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DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

Government and public administration have a multifaceted role in defining and achieving sustainability by developing policies and supporting the implementations. Since this area is a notable employer, personal opinions of the present and future employees deserve attention. Several studies are dealing with the attitude of higher education students towards sustainability, but public administration manager students are usually out of scope. This paper shows the results of a pilot study among 34 public administration manager students. The results include that the respondents are active in certain activities, but these are limited to simple and attractive issues like selective waste collection. The most important governmental responsibilities are defining and supporting tasks related to environmental protection, indirect tasks (framing) are rated less important. The main experience of the survey is that a system-oriented and integrated approach is desired.

Introduction

Pro-environmental personal behavior is essential for achieving sustainability. Since both sustainability and human behavior are complex concepts, there are no simple answers to the emerging challenges. UN [1] defined 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) including environmental, social and human ones. The most important components of environmentally conscious behavior are the knowledge, shared values, attitudes, intentions and the evaluation of actions [2] [3] [4] [5]. However, only the implemented actions bring sustainability closer to the present, such occurrence should be consciously increased. Li and Hu [6] or Bukovics [7] confirm the importance of relevant information available, others deal with exploring the patterns of personal attitudes ([8] [9] [10] [11]). Due to the conceptual diversity and a large number of influencing factors, the role of empirical studies is appreciated.

Attention paid to public administration can be justified by two reasons. Once, public services appear in a wide area of life, so it is an excellent medium for presenting the expected behavioral patterns. Secondly, there are 471 800 people (2016 data of the KSH) working in various positions for the public administration, so the government is the largest employer in Hungary. Developing environmental awareness among them may also lead to notable impacts on the national level. Bukovics et al. [7] pointed out the need for this special approach to sustainable public administration that focuses on the functioning of society.

The 'Good State and Governance Report' [12] [13], managed by the National University of Public Service, covers the strategy and the measurement initiation of the issues above. Sustainability is evaluated in five dimensions:

- Climate change
- Natural resources
- Energy and water management
- Environmental burdens (emissions)
- Social sustainability.

Just social sustainable is marked 'in need of development'.

Several studies are dealing with the attitudes of higher education students (see e.g. [8] [10] [14]) but these usually focus on business/MBA students. Exploring the characteristics of public service students contributes greatly to the knowledge base of the field.

Experimental

The paper presents the results of a pilot study among 34 public administration manager students (82.4% female, 17.6% male). The representativeness of the sample is not ensured, conclusions are limited to the sample. The main purpose of the research is to prepare a wider survey. The survey uses an online questionnaire about the opinions and attitudes to environmental issues, evaluation of environmental and social problems as well as the role and engagement of the government. Due to the pilot nature of the research and the small sample size, it is not worth to run statistical tests for relationship analysis. This paper selects some results:

- personal approach to environmental protection (measured on a 5-point scale),
- barriers of sustainability (respondents were asked to mark at most 3 items of a list),
- role of government (respondents were asked to put items in order).

Results and discussion

Environmental considerations are presented in some activities of the students. Figure 1 summarizes the distribution of the responses measured on a 5-point scale. The waste collection shows a 'greener picture' than other items of the survey. Voluntary actions are not typical as well as environmental considerations in e.g. selecting the travel mode of the holiday journey.

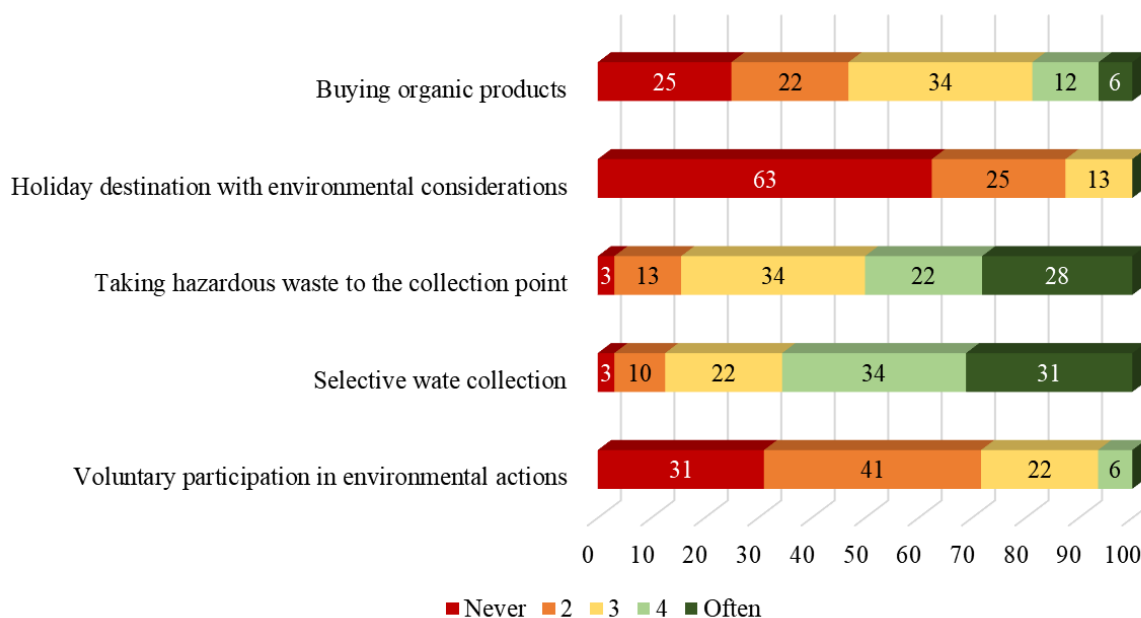


Figure 1: Considerations of environmental aspects in some activities (own edition)

The most relevant barrier of environmentally conscious living is the need for comfort based on the evaluation of the respondents (Figure 2). Financial reasons are marked by 46.9% of the respondents as one of the three most relevant items. It is surprising, that a high proportion of them do not consider environmental problems serious (41.2%). However, it is encouraging that only 11.8% thinks that the conditions of sustainable living are not available.

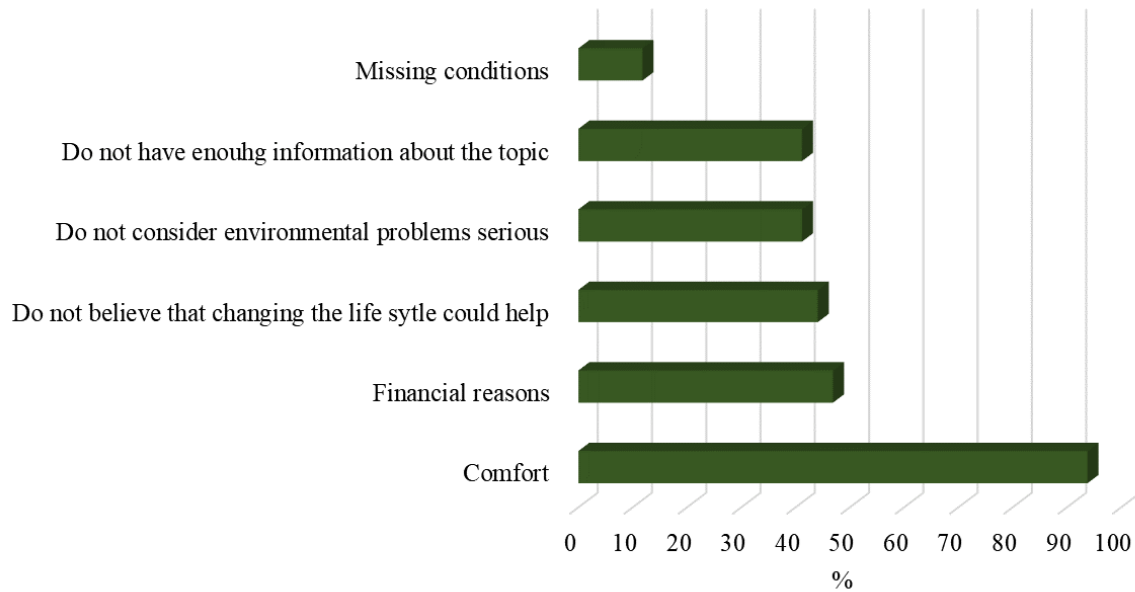


Figure 2: Barriers of sustainability (own edition)

The role of government is complex in managing sustainability from legislation to business activities including education and supporting social changes. The survey asked the respondents to rank 7 statements. Accordingly, the order is as follows, based on the mean value of the ranking numbers:

1. Establishing a legal, economic and technical regulatory framework for achieving environmental goals (3.4)
2. Defining the priority tasks of environmental protection (3.5)
3. Providing the economic and financial foundations of environmental protection (3.6)
4. Carrying out environmental state administration tasks (4.0)
5. Exploring the state of the environment and determining the status to be reached (4.1)
6. Defining and realizing R&D, education and information tasks (4.4)
7. Enforcement of environmental requirements in other state tasks (5.0)

The distribution of the rankings shows a more nuanced picture of the opinions. Figure 3 highlight the ratios of high priority (Rank 1 and 2), middle (Rank 3 to 5) subordinated (Rank 6 and 7) issues.

Beyond providing the economic and the financial background, the respondents considered defining the priorities as an important governmental task as well as R&D, education and information tasks. However, 44.1% of the respondents rated this item the least important. Medium values are assigned to establishing a regulatory framework and state administration tasks. An interesting experience of the survey is that an integrated approach is not expected, 58.6% considered enforcing environmental requirements in other governmental tasks the least important item.

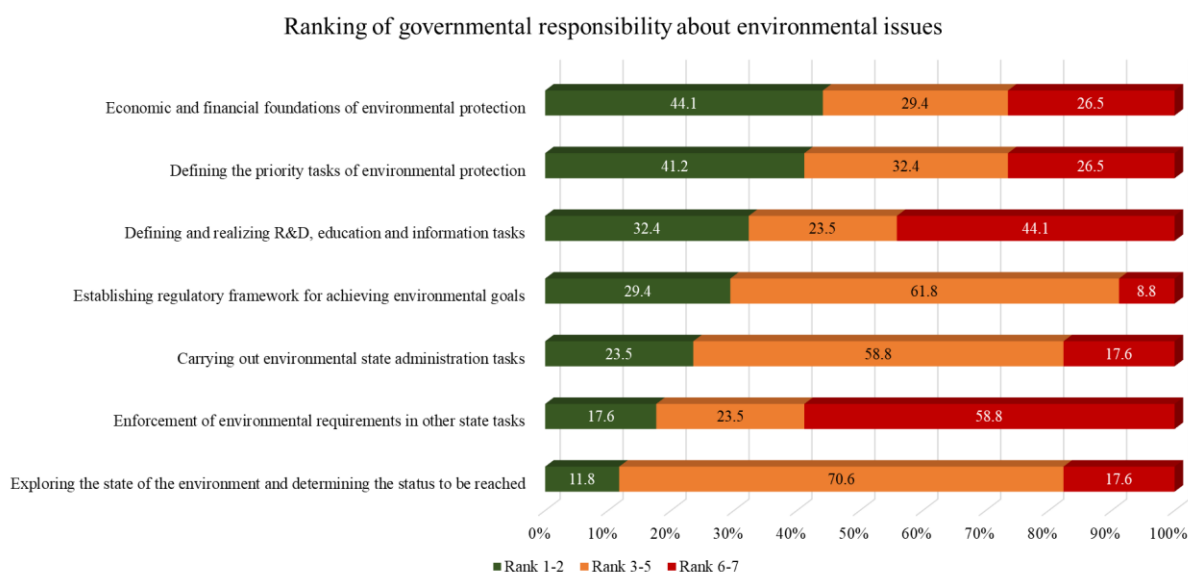


Figure 3. Ranking of governmental responsibility about environmental issues (own edition)

Conclusion

The government has a multifaceted role in defining and achieving sustainability. The attitudes of public administration manager students as future public servants may influence the success of the progress. However, there is very little attention to their characteristics in the literature. However, the results presented in this paper are not representative and the conclusion is limited to the sample, the experience helps to prepare extensive research. The main conclusions of the research are as follows:

- the respondents are active in certain activities, but these are limited to some simple and attractive issues like selective waste collection,
- comfort is considered the most important barrier of sustainability,
- Defining and supporting tasks related to environmental protection are the most important governmental responsibilities; indirect tasks (framing) are rated less important,
- integrated approach and system-oriented thinking must be developed.

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