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Exploring the Role of Green HRM and Sustainable Practices in Initial Career Choices from an International Student's Perspective

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to verify the attitudes and motivations of young people in the context of their preferences for choosing a future employer, with a particular focus on the role of ecology, Green Human Resource Management, and sustainability practices implemented by companies, including possible differences due to the country of origin factor. Specifically, the article explores international students' perceptions of sustainable development practices when choosing a job. The article is based on qualitative research – interviews conducted by the author with international students representing 11 different countries. The article is empirical, and the results of the conducted study can provide a basis for making informed decisions on HR practices and development strategies that consider cultural diversity and sustainability values in recruiting and retaining future young employees.

Keywords: Green HRM, Sustainable development, career choices, diverse cultural students

JEL Classification Codes: J24, Q56

Introduction

In an era marked by environmental consciousness and cultural diversity, the intersection of Green Human Resource Management (Green HRM) and sustainable development practices holds significant meaning for society. As a new approach to realising HR functions, Green HRM can play a pivotal role in environmental management, as it is an element of sustainable human resource management (SHRM). The concepts of green economy and jobs play an increasingly important role in organisations (Bugdol and Stańczyk, 2021, p. 78). The critical success factor in sustainable development is understanding the green economy's nature and objectives (Saqib et al., 2020). Since no one seriously denies the need to implement sustainable business practices, their implementation can also improve a company's image among investors and future employees. The profitability of companies depends on healthy ecosystems and equitable societies (Przychodzeń, 2012). Therefore, implementing such socially responsible strategies allows for the balance of profits and needs of different stakeholder groups (Porter and Kramer, 2011). As the future stewards of our planet, young people play a pivotal role in shaping sustainable development agendas and promoting environmentally responsible practices within organisations. Understanding their perceptions regarding Green HRM practices and sustainable development initiatives is crucial for aligning organisational strategies with the values and expectations of the next generation (Rakowska, 2024). This study aims to fill the gap regarding the inclusion of sustainability practices (including green HRM) as a determinant of workplace choice among students. In addition, the study examines the attitudes and beliefs of young people regarding sustainability efforts in the workplace. The study was based on a group of Faculty of Economics students from different countries with different education systems, cultures and policies. In this way, an attempt was made to find an “international” perspective.

The following research questions were addressed during the analyses:

- Is the Green HRM concept known and understood by students?
- Are the perceived practices companies use related to Green HRM and sustainability essential criteria when making employment decisions?

In the first part of this paper, conclusions from the literature review regarding the definitions of sustainable development and Green HRM are presented. Then, the methodology and study results are presented. The last part is a summary and conclusions.

Sustainable development and green HRM

Examining various concepts arising from the growing importance of ecology in business reveals that terms like “sustainable development”, “green economy”, “sustainable human resource management”, and “green human resource management” share similar and complementary goals (Róžańska-Bińczyk, 2022, p. 50). However, they are not precisely the same concept. Sustainable development is a strategy for simultaneous recognition and solution of contemporary economic, social and environmental problems aimed at ensuring actions for a sustainable future on our planet and present and future generations (Agenda 21, 1992). Such development is intelligent and environmentally friendly, based on the effective use of resources, knowledge, and innovation (Kromer, 2014). We can distinguish three basic dimensions of sustainable development (Graap, 2001): ecological (protection of the environment and its natural resources), economic (economic development that is not hindered but stimulated by technological advancement and increased effectiveness in the use of resources, materials, and workforce), and social (improvement in the living conditions and safety of all people). According to the principles of sustainable development, social, economic, and environmental goals are interdependent and mutually reinforcing (ISO 26000:2010). The concept of Green HRM is a trend and a necessity resulting from the growing ecological awareness of society and business. The evolution of this concept is associated with the dynamic development of literature on sustainable development, which emphasises the need to harmoniously combine economic, social, and environmental aspects in all areas of an organisation’s activities (Bunge et al., 1996; Marcus and Fremeth, 2009). Understanding Green HRM goes much deeper than just introducing green practices within HR. It is also a cultural and organisational transformation that requires the involvement of all members of an organisation, from the grassroots to the top management positions (Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Marcus and Fremeth, 2009). Green HRM practices include standard HR processes, such as recruiting, training and evaluating employees, developing environmental awareness among employees, and promoting green behaviour at all levels of the organisation (Jabbour, 2011; Renwick et al., 2013). Green HRM practice should not be viewed solely as part of a strategic plan to improve an organisation’s sustainable performance but should also be understood as a means to achieve positive outcomes for employees, including improved job satisfaction (Ling et al., 2018). The role of employees in achieving Green HRM goals is crucial. Creating a green work environment requires actions based on the active involvement of managers and employees at all levels of the hierarchy. Notably, the effectiveness of Green HRM depends not only on adherence to formal procedures but also on the

creativity and initiative of employees in taking action to protect the environment (Ren et al., 2018). Based on the study by Fawehinmi et al., Green HRM influences the ecological behaviour of employees through the complete mediation of ecological knowledge (Fawehinmi et al., 2020). This makes it necessary to research the perception of ecology in business practices not only at the organisational level but also at the individual level. In several studies (Harvey et al., 2013; Paillé et al., 2014; Paille et al., 2020), human resource management policies and practices are linked to employees' pro-environmental behaviour at the individual level.

Students, as future managers and the future of the labour market, are of interest among researchers in the context of their perception of sustainable development practices. There is much research focusing on the general perception of the Green HRM concept (Shawetha and Sengupta, 2023; Ercantan and Eyupoglu, 2022) or on transforming the workplace (Pandita and Kumar, 2022; Różanska-Binczyk et al., 2020), including issues related to employee behaviour (Fawehinmi et al., 2020; Ling et al., 2018). One study conducted by I. Różańska-Bińczyk et al. in 2019 showed that the young generation of Z (C) employees (average age 25) expects, among other things, a more comprehensive range of Green HRM activities in companies where they work (Różańska-Bińczyk et al., 2020, p. 88). This serves as a starting point for considering whether Green HRM practices implemented by companies are essential enough for young people to focus on them in their first job searches (reviewing job offers) and whether they try to find such information themselves.

Methodology

The main objective of the research is to answer the following question: Is the Green HRM concept known and understood by students? Are the perceived practices used by companies related to Green HRM and sustainability important criterion when making employment decisions? To answer these research questions. A qualitative study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews in English. These interviews were conducted in pairs (dyads) in November/December 2023 and lasted about one hour. The research sample (N=20) comprised full-time students at the Faculty of Economics at UMCS, selected using a non-random purposive sampling method by country of origin from eleven countries. Due to the nature of qualitative research and the small research sample (only two representatives from each country, and in the case of Rwanda and Tanzania, only one person), the obtained results of the study are not representative. The interviews used a specially constructed research tool in the form of an interview questionnaire consisting of seven open questions

and two partially open questions. The interview questions, based on aspects from the literature, covered areas such as:

- Individual experience and subjective assessment of the labour market, including perceptions of job opportunities for young people in the respondent's country of origin – as an element characterising respondents.
- Identification and ordering of factors that interviewees pay attention to when looking at job offers (in the context of their job search) (Prabhu et al., 2021), including salary, non-wage benefits, training opportunities, sustainable development practices implemented by companies, applications of green solutions in companies, modernity/used technologies, flexible working hours.
- Assessment of how vital ecology is in the lives of interviewees and whether they feel anxious about the current state of the environment (Rakowska, 2024),
- Their opinion on whether they would like to work in a company where ecology would play an important role and ecological solutions were applied (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022).
- Indication of what practices or words they associate Green HRM and how they understand Green HRM (Shwetha and Sengupta, 2023).
- Issues related to approaches to sustainability and ecology in the workplace. If these factors determine the choice of a job offer, could they be factors that increase job satisfaction? (Shahriari et al., 2023). Including context on the relevance of these practices for young people in the country.

To verify and compare the general tone and emotions surrounding the interviews, a sentiment analysis was conducted using the tone of speech and vocabulary (in Orange using the SentiArt method).

Interviewees' characteristics

The research sample consisted of 20 full-time students at the Faculty of Economics (UMCS), representing eleven countries: Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Portugal, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria and Kazakhstan. There were two students from each country, except for Tanzania and Rwanda, where it was possible to interview only one resident. The following table (Table 1) summarises the interviewees, considering their country of origin (including a regional breakdown) and work experience.

Looking at students' work experience, eight interviewees (one person each from Ukraine, Belarus, Tunisia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria, and two representatives from Kazakhstan) had yet to gain work experience. One respondent from Morocco is currently looking for work, and four interviewees (representatives from Ukraine,

Belarus, Morocco and Nigeria) have some work experience. The remaining seven interviewees (R1, R2, R7, R8, R9, R10, R12) are currently working.

Table 1. Tabular presentation of interviewees (with identification number)

Region	Country	ID.	Work experience
Eastern Europe	Poland	R1	Yes, currently working
		R2	Yes, currently working
	Ukraine	R3	Yes
		R4	No
	Belarus	R5	No
		R6	Yes
South Westen Europe	Portugal	R7	Yes, currently working
		R8	Yes, currently working
Northern Africa	Algeria	R9	Yes, currently working
		R10	Yes, currently working
	Tunisia	R11	No
		R12	Yes, currently working
	Morocco	R13	No, currently looking for a job
		R14	Yes
Eastern Africa	Tanzania	R15	No
	Rwanda	R16	No
Western Africa	Nigeria	R17	No
		R18	Yes
Asia	Kazakhstan	R19	No
		R20	No

Source: own study.

Results

The analysis of the research material indicated that most interviewees consider it a problem to find a suitable job in their country, especially in the initial stages of developing a career path. They highlighted various issues such as economic instability (R5, R11, R12), political instability (R10, R18), including wars (R3, R4), poor working conditions (R19, R5, R6), unfair behaviour (practices) of some employers (R1, R2, R10), employers' requirements regarding experience (R16, R20), and even laziness (R9).

Regarding the elements interviewees pay particular attention to when reviewing job ads. almost all (except R13) indicated salary as a primary factor. R9 emphasised

that their experience makes them value their work and “negotiate salary.” The situation is similar for non-salary benefits, where only R1, R2, R9, and R14 indicated that they are unimportant. R1 stated, “it is good as if they were, but they are not essential”. R9 added, “I care more about the experience than this” and R2 mentioned, “I find some of the benefits often offered unnecessary”. When it comes to development opportunities (training), five interviewees said they ignore this factor because they prefer to decide about the training they receive and their development path (R4, R8, R10, R17, R18). The others, however, emphasised the importance of opportunities to build experience and continuously develop skills at work. This response was often indicated in second or third place, along with the possibility of flexible working hours. R9 said, “continuous development and gaining new experience are most important to me, so when I look for a job, I make sure that employers support this”. R2 stated, “for the time being, not having very much experience and budget possibilities for expensive training, I consider it a big advantage when training shares are supported by a potential employer”. For most interviewees, except R3, R6, and R19, flexible working hours are significant to reconcile work and studies. Although modernity and the technologies used are factors that many interviewees pay attention to, they were not considered the most important. Some interviewees pointed out that they would prefer the software not to be outdated so that they could work efficiently (R4, R5, R12). Those who considered it an indifferent factor stressed that it was generally good for the employer to have adequate working conditions, while also highlighting their flexibility and ease of learning new programmes (R1, R2, R7, R8, R9, R19). Eight interviewees (R5, R6, R7, R10, R12, R13, R14, R20) indicated that they also look at the company’s sustainability practices, while six said they do not pay particular attention to this when looking at job ads (R1, R3, R11, R15, R16, R18). Another six indicated that this information is indifferent to them (R2, R4, R8, R9, R17, R19). Only three interviewees (R7, R10, R19) indicated that they pay attention to applying green (ecological) solutions in companies when looking for a job, through this was not a primary factor for them. Nine interviewees do not pay special attention to this aspect (R1, R2, R4, R8, R9, R12, R13, R14, R20). R20 said, “I think that is great, but personally, for myself, it is not really important to have any ecologically sensitive approach at work, because it is not what I expect from the job”. In turn, R3, R5, R6, R11, R15, R16, R17, R18 consider this information indifferent. For R1, R2, and R9, their indifference is due to scepticism about the true intentions behind such practices. R2 commented, “such behaviour is most often due to not receiving a fine, for example, for unsorted waste”. R9 stated, “companies do everything for profit, so they often use solutions to create good PR”. R1 added, “I have read about many examples of greenwashing, so I think some of their solutions are empty words”.

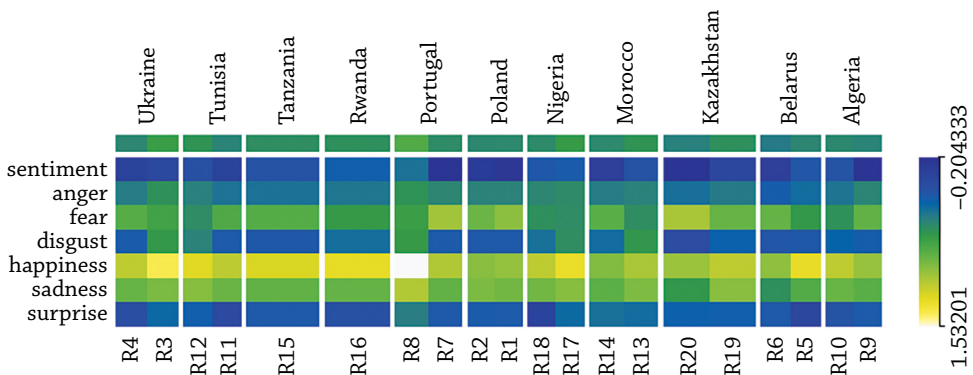
Turning to issues related to perceptions of ecology in their lives, the majority of interviewees consider ecology to be critical in their lives and would like to work in a company where it also plays an important role, with eight to a moderate degree (R1, R2, R4, R5, R6, R8, R9, R11) and another seven to a high degree (R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R19). The remaining interviewees indicated a small degree, and only two interviewees (R3, R17) indicated that ecology does not play a significant role in their lives. These responses were strongly correlated with feelings of unease about the current state of the environment. Three interviewees (R1, R2, R9) specially mentioned that television and social media mostly talk about disasters and “bad things,” and there is not enough focus on what good individuals can do for the world. They believe there should be an effort to increase education among youth and adults about specific good practices, stating that “one should make sure that the example comes from the top. Many companies talk about environmentalism, but they are not green” (R1). R3, R17 and R20 indicated that they do not necessarily feel that the workplace should be linked to ecology, and if it had to be, “employee participation in such activities should be voluntary, not imposed” (R17).

When interviewees were asked about their associations with Green HRM, they all indicated ecology, reducing pollution, segregating trash, or minimising paper consumption. There were also specific examples from business practice regarding various HR areas such as green development and employee education (R10, R13, R19). This shows that most of the interviewees have only intuitive knowledge in this area, talking about the ecological processes in the organisation, “ecology in every HR process” (R11). Only a few statements referred to more complex managerial activities, such as “creating a green culture in the organisation...” (R4) and “creating green mindset”..” (R14), motivating through “encouraging employees to take part in some green initiatives...” (R1). Except for three participants (R3, R17, R20), all indicated that working for such a company that genuinely implements sustainability and uses green solutions could be a cause for job satisfaction. They would be happy to work in such a place. R4 stated, “working for a company that is “ecologically-sensitive” will give me a feeling of contributing to the greater purpose”. R19 added, “I would like to be part of the people who care about ecology and have an exact plan to change the world”. R15 mentioned “It is my wish to see the environment is well preserved; therefore, whenever I get the chance to work in such a company, it will be my pleasure”. Only two participants (R17 and R3) indicated that they would not necessarily want to work in such very green companies but emphasized that “appropriate and sustainable” treatment of employees is essential to them. Their general opinion regarding young people from their country indicated that these could be essential topics because, in their perceptions, the public’s general awareness about environmental and sustainability issues is increasing. However, these are

not currently the factors that determine the choice of employer. R4 noted “after finishing university, most people are looking at any kind of job opportunity to build their portfolio for future employees. Things like ecology are their second priority”. R1 added “honestly, green and sustainability are not something I would look at when choosing a company. I do not know if this company is green, but if I did, it might influence my decision. However, I do not think I would search the company myself in terms “. R7 concluded, ”using green and sustainable practices would positively influenced my decision if everything else was constant”.

Sentiment analysis was used to check the general mood of the interview content regarding attitudes towards Green HRM, declared willingness to work in a green work environment, and the possible resulting satisfaction. The original content of the interview transcriptions (in English) was processed using a prepared model employing the SentiArt method. This method analyses sentiment based on vector space models returning the value of the text (Jacobs, 2019). The overall “sentiment” value consists of measurements of anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise. The sentiment value is calculated based on the difference between negative and positive values. The chosen method shows a greater cross-section of emotions than, methods like Vader, which shows only three types of sentiment: negative, positive and neutral (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). The model was built in Orange Data Mining using the “Sentiment analysis” widget (from the “Text Mining” group). The heat map below (Figure 1) presents the value of individual emotions and overall sentiment (calculated by subtracting negative from positive sentiments).

Figure 1. Heat map of the results in Sentiment Analysis of the same interview



Source: own study.

Based on the sentiment analysis values obtained for single respondents, both the lowest (-0.204) and highest (0.352) sentiment values were obtained by respondents

from Portugal (R7 and R8). For the paired analysis, the lowest mean value was obtained by interview participants from Poland (-0.145), and the highest was obtained by interview participants from Nigeria (0.203). The average sentiment analysis value for all interviewees was 0.034. Looking at the average emotions included in the sentiment value, the highest value was obtained for “happiness” (1.128), followed by “sadness” (0.828) and “fear” (0.721), and the lowest by “surprise” (0.202). The other values, “anger” and “disgust”, oscillated in the range of 0.418–0.301.

Discussion

Based on the responses collected in the research material, interviewees mostly pay attention to environmental issues and the need to take care of sustainability and the environment in the workplace. We find a similar conclusion in many other studies. Based on the results of a study of green consumption behaviour and the habit to pro-environmental actions of Generation Z (Debski and Borkowska-Niszczoła, 2020), it turned out that Generation Z supports pro-environmental behaviour daily, but this mainly concerns behaviour that brings financial or health benefits. A survey of Generation Z (C) representatives’ expectations of companies in terms of their green activities (Różanska-Binczyk, 2022) indicated that the younger generation of employees considers “being green” very important. This generation wants to work for companies that act according to their values, understands the validity of the concept of sustainability, and is aware of the importance of Green HRM in implementing this concept.

Therefore, it is worth emphasising that although ecology plays a significant role in young people’s everyday lives, the use of ecological practices and sustainable development is not currently indicated as the essential factors in choosing an employer. However, the sheer number of indications and general attention to these factors testify to building an employer’s reputation in the eyes of students, as well as society as a whole (regardless of nationality). It is also worth focusing on the education of employees in the field of sustainable development. According to a study by A. Rakowska, young people need to gain more knowledge in sustainable development (Rakowska, 2024). In the presented study, the majority relied only on intuitive indications despite their awareness. Therefore, companies should build a culture that supports initiatives and communicates their activities accordingly while maintaining the authenticity of their intentions.

Recalling the sentient analysis, interviewees expressed different emotions related to Green HRM issues. However, it is worth noting that the method used is based on an introduced word dictionary. Since English was not the native language

of the interviewers, this analysis should consider possible limitations, such as respondents' unfamiliarity with words capturing the essence of their statements (e.g., using more basic phrases). On the other hand, the results of this analysis can help formulate tailored messages for particular groups of students (e.g., to minimise negative emotions and stimulate more positive ones) and serve as the basis for formulating more personalised messages for prospective employees or other company stakeholders in general.

Conclusion

To summarise an empirical study of economics students representing various countries, it helped fulfil the purpose of the work, adding new insights into the perception of Green HRM and sustainability practices in organisations taking their first steps in building a career. Students are familiar with the concept of Green HRM and intuitively understand its importance; most would like to work for a company where employees are voluntarily involved in various green initiatives and care about sustainability – they believe this can significantly increase their job satisfaction with Green HRM. Sustainability plays a significant role for most young people. However, it is not a priority sought in job advertisements, possibly due to young people's generally perceived difficulty in finding a job (especially in countries the students represent). No significant differences were noted between representatives of each country (which may have been due to an unrepresentative sample). The differences in overtones and approaches in the statements were due more to the declared environmental attitudes and individual experiences (mainly professional).

For many organisations, this means that it is worthwhile to inform about the Green HRM and sustainable development practices being implemented. The increase in awareness among young people means that, when faced with comparing offers in the future, this may be one of the critical factors in choosing a future employer (with comparable other parameters analysed). This includes the ability to manage talent in the organisation (both attracting and retaining it and developing it through higher-order goals in line with their beliefs).

The author is aware that the content of the presented study does not exhaust the subject matter addressed, as it is broad and complex, and the research sample was small, with only had two representatives from each state. The study was conducted on a non-representative research sample, so the presentation of the results and extension to the entire population were significantly limited.

The results obtained indicate the need to expand the research and consider specific areas and practices (rather than general perceptions of the concept). Additionally, it is

important to take into account other factors, such as a more in-depth consideration of the labour market situation, unemployment rate, and education level, particularly in the context of sustainable development. In the future, research should be conducted on a broader research sample, including a comparative study of representatives from other countries, considering cultural and educational differences (e.g., the focus could be on Scandinavian countries, where steps are being taken toward a circular economy). This research could be supplemented with a quantitative survey in the form of a questionnaire among students from various countries. The survey could also include students from other majors or generational groups. A systems perspective is needed to combine individual and organisation-level approaches.

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