Exploring the Concept of Sustainability in Nutrition and Dietetics: Student, Academic and Practitioner Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nutrition and dietician (N&D) professionals can contribute to sustainable development and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there are diverse understandings of what sustainability means in the N&D context which may be constraining higher education curricula.

Objective: To explore the concept of ‘sustainability’ in the context of N&D from student, academic and practitioner perspectives.

Study Design, Settings, Participants: An action research process was used to explore the concept of sustainability. Data was collected sequentially, first from undergraduate students’ self-reported perceptions of sustainability (n=55, self-administered online survey, open question) and then academics’ perceptions of sustainability related teaching practice (n=7, workshop) at a regional Australian university. Semi-structured interviews were then undertaken with Australian N&D practitioners (n=10) having longevity in the dietetic/nutrition profession as well as a specialist practice area. Data was analysed concomitantly and used as a sensitising device with each subsequent group.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Students provided four keywords/phrases conveying their personal understanding of sustainability within the N&D context. Academics provided a written response to the question; how do you perceive sustainability? Practitioners answered questions from an interview protocol developed to enable exploration of sustainability both conceptually and in practice. Each data set was analysed thematically independently by two researchers. Findings across participant groups were then analysed for overarching themes.

Results: Across groups sustainability was perceived as a broad, future focused concept, multi-faceted (environment, culture, social, economic), and relating to dietary recommendations and practices.

Themes from student responses were; Sustainable food systems, Sustaining the profession, Sustaining the effects of our work, and Future focused.

Themes from academics were; Teaching food system sustainability in the dietetic curriculum, Sustaining the profession and practice over time, Sustaining ecosystems, Stewardship of resources, and Future focused.

Themes from practitioners were; Sustaining the profession and practice, Sustaining the effects of our work, Future focused.

Participant characteristics

Students: Online survey; Provide four key words/phrases conveying understanding of sustainability.

Academics: Facilitated workshop with academics to discuss how they perceive sustainability.

Practitioners: Semi-structured video call interviews using an interview protocol to explore sustainability conceptually and in practice.

Each data set was analysed thematically independently by two researchers. Findings across participant groups were then analysed for overarching themes.

Conclusions

Using multiple perspectives showed that sustainability in N&D is perceived as a broad and complex concept. Student, academic and practitioner perceptions may be useful in forming a working definition to clarify sustainability in the N&D context for curriculum development.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the students, academics and practitioners who participated in this study. Dr Teliana Ricks for assistance with the student survey and Ms Liz English for assistance with practitioner interviews.

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Key findings

Across groups

Sustainability was perceived as;

- A broad, future focused concept,
- Multifactorial (environment, culture, social, economic),
- Stewardship of resources, and
- Relating to dietary recommendations and practices

Themes from student responses were;

- Sustainable food systems
- Sub-topics: resource management, future focussed, food production practices, food behaviours, access and availability and,
- System influencers
- Sub-topics: economics, values and ethics

Themes from academics were;

- Sustaining the profession and practice over time,
- Sustaining ecosystems,
- Stewardship of resources, and
- Future focused

Themes from practitioners were;

- Sustaining food supply/systems,
- Workforce and profession sustainability,
- Dietary recommendations can be maintained (environment and individual)

Sustainability was characterised as action-oriented, conflicted, context-dependent & interdisciplinary.

Academics and practitioner themes incorporated focus on sustaining the profession and sustaining the effects of their work. This was not identified by students.

Ethical approval was provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the authors institution (A16837).