

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



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Nutrition and dietetic (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=95, 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, multifactorial (environment, culture, social, economic), and relating to dietary recommendations and practices. Themes from student responses were; Sustainable food systems and system influencers. Academic and practitioner themes diverged to; sustaining the profession, sustaining the effects of our work, and stewardship of resources. Sustainability was characterised as conflicted, action oriented, context-dependent and inter-disciplinary.

**Conclusions:** Student, academic and practitioner perceptions may be useful in forming a working definition to clarify sustainability in the N&D context for curriculum development.

## Background

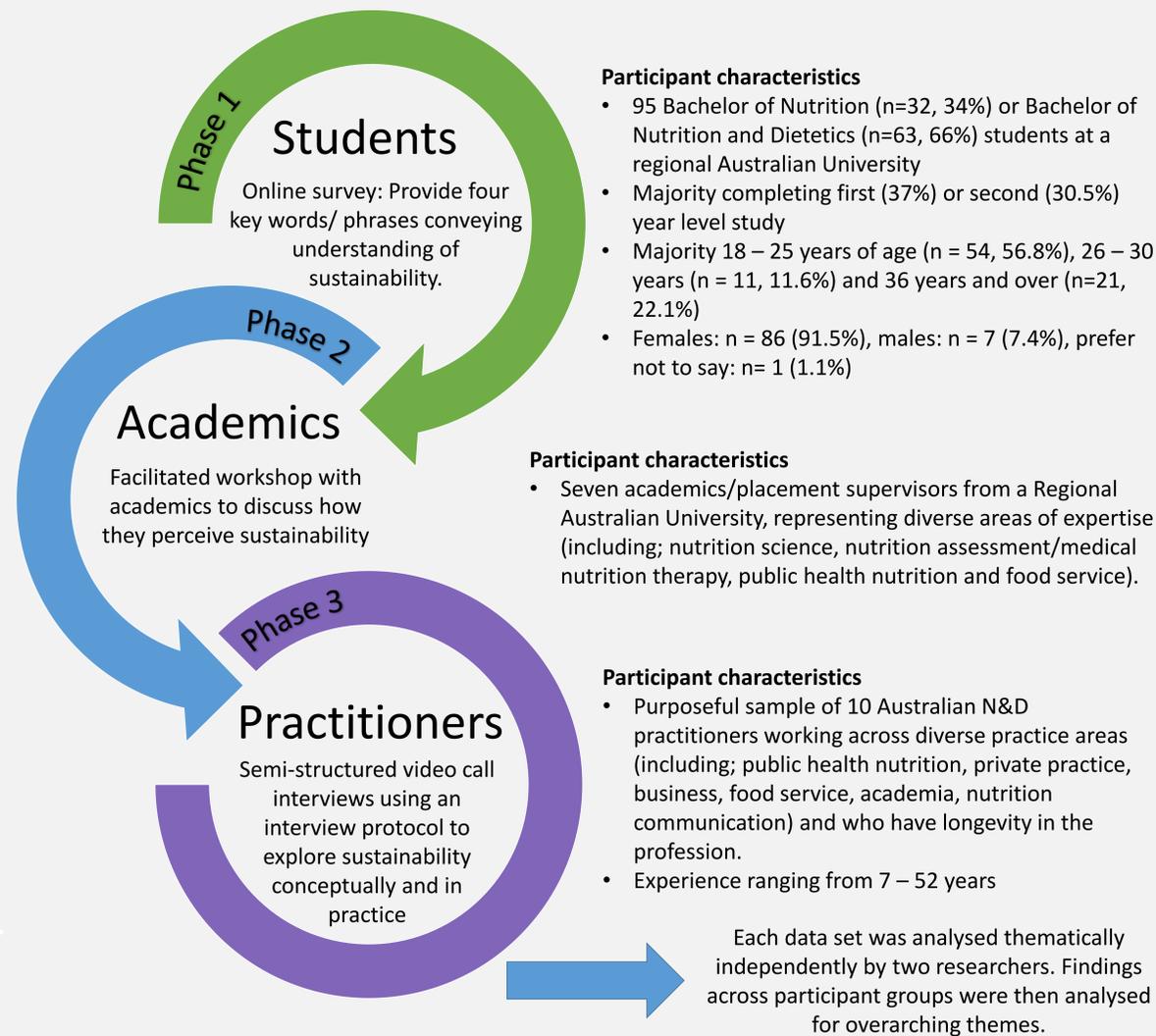
Nutrition and dietetic (N&D) professionals can contribute to sustainable development and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. While being sustainability focused is important for N&D professionals<sup>1</sup>, higher education curricula may be constrained by the complexity and ambiguity of what sustainability means in N&D practice.

To date, N&D sustainability literature has focused on environmental sustainability in food systems<sup>1-4</sup>, with less focus on the constructs of economic and social sustainability<sup>5</sup>. While N&D professionals require an understanding of environmental sustainability, it is important that N&D higher education curricula provides opportunities for developing an understanding of all constructs to ensure sustainability focused practice.

Integration of sustainability in N&D curricula is problematic. In addition to educators reporting a lack of understanding and confidence to teach this concept<sup>3</sup>, there is a perception that sustainability is abstract and broad<sup>6,7</sup>. Understanding multiple perspectives of sustainability may help to inform what sustainability means in the context of N&D, and assist educators to frame sustainability in curriculum.

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

## Action Research Process and Key Findings



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

## 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.

### Participant characteristics

- 95 Bachelor of Nutrition (n=32, 34%) or Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics (n=63, 66%) students at a regional Australian University
- Majority completing first (37%) or second (30.5%) year level study
- Majority 18 – 25 years of age (n = 54, 56.8%), 26 – 30 years (n = 11, 11.6%) and 36 years and over (n=21, 22.1%)
- Females: n = 86 (91.5%), males: n = 7 (7.4%), prefer not to say: n = 1 (1.1%)

### Participant characteristics

- Seven academics/placement supervisors from a Regional Australian University, representing diverse areas of expertise (including; nutrition science, nutrition assessment/medical nutrition therapy, public health nutrition and food service).

### Participant characteristics

- Purposeful sample of 10 Australian N&D practitioners working across diverse practice areas (including; public health nutrition, private practice, business, food service, academia, nutrition communication) and who have longevity in the profession.
- Experience ranging from 7 – 52 years

## 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-themes: resource management, future focussed, food production practices, food behaviours, access and availability and,
- System influencers
  - Sub-themes: 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/system,
- 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 a focus on sustaining the profession and sustaining the effects of their work. This was not identified by students.

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