provide a background on the studied topic, the research questions that were attempted to answer and the outcomes of the study. Furthermore, the brief will focus on answering the question of What material issues should the University of Edinburgh’s (UoE) new Social Responsibility and Sustainability (SRS) Strategy address?

Background

The dissertation attempts to understand the relationship holistically between universities and SRS by combining primary and secondary data concerning universities’ relationships with CSR, Sustainable Development, and Sustainable Reporting. The study examines the impact of SRS efforts have on universities, defines challenges these efforts face, and identifies topics to recommend as the focus of sustainable Reporting by universities. Furthermore, the study considers whether universities should use international standards and metrics of the SRS field or develop their own. Lastly, five key topics are identified and recommended – using materiality approach – to be the focus of University of Edinburgh’s forthcoming SRS strategy.

Research Questions:

- What challenges hinder universities’ ability to adapt in SRS?
 - What SRS topics should universities focus on in their SR?
 - Should universities use international standards and metrics in their sustainability reports?
- What material issues should the University of Edinburgh’s new Social Responsibility and Sustainability Strategy address?

Methodology

To understand the current state of universities regarding SRS, sustainable development, and sustainable reporting and to identify UoE key environmental, social, economic, and governance issues, a qualitative research approach has been employed. Qualitative approach is used when the research aim is to find information based on individual experiences. The approach helps in answering the what, how, and why questions and in studying cases in their habitats by observing how they operate in their own environments.

Sample Characteristics

The information for the dissertation study is collected from three selected universities, hence, comparative case studies approach was utilized to understand their similarities and differences to produce an outcome that can be generalised.

The universities selected for the interviews were based on an extensive desk research. The selected universities—Manchester (UoM), and Oxford Brooks University (OBU), in addition to UoE—have been referenced in different articles concerning their role in SD and SR and using the materiality principle. Their communities consist of tens of thousands of students and staff, where they have core SRS departments with an average of ten employees in each.

Research Instruments - Data Collection Methods

- Secondary Data was collected from published articles, reports, books, websites, and internal documents provided by the SRSD at UoE.
- Primary data were collected from the semi-structured interviews and from analysing the surveys and the workshop.
 - The survey sample included 3,866 respondents divided between 2,006 students and 1,652 staff.
 - The workshop consisted of 80 international students taking part in the “Universitas 21 Undergraduate Research Conference”. The workshop was held at UoE where the focus was on “What Is a Socially Responsible University?”

Data Analysis - Content & Thematic Analysis

For the purpose of the dissertation, content analysis was used, where different codes were identified from the transcripts, which then compiled into different categories.

Those categories were analysed thematically by formulating themes and sub-themes from the categories in relation to the literature review.

Materiality Principle was used as the main principle for identifying the key five SRS topics as shown in the following page.

Materiality Principle

Materiality is multi-stakeholder approach that is used in defining important sustainability topics for reporting. The importance of the approach can be seen in the number of indicators used for social, economic, and environmental dimensions. GRI has defined materiality in sustainable reporting: “The report should cover aspects that: reflect the organization’s significant economic, environmental and social impacts; or substantively influence the assessments and decisions of stakeholders.”

The approach has been criticized on two main aspects. Firstly, the difficulty in dividing sustainability issues and viewing them as stand-alone, where it is very possible that sustainability topics can be directly connected to others presented in different categories. The second criticism is that the process is subjective since different stakeholders can have different views on sustainability issues. Despite that, the approach is highly acclaimed for ensuring the satisfaction of the stakeholders while discussing and developing recommendations for important sustainability issues.

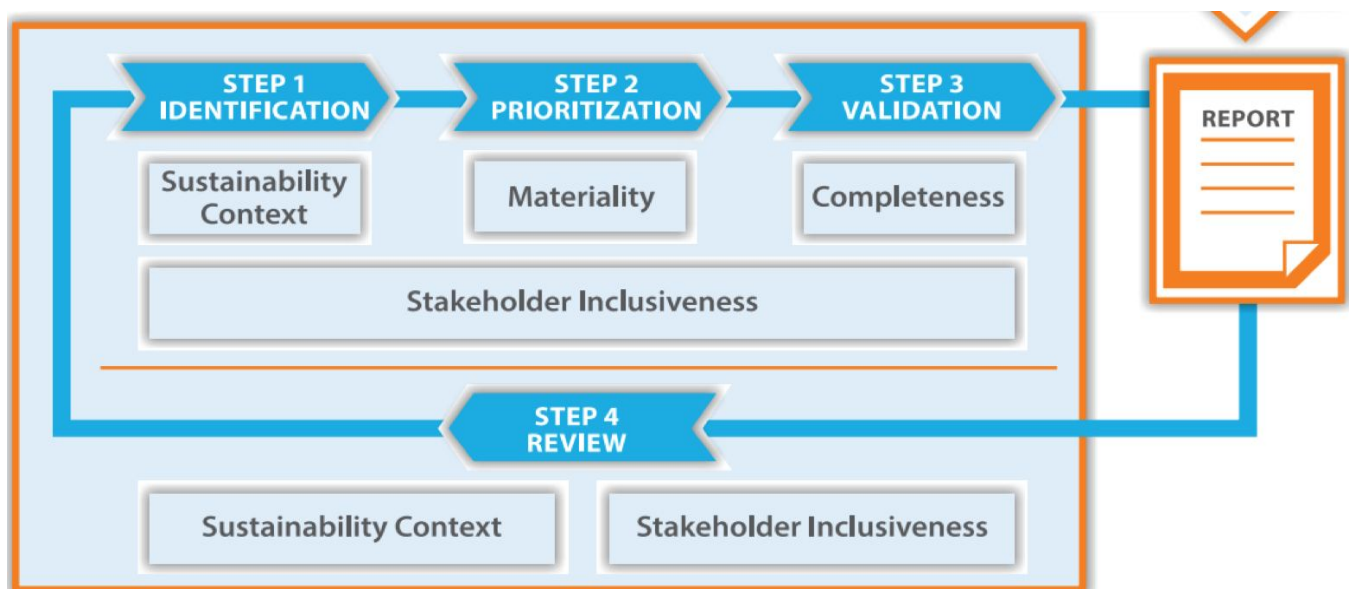


Figure 1: Process for Defining Material Topics.

Research Findings

The research shows that challenges hindering SRS efforts in higher education include difficulties in obtaining buy-in from senior management, lack of coordination between universities’ internal and external stakeholders, and the problem of recognizing the value of SRS at universities. Findings point to the importance of clear communication processes and using internal and external policies to support sustainable development in academic settings. In addition, the research demonstrates that universities would benefit from the creation of an external platform that provides guidance on standards and metrics that universities’ SRS departments can follow.



Figure 15: The identified environmental, economic, social and governance issues that University of Edinburgh's new Social Responsibility and Sustainability Strategy should address. Source: The researcher findings

Key SRS Topics

To start with, the most frequently discussed topic is **Learning and Teaching**. It is considered the core purpose of universities. Based on the analyses, more investment should be directed towards research by integrating 21st century challenges, whether they are related to refugee crises, human rights, natural disasters, etc. Furthermore, there should be better coordination among the different schools to work on solutions that can impact sustainability on the local and global levels. Moreover, universities need to build memorandums of understanding with the PS to work together on combating SRS challenges by utilizing each other as resources. In regards to teaching, universities need to better incorporate SRS topics in their disciplines and develop introductory SRS courses. In addition, they should incorporate sustainability values in the labs and create opportunities for research that focuses on finding solutions for SRS issues. These activities will increase awareness and better support SD.

The second topic is **Community Engagement**. It can be conveyed from what has been discussed that the universities' engagement with the communities they operate within will be a great asset in building sustainable futures. It is important to focus on widening participation with local schools and institutions by building initiatives and funds that support students from disadvantaged backgrounds (internships, participate in universities' research, provide lifelong-learning opportunities), working on environmental projects, improving the quality of public events, and working on innovative awareness campaigns are a few of many activities that can be achieved. This will be a key in value creation and can support SRS Departments on campuses by expanding their reach. Furthermore, it may be beneficial in increasing student and staff satisfaction by engaging them in voluntary work that supports their communities.

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The third topic is **Responsibility**. It is the combination of the work on supply chain, fair trade, and human rights. Universities should expand their operations by building clear laws and regulations governing the type of businesses with which they can work, increasing the awareness to SRS, and supporting businesses to change their ways of doing things if they realize it has a value such as increasing their profits. Universities need to invest more in equality and diversity on and off campus, incorporating clear laws and regulations concerning hiring and admission, which support the inclusion of minorities and females. Furthermore, there should be initiatives that focus on minimizing bullying and harassment on and off campus. Lastly, it can be seen from the workshops and the surveys that universities need to focus on providing healthier and more varied food choices on campus, increase fair-trade products and work on sustainable computing

The fourth topic is **Investments**. Having clear policies and support for projects that protect the environment and the communities is of an importance to demonstrate how universities are adapting and committing to SRS. In relation to that, UoE should work on minimizing the impact of human-rights issues associated with the universities' investment portfolio by building clear bylaws. Working on this topic, the same as on any of those mentioned, can be used to gain buy-in and convince senior management to expand on SRS. This approach will not only support the development of sustainable future, but it will contribute to minimizing expenditures on the long run.

Lastly, **Climate Change** cannot be ignored. Protecting the environment is a key in SRS adaption and growth. UoE is committed to becoming zero carbon by 2040 (The University of Edinburgh , 2016). Moreover, according to recent UoE surveys, students and staff are more vigilant to the need to cut down carbon emissions. Working on environment-supporting activities by incorporating them in the previous mentioned topics will aid value creation, increase awareness, and help SRSDs in reaching their intended goals.

