Sustainability Education at HKUST

2024 Sustainability Course Evaluation Report

Last updated: April 2025
Report developed by the Sustainability Education Advisory Group

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The strategic vision for HKUST is to become a regional leader in sustainability education with a global outreach. As an on-going effort to achieve the Sustainable education goal of ensuring that *all students gain a solid understanding of sustainability concepts and graduate with the capacity and commitment to solve problems locally and globally*, The Sustainability Education Advisory Group (SEAG) has been conducting this analysis annually since 2018 to identify opportunities and gaps in the existing provision of sustainability-relevant courses (process described in Appendix A), providing a basis for the development of sustainability education across Schools and programs.

This report documents the on-going efforts of Sustainability Education Advisory Group (SEAG) to achieve this goal, for assessing the breadth and depth of sustainability education across the curriculum at HKUST. This report includes:

1. Updated results of the sustainability coverage across the 2023/24 Undergraduate (UG) course catalogue;
2. Updated sustainability course inventory; and,
3. Key findings and recommendations for moving forward.

Highlights from the report:

- 94% of graduates had enrolled in at least 1 sustainability course during their undergraduate studies.
- In 2023/24, Sustainability Focused or Related courses represented roughly 11% of the *approved new* courses.
- By distribution, all schools and most departments included at least one listed course.
- In terms of exposure to sustainability concepts, we note that 66% of recent graduates are leaving with a "strong" exposure (completing two or more Sustainability Focused courses). 28% of all graduates completed at least 1 course that is related to Sustainability. Only 6% of students graduated with no course exposure to sustainability, which remains consistent with the last years.
- A total of 91 newly offered courses were reviewed and an addition of ten new courses were added to the Sustainability course inventory, representing 11% of the newly offered course in the academic year of 2023/24.

Evaluation of Sustainability Exposure

With the help from Academic Registry (ARO), we retrieved the enrolment information for recent graduates (defined as any students who graduated between the fall of 2023 and the summer of 2024), and we mapped that information against the 95 courses that were identified as "sustainability focused" and "sustainability related." The information was then examined in order to determine how much exposure students at HKUST had to sustainability principles.

The courses are distributed somewhat evenly by level (Table 1).

	Sustainability Focused	Sustainability Related
1000 level	19	10
2000 level	15	4
3000 level	12	10
4000 level	14	11
TOTAL	60	35

Table 1: Updated Sustainability Course Designations (distribution by level) as of 2024 Summer

In the academic year of 2023/24, 2,238 graduates (93.7%) had enrolled in at least 1 sustainability course during their undergraduate studies. Of those, 661 graduates (27.7% of all graduates) completed at least 1 course that is related to Sustainability. 1,577 graduates (66.0% of all graduates) completed 2 or more Sustainability Focused courses.

Based on this preliminary result, we can assume that at least 27.7% of graduates are potentially gaining an elementary understanding of sustainability, while 66.0% are potentially gaining a medium to substantial exposure of sustainability concepts by taking two or more courses. And around 6.3% of students are potentially receiving little to no understanding or exposure to sustainability upon graduating—at least not in their coursework.[1]

[1] For students to gain a strong exposure of sustainability concepts, a student should complete at least 2 "sustainability focused" courses. While students who completed less or only enrolled in "sustainability related" courses can be considered as having an elementary to medium exposure to sustainability.

There are numerous other ways to gain exposure to sustainability concepts at HKUST; HKUST Connect, for example, provides activities and service-learning opportunities that are aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are also many Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) projects that are related to sustainability which are not included in this analysis.

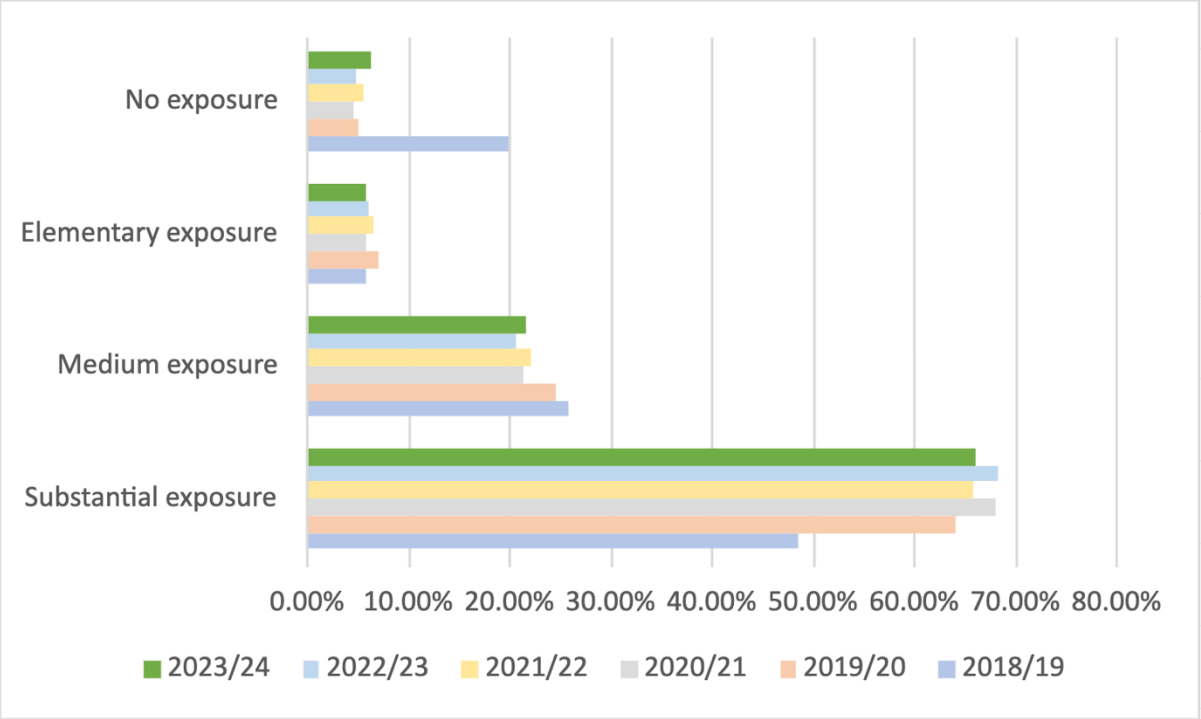


Figure 1. Level of Exposure to Sustainability Education of Graduates over the Years

According to Figure 1, it is apparent that since the academic year of 2018/19, there has been minimal changes in the overall distributions of exposure to Sustainability.

While it is reassuring that there is abundance of sustainability concepts dispersed in the Undergraduate (UG) curriculum, we should also target the students that are receiving little to no sustainability concepts.

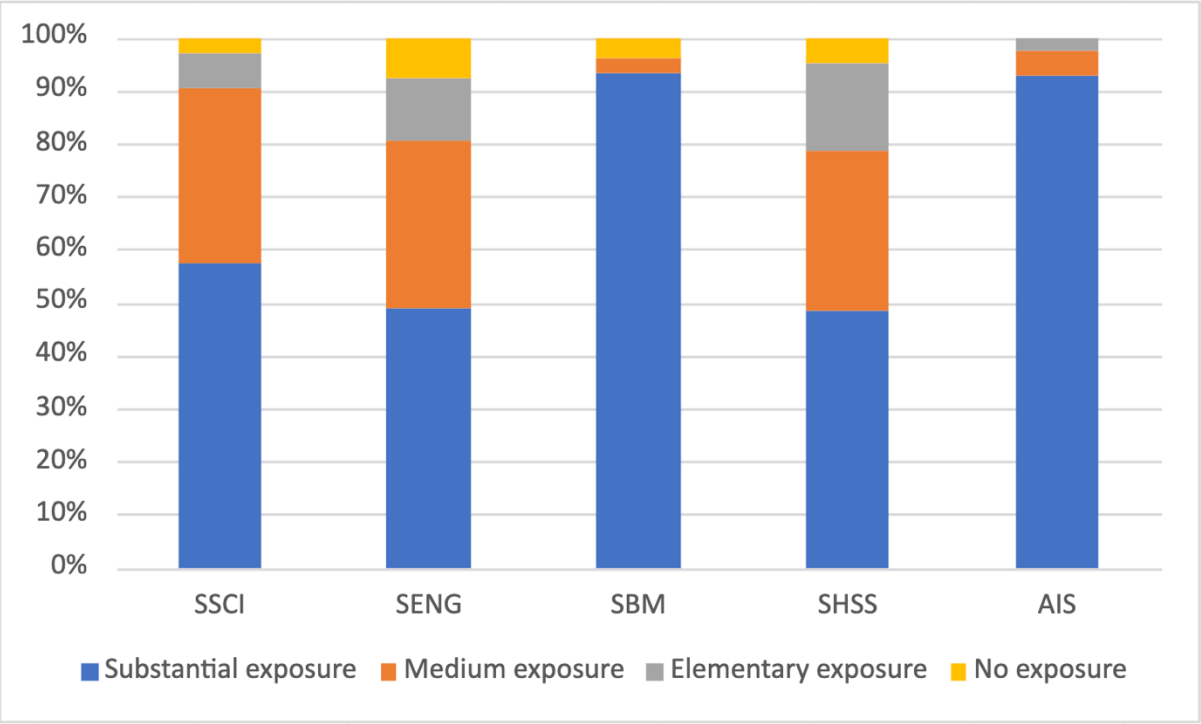


Figure 2. Level of Exposure to Sustainability Education of Graduates by School (2022/2023 Academic Year)

Legend: SSCI: School of Science, SENG: School of Engineering, SBM: School of Business & Management, SHSS: School of Humanities & Social Science. AIS: Academy of Interdisciplinary Studies

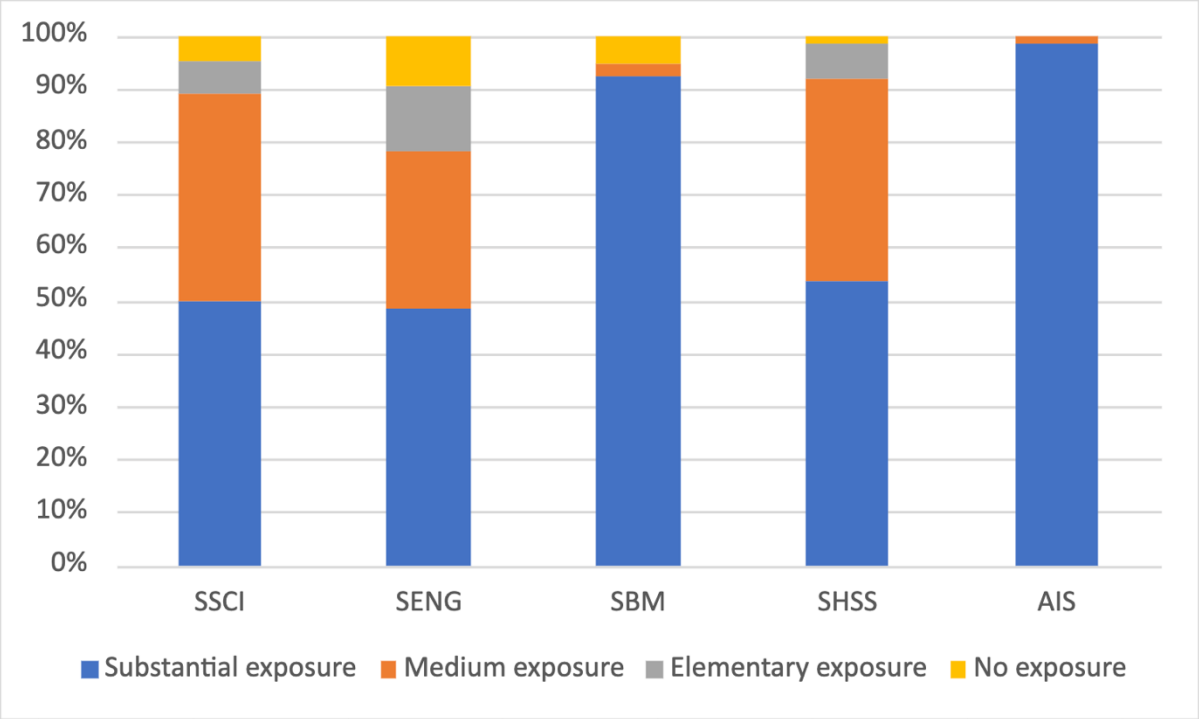


Figure 3. Level of Exposure to Sustainability Education of Graduates by School (2023/2024 Academic Year)

Legend: SSCI: School of Science, SENG: School of Engineering, SBM: School of Business & Management, SHSS: School of Humanities & Social Science. AIS: Academy of Interdisciplinary Studies

With reference to Figures 2 and 3, AIS (98.3%) has the highest percentage of graduates with substantial exposure to sustainability in 2023/24 academic year, surpassing SBM and other schools in the 2022/23 academic year. Furthermore, students in the SHSS school saw an increase in students with medium exposure to sustainability in the 2023/2024 academic year.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The overall result shows that a high percentage of graduates are receiving medium to substantial exposure to sustainability concepts. However, a small portion of graduates are still graduating with no exposure to sustainability.

We would suggest the following activities to achieve a greater level of sustainability literacy in order to accomplish the university's primary educational purpose.

1. ***Develop a branding system for easily identifying sustainability courses.***
   By developing a branding scheme to highlight the sustainability-focused elements in the course catalogue, we can enable the students to identify such courses easily for designing their own sustainability learning pathway.

   A branding scheme would also act as an incentive for faculty to (a) complete the self-assessment, and (b) adjust their course materials to qualify as a Sustainability course, thus contributing to the university's sustainability education goal.

2. ***Continue implementing a sustainability literacy test on an annual basis.***
   As concluded in the report, while this annual exercise is exceptionally effective for us to assess the exposure of sustainability education to students before they graduate from HKUST, it does not give us a clear picture of how well the students are understanding these concepts. As an effort to gain a better understanding of the sustainability literacy of students, SEAG has developed a survey, called the "Sustainability literacy test", which comprise of 18 multiple-choice questions that cover different aspects of sustainability.

   The first trial was conducted in Spring 2021 and invited students from all school to participate on a voluntary basis. In the long-term, we believe it would be beneficial to implement the test on an annual basis into a longitudinal study. It also gives us a much clearer picture of how well the students are understanding the sustainability concepts, rather than just being exposed to it.

Appendix A: Process of identifying Relevant Courses

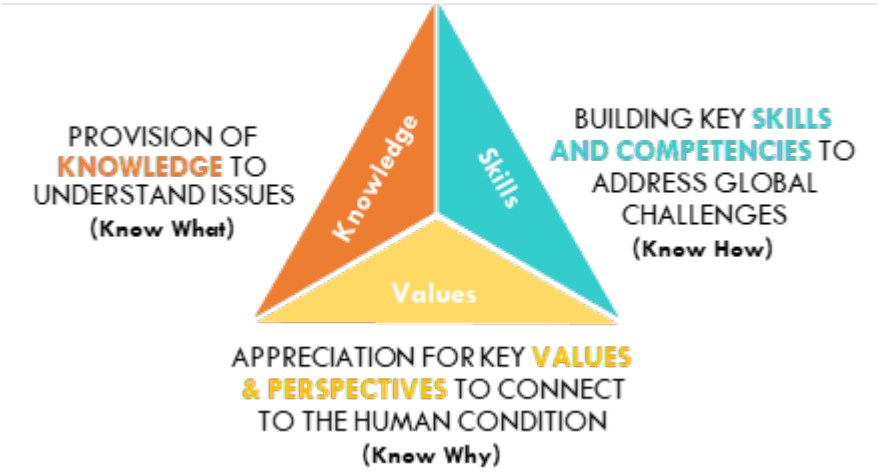
Determining Course Criteria

Sustainability education is the foundation for preparing students to meet the challenge of *sustaining human thriving over time and within planetary boundaries*. As documented in the first Evaluation report in June 2018, SEAG has undertaken several exercises to define the terms relating to sustainability, sustainability education, and sustainability courses.

SEAG agreed that sustainability education is built through the interplay of:

- Relevant **knowledge and understanding** of the issues, supported by…
- An appreciation for **values and perspectives**, creating the foundation to build…
- The **skills and competencies** necessary to address the challenge of a sustainable future

Figure 1: Sustainability Education Framework



The SEAG also further developed a sub-list of criteria to help in evaluating core areas that are associated with sustainability education. The list of criteria is further broken down into key concepts, as detailed in Appendix B.

Values	**Knowledge and Understanding**	**Skills and Competencies**
1. Human responsibility within the environment	4. Natural limits	9. Systems thinking
2. Human responsibility within society	5. Business and economics	10. Collaboration & communication
3. Human behaviour	6. Science and technology	11. Futures thinking
	7. Planning and design	12. Critical thinking & complex problem solving
	8. Governance	

Sustainability Course Inventory Update

As an on-going effort for assessing the breadth and depth of sustainability education across the curriculum at HKUST, we have evaluated all our existing undergraduate courses against the list to develop a sustainability course inventory. This report will provide an update on the annual exercise to add the newly available sustainability courses to the course catalogue for the academic year 2023/24.

Preliminary Evaluation

The evaluation process starts with a preliminary review which includes identifying any keywords or concepts in the course descriptions which suggest the course may cover sustainability concepts throughout its delivery. Apart from courses that had keywords in their description which overlap with the pre-defined sustainability course criteria, courses with descriptions itself suggesting that it may be sustainability related were also shortlisted for further investigation.

Faculty Self-Assessment Exercise

In order to assess the shortlisted courses and ensure they are properly designated as "sustainability focused" or "sustainability related" courses, each course instructor is invited to complete a self-assessment survey which asks them to provide detailed information of their courses. The survey is developed based on the previously defined sustainability criteria and helps clarify how much class time is dedicated to teaching sustainability concepts.

The courses are separated into two categories: "sustainability focused," and "sustainability related."

1. Sustainability focused courses – these courses may be broad and cover a wide breadth of sustainability concepts, content, issues, and contemporary thinking, or they may be narrowly focused and address one or more sustainability issues or concepts in depth. In both cases, the course is primarily focused on sustainability.
    - ✓ A focused course must concentrate on sustainability in **at least 75%** of class time, and incorporate elements of sustainability criteria within the course material (readings, discussions, and assignments).
2. Sustainability related courses – these courses are focused on a topic other than sustainability, but have sustainability ideas, principles, or content embedded within specific parts of the curriculum.
    - ✓ A sustainability related course spends **at least 25%** of class time covering one or more of the sustainability criteria within the course material (readings, discussions, and assignments).

Appendix B: Detailed Sustainability Criteria

	Criteria	Key Concepts
VALUES	**Human responsibility within the environment** *Exploring the morality underlying how humans interact with natural surroundings, particularly through the lens of fairness and responsibility for future generations*	☐ Environment-related Sustainable Development Goals ☐ Environmental justice ☐ Valuing eco-system services for future generations ☐ Ecological citizenship in terms of protection of the public environmental good ☐ Appreciation, empathy, and nurturing of environmental values
	Human responsibility within society *Exploring the social factors that limit human thriving and global quality of life*	☐ Social justice and responsibility ☐ Social-focused Sustainable Development Goals ☐ Universal Declaration of Human Rights ☐ Poverty reduction ☐ Equity (e.g., income distribution, Gini coefficient) ☐ Gender equality ☐ Actions that degrade human well-being
	Human behaviour *Exploring how culture, social networks, and personal identity can shape human behaviours in ways that impact our ability to act in sustainable ways*	☐ Institutional theory and dynamics of social change ☐ Behaviour economics ☐ Change management ☐ Strategies for pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., Community-Based Social Marketing) ☐ Environmental psychology ☐ Reflecting upon diverse perspectives (e.g., moral relativism, social norms, identities)
KNOWLEDGE	**Natural limits** *Exploring the finite capacity of natural ecosystems (including the global ecosystem) and their ability to support human needs*	☐ The Anthropocene ☐ The biosphere, ecological risks, biodiversity ☐ Understanding of planetary systems (air, water, or soil) ☐ Food systems ☐ Demographic trends ☐ Natural capital and limits to growth
	Business and economics *Exploring the market conditions that create "market failures" with respect to the environment or society, and examining business and economic strategies that can better maintain the integrity of ecosystems*	☐ The circular economy ☐ Sustainability business strategies (e.g., auditing, reporting, green finance) ☐ Tragedy of the commons, externalities, or other market failures ☐ Global patterns of production and consumption
	Science and technology *Exploring the role of basic science and technology (broad and individual technologies) specifically in mitigating harmful impacts to humans and the natural world*	☐ Transitions to renewable, zero-carbon energy ☐ Green technologies to preserve oceans, forests, and agriculture ☐ Technologies to generate efficiency, conservation, and productivity ☐ Mitigating pollution, waste, and effluence ☐ Smart cities strategies
	Planning and design *Exploring concepts from local and regional planning, infrastructure development, and product design to mitigate harmful impacts to humans and the natural world*	☐ Sustainable urban environments ☐ Green building design ☐ Product design for sustainability outcomes ☐ Urban infrastructure (e.g. transport, waste management)

	Criteria	Key Concepts
	Governance *Exploring how legal frameworks and government policies impact society and the natural world*	☐ Political and economic organisations ☐ Policy for sustainability (e.g., codes, standards, and regulations) ☐ Governing for public good (e.g., public investment, incentives, public relations campaigns) ☐ Legal frameworks (e.g., property rights, trade agreements)
SKILLS	**Systems thinking** *Building a holistic perspective, recognising interconnectedness and interdependence across multiple scales*	☐ Resilience and robustness ☐ System dynamics (e.g., feedback loops, tipping points) ☐ Unanticipated consequences and trade-offs ☐ Qualitative / quantitative systems analysis ☐ Life-cycle thinking and whole-life cost analysis
	Collaboration & communication *Building interdisciplinary thinking and a capacity to work with others to resolve sustainability problems*	☐ Communicating for sustainability outcomes ☐ Negotiation, mediation, or conflict resolution ☐ Team-building for sustainability causes ☐ On/off-site experiential learning ☐ Stakeholder engagement
	Futures thinking *Building an orientation to the long-term, with the ability to anticipate future challenges, risks, and opportunities*	☐ Assessing sustainability-related risks ☐ Forecasting / backcasting ☐ Scenario planning ☐ Simulation modelling ☐ Strategic planning ☐ Adaptation and mitigation strategies
	Critical thinking and complex problem-solving *Building a foundation for evaluating the credibility of data and ideas, and the capacity to develop and implement meaningful solutions*	☐ Analysis of news cycles and media depictions of events ☐ Objective development of judgements and persuasive arguments ☐ Principled reasoning ☐ Multi-criteria assessment models ☐ Impact assessment methods ☐ Creativity and innovation ☐ Critical data analysis and interpretation

Appendix C: Updated Sustainability Courses

(Newly added courses this year are highlighted using coloured text, removed courses are marked in italic light brown text)

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUSED		SUSTAINABILITY RELATED	
ACCT3630	**ESG Measurement, Disclosure and Applications**	ACCT1010	Accounting, Business and Society
CENG4130	Plant Design and Economics	CENG3150	Integrated Chemical Process and Product Design
CENG4720	Environmental Impact Assessment and Management Systems	CENG3230	Reaction and Reactor Engineering
CHEM1004	Chemistry in Everyday Life	CENG4710	Environmental Control
CIVL/ENVR1150	Climate Change Impacts and Extreme Weather Events	CHEM4310	Environmental Chemistry
CIVL1140	Environmental Quality Control and Improvement	CHEM4320	Environmental Analytical Chemistry
CIVL1170	Big History, Sustainability and Climate Change	CIVL1160	Civil Engineering and Modern Society
CIVL1190	**Climate Change, Big History and Sustainability**	**CIVL1180**	**Monitoring Changing Climate from Space**
CIVL1210	Fundamental of Green Buildings	CIVL2410	Environmental Assessment and Management
CIVL3420	Water and Wastewater Engineering	CIVL3610	Traffic and Transportation Engineering
CIVL3510	Hydrosystems Engineering	CIVL3910	Smart Infrastructure Sensing and Data Analytics
CIVL4100U	**Geospatial Science & Technology for Smart City**	*CIVL4100H*	*Water, Energy and Climate Challenges in Smart Cities*
CIVL4450	Carbon Footprint Analysis and Reduction	CIVL4620	Transportation System Operations
CIVL4460	Process Design of Environmental Engineering Facilities	ENEG4210	Optimization of Energy Systems
ECON4434	Economic Development and Growth	ENEG/MECH3110 /AMAT3590	Materials for Energy Technologies
ENTR3030	Social Innovations & Entrepreneurship	**ENEG4130**	**Photovoltaic Materials and Devices**
ENVR/ECON/ SOSC2310	Introductory Environmental and Health Economics	ENGG1110	Engineering Solutions to Grand Challenges of the 21st Century
ENVR1040	The Environment and Society - A Comprehensive Perspective	ENGG1130	The Impact and Value of Technology Innovation
ENVR1070	Thinking Big: Systems Thinking for Environmental Problems	ENTR1001	Entrepreneurship 1001: Building Your Own Future

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUSED		SUSTAINABILITY RELATED	
ENVR1080	The Smart Consumer - Uncovering the Hidden Story behind the Product Label	ENVR2090	Environmental Laboratory
ENVR2010	Environmental Science Fundamentals	ENVR3220	Energy Resources and Usage
ENVR2020	Urban Air Pollution	ENVR/CIVL4480	Climate Modelling and Risk Assessment
ENVR2040	*Life Cycle Assessment*	ENVR4010D	Independent Study in Environment Issues
ENVR2050/ CORE2942	Sustainability Thinking	ENVR4320	ESG Management and Reporting
ENVR2060/ CORE2943	From Trash to Treasure: Managing Waste to Resources	ENVR4330	Environmental Geographical Information System
ENVR2080	**Circular Economy and Life Cycle Assessment**	*ENVS3004*	*Global Climate Change*
ENVR3003	*Green Buildings and Energy Efficiency*	*ENVS4001*	*Environmental Impact and Risk Assessment*
ENVR3005	**Environmental Sustainability: Risk and Challenges**	*ENVS4905*	*Marine Molecular Biology and Ecology*
ENVR3110	Sustainable Development	HUMA1000E	Cultures and Values: Freedom, Justice, and the Good
ENVR3310	Green Business Strategy	IELM/IEDA2150	Product Design
ENVR3410	Economics for Environmental Policy and Management	MECH3420	Engineering Materials II
ENVR/CIVL4470	Air Quality Control and Management	OCES1001	The Earth as a Blue Planet
ENVS2001	*Environmental Conservation and Sustainability in Practice*	OCES3201	Biological Oceanography
ENVS2004	*Introduction to Ocean Science*	**OCES4103**	**Fisheries and Aquaculture**
ENVS4301	*Environmental Conservation*	PHYS1001	Physics and the Modern Society
FINA4929Q	Responsible Finance	PPOL3210	Energy Policy
GBUS2040	**Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Corporate Project**	SBMT2100T	Community Services Project
HUMA2595	*Science, Technology and Modern Life*	SCIE1120	Chemistry and Life
HUMA2597	Environmental History	SOSC3880	Social Inequality and Social Mobility
HUMA2621	Culture and Environment		
HUMA2623	Cultural Sustainability in South China		

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUSED		SUSTAINABILITY RELATED
ISDN2200	Systems Thinking and Design	
ISDN4000J	Introduction to EcoDesign	
ISOM1700	Critical Issues in Business Operations	
LIFS2011	A Practicum on Wetland Conservation	
LIFS/OCES1030	Environmental Science	
MARK1220	Marketing and Society	
MECH1902	Energy Systems in a Sustainable World	
MECH1905	Buildings for Contemporary Living	
MECH1906	Mechanical Engineering for Modern Life	
MECH4000N	Solar Energy Conversion Technology	
MECH4350	Indoor Air Quality in Buildings	
MECH4912	**Green Technologies for Buildings, Energy and Water**	
MGMT2010	Business Ethics and the Individual	
MGMT2130	Business Ethics & Social Responsibility	
MGMT3160	Environmental Business Strategies	
MGMT3170	Managing CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)	
OCES1010	Principles and Applications of Environmental Science	
OCES3302	Marine Pollution Tracking	
OCES4320	Marine Toxicology	
PHYS1003	Energy and Related Environmental Issues	
SOSC1860	Population and Society	
SOSC2330	Environmental Politics and Policy	
SOSC3260	*Sustainability Science: Problems and Perspectives*	
SOSC3540	Psychology of Environmental Sustainability	
SOSC4290	China's Sustainable Development	

SUSTAINABILITY FOCUSED		SUSTAINABILITY RELATED
SUST1000/1010	Introduction to Sustainability	