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# Pre-University engagement and education for sustainable development in Aruba: The Academic Foundation Year

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Universities of Small Island States (SIS) have the potential to fulfill a crucial role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but also face barriers to local capacity building. The University of Aruba partly addresses these challenges through the development of The Academic Foundation Year (AFY), a one-year pre-university program aiming to optimally equip students for higher education. This study aims to assess to what extent the program can foster the local embeddedness of the students in ecology, culture and history and an understanding of opportunities and challenges for sustainable development in SIS.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors provide examples of how the program incorporates education for sustainable development and how it emphasizes experiential learning. In addition, quantitative survey data and qualitative analysis of focus group meetings are used to reflect on the program's achievements and its potential for further development.

**Findings** – The survey results suggest that AFY courses not only increase knowledge but also change students' perceptions regarding sustainability. Indeed, key impacts emerging from the student focus group related to both academic preparation and engagement with sustainability. Reflections by teachers emphasized the importance of experiential learning, an expansive view of the SDGs and preparing students as citizens.

**Originality/value** – This study highlights that the program could provide a starting point for the development of similar initiatives in other SIS, the common basis being the fostering of sustainability literacy and social adoption of the SDGs.

**Keywords** Education for sustainable development, Small island states, Survey analysis, Focus group analysis, Experiential learning

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

### *Education for sustainable development in Small Island States*

In a world approaching ecological planetary boundaries and confronted with increasingly modified ecosystems (Steffen *et al.*, 2015), Small Island States (SIS) may very well be the litmus test for the efficacy of measures mitigating the impacts of climate change and promoting sustainable development (Parsons and Nalau, 2019). As sustainable development entails the transformative processes that would enable the natural environment and humanity to thrive continually (Sachs *et al.*, 2019), a particular concern for SIS is whether these processes can be initiated in a timely manner as a response to current threats (Eppinga *et al.*, 2020; Foley *et al.*, 2022). Compared to larger continental countries, SIS are subject to numerous additional threats due to their specific environmental, geographical, social and economic characteristics (Briguglio, 2014; de Scisciolo *et al.*, 2016), leading to greater vulnerability (Mycoo, 2018). These threats may limit the sustainability of ecological, economic, social and/or political components of SIS' social-ecological system (Ruggerio, 2021), thereby constraining future trajectories (Leopold, 1949; Schellnhuber, 1999). In this context, SIS' sustainability is linked to their resilience to respond, reorganize and adapt to internal and external threats (Briguglio, 2014; Foley *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, initiatives have been undertaken to build resilience to these threats, but the focus of these attempts is mostly externally oriented, rooted in international technical and logistical support and consultancy (Baldacchino, 2018). Such initiatives often do not consider the specific local context and may therefore lead to a lack of institutional and social adoption within an island state's social spheres (Mijts *et al.*, 2019; Murillo-Licea *et al.*, 2019; Petzold and Ratter, 2019; Mertens *et al.*, 2022).

The scale of SIS does not only translate to vulnerabilities but also creates a high potential for resilience building due to the short communication lines and close-knit communities where interventions can quickly have island-wide impacts (Crossley and Sprague, 2014; Howell and Fielding, 2019; Moncada *et al.*, 2021). Research and education are fundamental in understanding the driving forces behind the processes and the barriers to resilience building (Scott and Gough, 2007; Mycoo *et al.*, 2017). As stated in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), "ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" is key to empowering the people of this planet to embrace and promote sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Without adequate education (be it in the form of conventional childhood and adolescent education, higher education, adult education or lifelong learning opportunities), taking ownership of a local sustainable development program will remain an unsurmountable challenge for many (Wals and Benavot, 2017; Ferguson, 2020; Heleta and Bagus, 2021). As critical institutions of higher learning and academic research that are embedded in the island states, when integrated and socially involved, local universities play a crucial role in fostering an understanding of resilience and the implementation of the SDGs in general (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019) and the fourth SDG in particular (Ferguson and Roofe, 2020). Local universities, due to their connectedness and in-depth knowledge of the contextual variables of those specific island states, can play a pivotal role in developing inclusive and contextualized multidisciplinary solutions for the sustainability challenges at hand (Crossley and Sprague, 2014). Such a domestic process can shift the focus from vulnerability and victimization to building resilience and ownership through the adoption of sustainable development in SIS (de Souza *et al.*, 2015). For this purpose, these local universities need to establish local, regional and international partnerships facilitating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), develop knowledge bases for sustainable development in SIS and contribute to the formation of sufficient critical capacity to contextualize pathways for sustainable development (Mycoo *et al.*, 2017; Parsons and Nalau, 2019). The authors situate this study within the ESD literature primarily and secondarily in that of sustainability transformations. This paper refers to sustainable

development when focusing on goals (such as the SDGs) or processes of transformation; alternatively, sustainability is used to refer to the broader systems understanding behind sustainable development, encompassing ecological, economic, social, political and other dimensions (as may be relevant by context).

*The Academic Foundation Year at the University of Aruba and education for sustainable development*

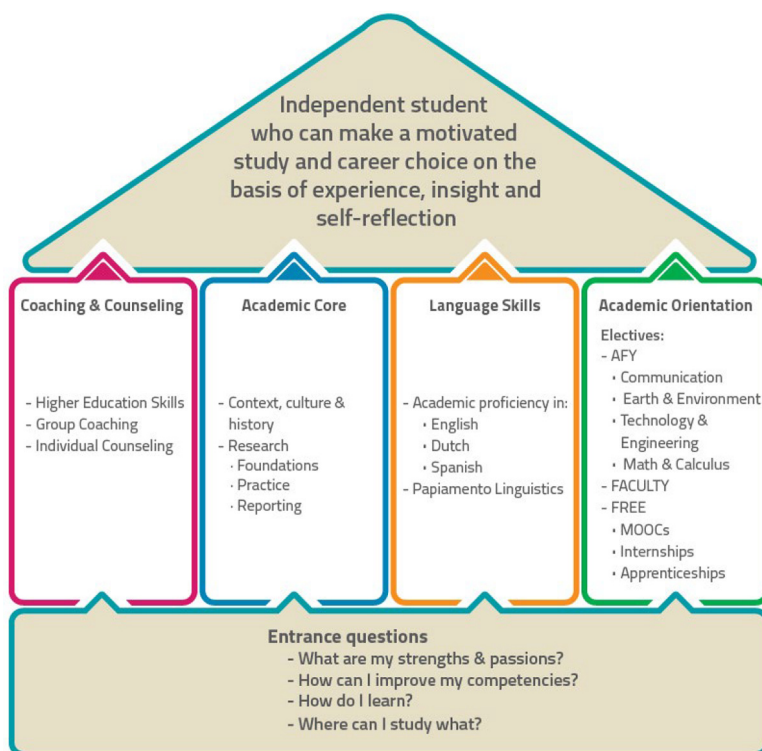
The above challenges are also encountered in the Caribbean small island state of Aruba (southern Caribbean). Compared to other SIS, Aruba has a relatively high population density and an economy that is heavily dependent on tourism (de Scisciolo *et al.*, 2016; Mijts *et al.*, 2019; Eppinga *et al.*, 2020). It has a relatively small amount of remaining forest and protected natural areas, and terrestrial and marine ecosystems are under pressure of tourism and other anthropogenic activities (Stevens, 2019; Vermeij *et al.*, 2020). The University of Aruba partly addresses these challenges through the development of the Academic Foundation Year (AFY). Offered since 2016, the AFY is a one-year full-time pre-university program aiming to optimally equip students for higher education, either in Aruba or abroad. Apart from the development of academic skills, the program aims to foster the local embeddedness of the students in context, culture and history, as well as an understanding of opportunities and challenges for sustainable development in SIS. The AFY program consists of four pillars in which all students participate (Figure 1): Coaching and Counseling for personal development, an Academic Core program for academic preparation of students, a Language Skills track for academic language training, and finally an Academic Orientation track that stimulates students to participate in electives as preparation for their definitive study choice.

Multiple courses of the AFY program explicitly focus on sustainable development and link to the SDGs through their design and execution, illustrated for four courses in particular in Figure 2. A more detailed description of these four courses is provided in Appendix 1, illustrating how excursions and fieldwork form an integral component of the learning experience of the AFY program (Figure 2; Appendix 1).

Previous research suggests that experiential learning through fieldwork, in addition to promoting a connection to sustainability issues, helps to improve in-depth learning, stimulates a deeper connection between the local environment and the students, and can result in the development of ownership and responsibility toward this local environment (Mycoo *et al.*, 2017; Zavaleta *et al.*, 2020). More generally, the integration of fieldwork in the curriculum promotes the application of learned knowledge and the emotional connection to the sustainability challenges that surround the students in SIS (Eppinga *et al.*, 2019). Within the context of natural science-based fieldwork, Zavaleta *et al.* (2020) highlight that fieldwork's challenges, setup and activities can promote the enhancement of several other factors in students, including a sense of belonging to a group and integration, self-efficacy and confidence in one's skills, outdoor skills and a sense of serving the broader society. For a natural science course that is part of the AFY program, *Introduction to Earth and Environment* (Figure 2), most of these attributes can be recognized as well (see Appendix 2). In summary, the aim of the AFY program to provide experiential learning that fosters students' local embeddedness and their understanding of opportunities and challenges for sustainable development in SIS is reflected in the program's design at both the curriculum level and the course level (Figures 1 and 2).

*Aim of this study*

The need to develop and implement impactful programs for ESD in SIS is broadly recognized (Crossley and Sprague, 2014; Eppinga *et al.*, 2020; Ferguson, 2020;



**Source:** Academic Foundation Year, University of Aruba (2021)

**Figure 1.**  
Overview of the aims  
and content of the  
Academic  
Foundation Year, a  
one-year full-time  
pre-university  
program offered by  
the University of  
Aruba, southern  
Caribbean

Mycoo *et al.*, 2022; Moody-Marshall, 2023). After the implementation of such programs, there is a need to monitor experiences from the perspectives of learners (Günther *et al.*, 2022) as well as educators (Corazza *et al.*, 2022). The aim of this study is to reflect on the implementation of the AFY program at the University of Aruba from both these perspectives. Specifically, the authors aim to address three research questions:

- RQ1. Do experiential learning experiences in the AFY program affect students' awareness and willingness to become agents of change toward sustainability?
- RQ2. What do (former) students consider to be the key impacts of the AFY program, especially in terms of their engagement in sustainable development?
- RQ3. What do AFY teachers consider to be the key impacts of the program, including the role of experiential learning and impacts on students' engagement in sustainable development?

Using these multiple perspectives, this study seeks to contribute to building a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for developing local ownership and initiatives for sustainable development in SIS through education.



**Figure 2.** Overview of how the four courses of the AFY program address the sustainable development goals in a local context

**Source:** Authors' own creation/work and UN (2015)

## Methods

### *Surveying students' environmental awareness and interest in sustainable development*

To answer the first research question, the authors conducted surveys among students participating in two of the courses of the AFY program: *Introduction to Earth and Environment* and *Research Practice*. Two years of survey data were collected, i.e. for the student cohort starting the program in 2018 and for the cohort that started in 2019. Each year, students filled out a survey before the start of the research project module of *Research Practice* and also filled out a survey after completion of the course module. Details of the survey are described in [Eppinga et al. \(2020\)](#), where also the data from the 2018 cohort are discussed. Briefly, the survey scored students' attitudes toward sustainability on a 24-point scale along three dimensions: Knowledge; Worldview; and Foreseen role of the university in leading sustainability initiatives (from here referred to as "Foreseen Role of University").

Within student cohorts, differences between premodule and postmodule scores were compared using pairwise *t*-tests in cases where scores were normally distributed (verified with Jarque–Bera tests) and variances in premodule and postmodule scores were similar (verified with Bartlett tests). In cases where scores were not normally distributed, differences were compared with Mann–Whitney *U* tests. Between student cohorts, differences in premodule scores and postmodule scores were compared using independent

samples *t*-tests, as scores on all three dimensions were normally distributed (verified with Jarque–Bera tests) and variances within cohorts were similar (verified with Bartlett tests).

All AFY students participating in the surveys followed the compulsory *Research Practice* course module, while a subset of these students followed the elective *Introduction to Earth and Environment* simultaneously. Hence, the authors could also identify potentially synergistic effects of following these two courses by analyzing the survey data separately for the student group that followed the elective *Introduction to Earth and Environment* and the group of students that did not. Following the above procedures testing for normality and homogeneity of variances, differences between student groups were compared with either independent samples *t*-tests or Mann–Whitney *U* tests.

#### *Students' and teachers' perspectives through focus group meetings*

To answer the second and third research questions, two focus groups were held: with AFY alumni as well as the teaching staff of the program. The authors believe that focus groups provide a valuable source of information, as it relates well to the AFY program as a social experience. Focus groups allow the researchers to hear about the same event from different perspectives and encourage exchange/reflection among participants. Also, as a way of thinking forward about the program, focus groups provide a useful setting for generating new ideas.

The first focus group consisted of six former students of AFY who completed the program in 2018, 2019 or 2020. All were attending university at the time, some in The Netherlands and some in Aruba. In addition, all former students had been involved in the Make Aruba A Greener Environment Club (M.A.G.E.C.). This environmental action committee was founded in 2017 by AFY students following the *Introduction to Earth and Environment* course. On their own initiative, M.A.G.E.C. began to organize activities such as beach cleanups and creating recycling bins (from recycled materials) for use around campus (Eppinga *et al.*, 2019). Students from subsequent cohorts of the AFY program have taken over the lead and membership of the organization, including the former students who participated in the focus group.

Participants were recruited via existing contacts of this paper's authors to achieve a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives within the sampling criteria. The authors specifically selected students that were alumni of M.A.G.E.C. to focus on those students who may have experienced a more significant impact of the program. It is acknowledged that this limits one's understanding of those students less interested and engaged in environmental conservation and sustainability. However, given the scope of the study, it was considered more valuable at this point to identify the "bright spots" of the program's impact. This latter approach is particularly complementary to the analyses of the survey data, which provide insight into the average and range of impressions among the whole student cohorts.

The second focus group consisted of four teachers in the AFY program. Six teachers had been recruited; however, at the last minute, two were unable to participate in person and submitted their answers via e-mail. The teachers taught a variety of courses within the AFY program; however, none were involved in the *Introduction to Earth and Environment* course to get a broader perspective (two authors of this paper teach that particular course). The teachers were based in Aruba, the USA and The Netherlands (some instructors visit Aruba one or more times a year and supplement this instruction with online learning and co-teaching).

Focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 h each and were conducted over Zoom. The student focus group occurred in late January 2021 and the teacher focus group in early February 2021.

While the authors' host institutions do not provide a formal ethics review, standard procedures were followed. Participants were sent introduction letters regarding the study

and information on risks and benefits. Consent was obtained orally and via the chat box in Zoom. Each focus group began with reflections on participants' personal experiences with the AFY program (see focus group guides in [Appendix 3](#)). Additional questions probed for insights on experiential education, impact of the program on students, ideas of responsibility regarding sustainable development in Aruba and insights regarding students who were less impacted by the program. At the end of the focus group, participants were invited to share any additional reflections. The focus groups were recorded in Zoom (video and audio) and transcribed, including notes on nonverbal communication (nodding, laughing, etc.).

Transcripts, as well as teacher e-mails, were imported into NVivo qualitative data management software for analysis. Coding was primarily deductive, focusing on the topics of the interview questions, though inductive codes were added as needed. The authors also coded for evidence of the factors promoting experiential learning listed in [Table A1 \(Appendix 2\)](#). Specifically, the factors sense of belonging, self-efficacy, role models and communal goals/service were all identified. In contrast, science identity and comfort outdoors were not brought up by the focus group participants, though no questions were asked about these factors specifically. In the analysis, the authors also considered group dynamics, noting when participants built on each other's ideas to form new understandings. This was especially prevalent in the teachers' focus group, though spontaneous conversation among the students also emerged. While inevitably, some participants contributed more than others, the facilitator assured that all views and voices were heard and all participants made significant contributions.

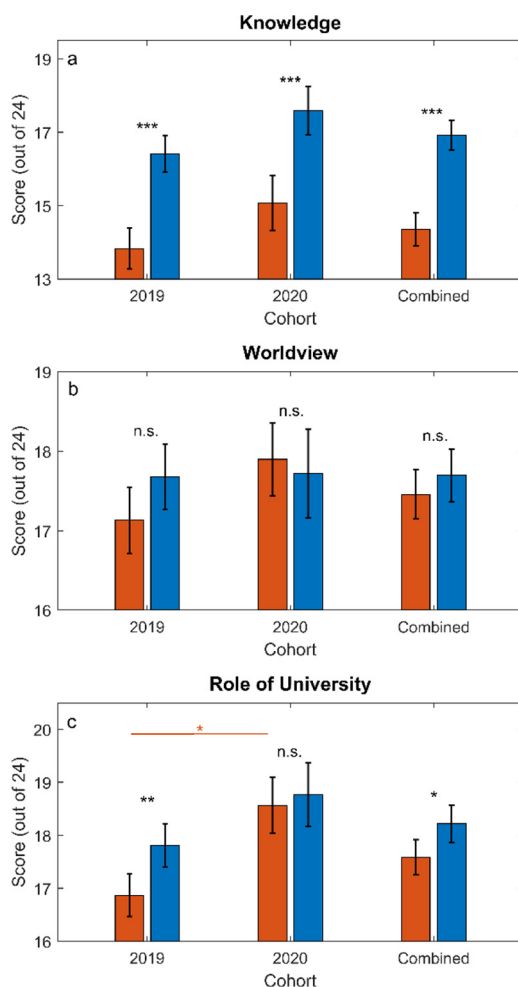
## Results

### *Student survey*

[Figure 3](#) shows that the trends identified in the first student cohort ([Eppinga et al., 2020](#)) were also present in the student cohort of the following year.

More specifically, student scores on the Knowledge component were higher after following the course module in *Research Practice* [[Figure 3\(a\)](#)]. In contrast, no changes in student scores on the component Worldview were observed [[Figure 3\(b\)](#)]. For the component Foreseen Role of University, there was an interesting difference between the two student cohorts [[Figure 3\(c\)](#)]. Before the start of the course module, students from the 2019 cohort scored higher on this component than students from the 2018 cohort [[Figure 3\(c\)](#)]. After completion of the course module, however, the 2018 cohort showed a stronger increase in scores as compared to the 2019 cohort, and the differences between cohorts were no longer statistically significant at this point [[Figure 3\(c\)](#)]. These results suggest that following the course *Research Practice* not only increased students' knowledge of sustainability and sustainable development but also their perspective on the university's role in promoting it.

Furthermore, prior to starting the courses, the student group that had chosen the elective course *Introduction to Earth and Environment* scored higher on all three dimensions measured in the survey [[Figure 4\(a\)](#), (c) and (e)]. This result is not surprising, as the expression of interest in following a course in earth and environmental science is likely associated with an interest in sustainability. Given the positive impact of the *Research Practice* course on the dimensions Knowledge and Foreseen Role of University, one could expect that the premodule differences would have become smaller after completing the course module, similar to the trends observed between the two cohorts [[Figure 3\(a\)](#) and (c)]. What was observed instead, however, was that the premodule differences remained after course module completion [[Figure 4\(a\)](#), (c) and (e)]. These results suggest that student scores increased proportionally to the premodule scores during the education program [[Figure 4\(b\)](#), (d) and (f)].

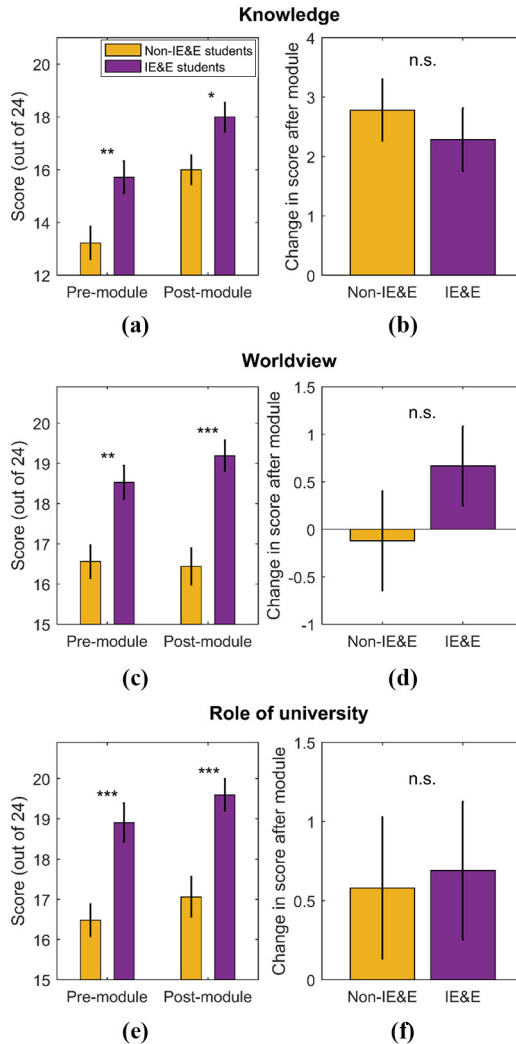


**Notes:** Asterisks indicate significant differences between groups: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , n.s: not significant  
**Source:** Authors' own creation/work

**Figure 3.** Results of student surveys held before and after following the first course module of *Research Practice*. Students were scored on three components: Knowledge, Worldview and Foreseen Role of University in leading sustainability initiatives

Interestingly, this latter effect suggests a synergistic effect of following the elective *Introduction to Earth and Environment* in conjunction with the *Research Practice* course module.

While the survey data show trends consistent with positive impacts of experiential learning on students' awareness and willingness to become agents of change toward sustainability (Figures 3 and 4, Appendix 4), attribution of these trends to specific course(s) (components) remains challenging. Yet, it is interesting to note that in students' individual reflections on the course *Introduction to Earth and Environment*, the importance of the fieldwork experiences is frequently mentioned (Eppinga et al., 2019).



**Figure 4.** Student surveys described in [Figure 3](#) also revealed that students following the *Introduction to Earth and Environment* (IE&E) course simultaneously scored higher before the courses started and that this difference was maintained after the course term

**Notes:** Asterisks indicate significant differences between groups: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , n.s.: not significant  
**Source:** Authors' own creation/work

*Students focus group*

Three key impacts of the program on students emerged from the student focus group: moving from interest to action on sustainability, engagement with sustainable development on Aruba and achieving self-efficacy both for preparation for university and for their sustainable development action. Detailed quotes referred to below are provided in [Appendix 4](#).

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*Moving from interest to action on sustainability*

All students in the focus group began the AFY program with an interest in environmental topics, often inspired by family members. However, they all found that participating in the program deepened this interest. As noted above, all the students in the focus group were members of the club M.A.G.E.C., so one major impact of participating in AFY was their engagement in environmental activities via M.A.G.E.C. Students explained that an instructor inspired them to self-organize and take local action for sustainable development [see also quote by Student 5 in [Appendix 4](#)]. While M.A.G.E.C. faces the consistent challenge of one-year turnover of the students, as well as more recently due to COVID-19 restrictions, students have still managed to continue organizing activities such as a partnership with a local surf shop to address damage from utility terrain vehicles driving on dunes. Beyond these organized activities, students also mentioned changing personal behaviors as a result of the program, such as eating less meat or avoiding plastic [S3]. Another important impact of the program was expanding the students' understanding of sustainability from only environment and climate change to also encompass issues such as equity within a sustainable development framing [S1].

*Fieldwork drives engagement with sustainable development on Aruba*

Experiencing local ecosystems via the program's fieldwork components helped convince students of the importance of taking action to protect the island environment, as one explains how they were inspired by the mangroves and their protection to think about protecting the island as a whole:

We [have] to do at least a few steps, or else we are going to lose everything precious, everything beautiful that we had. Because, for example, if the sea level rises up that much [indicates with hands] it may even take Aruba underneath it and I don't want my island to go under the sea [all smiling and nodding]. I don't think anybody wants that! [laughing] [...] If I can stop it, [I want to] find any way so that doesn't happen. [S3]

The students agreed that despite the grave consequences for Aruba, few people on the island were taking climate change seriously. They explained how it is up to them, the young generation, to counteract this trend [S6]. Overall, students were very knowledgeable and reflective about sustainable development issues on Aruba and globally but often frustrated at the lack of action or limited actions they saw from those in power. They were more optimistic about their own generation, describing them as more open-minded and willing to change.

*Developing skills and achieving self-efficacy for university and for sustainable development action*

A key goal of the AFY program is to prepare students for university level work, and all students in the focus group felt that they had benefited in this way. They mentioned learning skills such as writing research papers, studying, time management and presentation skills. Two students expressed gratitude toward an English teacher that helped them with their university applications. As well as these concrete skills, teachers had helped and supported students in many ways. As one explains, the teachers "guided me to my power," helping her to achieve self-efficacy (one of the outcomes mentioned in [Table A1](#)) [S3]. This sense of empowerment was echoed by another student, who explained how their experiences with AFY had allowed them to develop skills and expertise that they could then pass on to new generations of students: "We can use our limited expertise [laughing] to teach the members, execute projects, et cetera" [S4].

While the students in the studied sample were already interested in environmental and sustainability issues, the support of teaching staff, educational opportunities and community within AFY allowed them to develop new skills, join forces for local

engagement, inspired their own personal behavioral changes and prepared them to succeed at the university and continue their learning. One explains the value of the community of other students in M.A.G.E.C. that provided a space to discuss sustainability topics, “I loved that last year I was part of M.A.G.E.C. and I had all these people to talk about stuff with” [S1]. This shows the ways that AFY provided a context for working toward common goals for these students (another outcome listed in [Table A1](#)).

#### *Teachers focus group*

Three interlinked themes emerged from the teachers focus group: the importance of experiential learning, an expansive view of the SDGs as more than just about the environment (echoing the student learning) and the importance of preparing students not only for university but also as citizens.

#### *Experiential learning is key and encompasses more than field trips*

Teachers mentioned a broad variety of experiential learning opportunities within the program, from meeting university students, to field trips, to unique assignments that engaged students with the local histories, such as finding and researching the place from an old postcard of Aruba. Experiential learning is also a key component of learning research methods. One teacher explains how by doing instead of just learning about research, the students become much more engaged [T4].

The teachers also discussed experiential learning in terms of classroom participation. They mentioned the challenge of guiding students to a more participatory form of learning, explaining that initially “they hate it” when they are called on in class [T3]. Learning to participate in their education is thus also a key component of AFY. One teacher explains how this is a big adjustment for most students compared to high school, where students often have the mindset of, “I am going to take a lecture, I take notes, will this be on the test and I write everything down and then I know I will pass. And now it is more a ‘doing’ type of education and that is scary” [T5]. Experiential education in AFY, from the teachers’ perspective, therefore, involves both the aforementioned field trips and research projects but also extends to the classroom in the form of how to engage in active learning.

#### *Moving toward a more comprehensive view of Sustainable Development Goals to encompass not just the “green” but also the social and justice aspects*

The teachers in the focus group came from diverse backgrounds not necessarily related to sustainability. Some teachers were familiar with sustainability but not necessarily the SDGs, which they became familiar with via their teaching in AFY. They emphasized that the program was well-aligned with the SDGs, particularly around education. The framework is a useful didactic tool as it facilitates application to a diverse array of topics within the program ([Figure 2](#)). One teacher explained that the SDG framework is also useful for highlighting links between different issues, such as between health and the environment [T4].

The teachers then discussed an idea one had presented earlier in the focus group of connecting the SDGs to not only environmental issues but also issues of justice. The teachers in the focus group agreed that this would be a valuable goal, asking, “How can we actually link what we are doing in the different courses, in the different segments of AFY to these goals?” [T5]. One teacher (responding via e-mail) suggested greater collaborations with local businesses to solve real-world sustainability problems [T6]. However, another (also replying via e-mail) cautioned against making sustainable development the “hidden message” of AFY, explaining, “I do not want to control how students think about SD

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[sustainable development] – do they prefer green solutions, sustainable energy use, or to they not give these things priority – it is up to themselves” [T2].

### *Preparing young people as both students and citizens*

One teacher explained seeing their role as preparing citizens of the island of Aruba and “as people who are going to be part of society” explaining that therefore “there is always a link with these [SDG] goals” [T5]. The other teachers then all agreed that this was an important goal of theirs, though most had not made the connection between sustainability and Aruban identity and citizenship before [T3, T4]. The teachers went on to explain how preparing the students as citizens and to understand their own home and identity was important for the students’ future, especially as so many would likely live outside the island and would confront stereotypes [T1]. The challenge of so many students leaving the island was also highlighted by both teachers responding via e-mail. One noted that a potential benefit of AFY is that more students may decide to stay on the island [T2].

Part of developing students as citizens involves building students’ self-confidence to succeed at university: “what we are really trying to give them [is] to have that ability to realize that they belong [at university]” [T1]. This teacher explained that you could see the impact of the program just by the level of tasks the AFY students were doing (e.g. already conducting research projects), beyond that of much more advanced students in a large American university [T1].

Interestingly, the teachers had the impression that students in AFY struggled with moving from individual change to changing systems and structures. Yet, in the student focus group, the alumni quite eloquently described structural barriers and connections between local and global issues. A possible explanation is that via the students’ engagement in local sustainability projects and continuing studies at university, they had learned to shift their thinking to encompass broader system-level factors.

In summary, the teachers saw their role as developing the students not only academically but also as citizens and as Arubans to prepare them for the next stages of their life and career. This wholistic preparation of the students encompassing not only just knowledge and skills but also self-confidence and active experiential learning while connecting to local and global sustainable development issues, reflects well the student focus group results. There, the student alumni also emphasized their personal growth, especially in connection to their engagement in sustainable development activities.

## **Discussion**

Transformation toward sustainable development is urgently needed. A key instrument to achieve transformation of societies is quality education in all disciplines and at all levels (Mycoo *et al.*, 2022; Moody-Marshall, 2023). While education features prominently within the SDGs, it has been argued that the SDGs may not sufficiently prioritize the building of local institutional and other forms of capacity in the higher education sector in low-income countries (Heleta and Bagus, 2021; Biermann *et al.*, 2022). These include many SIS. In this study, the authors described a preuniversity program that aims to prepare students from SIS for a successful pursuit of higher education with the additional aim to reduce the barriers to local capacity building. Moreover, the program takes a holistic approach to ESD, not only isolating sustainability to a specific course in the program but also approaching sustainability from different scientific disciplines in different courses offered throughout the program (Figures 1 and 2). This vision is in line with previous notions of the need to include sustainability education throughout the curricula offered by higher education institutions

rather than confining it to isolated courses (Moore, 2005; Dmochowski *et al.*, 2016; Eppinga *et al.*, 2020). In the courses described, ESD is strongly tied to experiential learning (Figure 2).

After the implementation of ESD initiatives, evaluation of impact constitutes a major challenge (Kanada *et al.*, 2021). For example, developing research methodologies that measure intangible value changes is not straightforward (Harder *et al.*, 2014), and different methodologies may hamper the synthesis of findings from separate case studies (Kanada *et al.*, 2021). While standardization of research methods could improve the comparability between different case studies, sufficient flexibility is also needed to consider the unique characteristics of both the initiative and the social-ecological study system in which it is developed (Eppinga *et al.*, 2019). The approach followed in this study may provide a means to address both these challenges. Specifically, the survey component of the study could form the basis for a more standardized evaluation framework which could be used to evaluate similar ESD initiatives in related settings throughout the Caribbean or beyond (Ferguson, 2020; Ferguson and Roofe, 2020). By complementing the survey approach with qualitative methods that focus on in-depth analysis of students' and educators' perceptions, context-specific factors determining the performance of ESD initiatives may be identified as well (Cottafava *et al.*, 2019; Corazza *et al.*, 2022; Günther *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, further research could help to identify ways to reach a broader suite of students who may not be initially interested in sustainability topics. One way forward, as indicated by the presented results, is to emphasize a more comprehensive view of sustainable development, going beyond that which is "green" to also consider issues of identity and society. This could allow ESD to connect to a broader curriculum and may be especially important for students from less privileged backgrounds, as suggested by the teacher's focus group results. Going one step further, one could consider how to engage a broader group of students in becoming agents of change for sustainability. This may require a major change in current curricula, as students need to learn interdisciplinary and systems thinking, develop interpersonal and strategic competencies and learn to think about norms and values as well as future scenarios (Wiek *et al.*, 2011). Further research into effectively making such curricular design changes would form another promising avenue. Based on these observations, the authors believe that the AFY program of the University of Aruba could provide a starting point for the development and evaluation of similar initiatives.

### **Conclusion: implications for education for Education for Sustainable Development**

While preparing prospective students for their future trajectory in higher education, the multidisciplinary approach of the AFY program, embedded within the reality of the students' local socio-ecological context, creates an inherent link with ESD (Figure 2). The survey results (Figures 3 and 4) suggest that experiential learning activities in the AFY program affect students' awareness and willingness to become agents of change toward sustainability. This notion was supported by the findings of the student focus group, which highlighted the importance of experiential learning in driving key impacts of the program: moving from passive interest to active agents of change on sustainability, engagement with sustainability on Aruba and achieving self-efficacy both for preparation for university and for their sustainable development action. The importance of experiential learning was also highlighted in the teacher focus group. This focus group also brought forward the importance of a comprehensive view of the SDGs as more than just environmental sustainability and the importance of preparing students not only for university but also to be engaged and critical citizens. Student citizenship, in this sense, could be fostered by including civics, political economy or moral philosophy within ESD curriculums. These observations align well with recent calls for an integrated and multidisciplinary approach to

ESD to stimulate learners in developing a holistic view of sustainability. Together, the survey results, focus group results and the emergence of student-led initiatives within the campus community suggest that the design of the AFY program provides a useful template to facilitate such outcomes.

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### Further reading

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### Appendix 1

In the main text, it was illustrated for four courses of the Academic Foundation Year (AFY) program how they link to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This [Appendix](#) provides a more detailed description for each of these four courses.

*Context, Culture and History* is a five ECTS (European Credit and Transfer Accumulation System, in which one unit equates to 28 hours of study) compulsory course given in the first quarter of the AFY program. It gives a broad introduction to the science of sociology and cultural studies, embedding them within the local context of Aruba and the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR). The course consists of four interconnected parts. Part 1 gives an introduction to important definitions and theories of sociology and cultural studies serving as the theoretical academic background. These concepts are presented using a flipped classroom approach to stimulate students' participation. Part 2 shows how to use these theories while zooming in on issues intertwined around family, religion, education, social stratification and culture within small island states (SIS) in the WCR. Part 3 serves to contextualize these phenomena at the local level, immersing students within the cultural and social challenges found on Aruba. This is achieved through the organization of several excursions and reflective activities in various locations on the island (as shown in [Figure 2](#) of the main text). Students are stimulated to look and analyze objects and places of their daily life (i.e. going in the streets studying graffiti/street art, visiting a cemetery and analyzing the tombstones within it and visiting historical buildings found on self-selected postcards) through a sociological and historical perspective. In addition, students have to make a socio-cultural self-portrait and share it in class. This

self-portrait is constructed by comparing students' views of themselves and of the Aruban culture and society with the perceptions of their family members, friends and acquaintances obtained through semistructured interviews. The final part of the course, Part 4, is devoted to the creation of an art project (i.e. visual arts, music, poetry, dance, story-telling, etc.) which is usually combined with a visit to the art district in the city of San Nicolas, which students can use as a means for the reflection and expression of the complex cultural and social issues they investigated on their island. In addition, through the development and explanation of this project, the importance surrounding the student's own cultural, contextual and historical heritage is emphasized. This course serves to increase students' awareness of the contextual and historical dimensions affecting people's perception of reality and how culture interacts with identity-building and modes of interaction. This disciplinary frame of reference and the exposure to the regional and local socio-cultural issues incentivizes the students to reflect on the relevance and importance of developing inclusive, just and sustainable societies. This is seen as a key issue for Sustainable Development (SD), as highlighted by the SDG 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable).

*Research Foundations* is a five ECTS compulsory course given in the second quarter of the AFY program. The course aims to expose students to research practices within the realms of humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. In addition to equipping the students with important academic skills, it stimulates and exposes students to different disciplines and fields of research to help them make an informed study choice. Within this course, students get acquainted with the basics of research language, methodological approaches, study design and the principles of what constitutes evidence and argumentation. Students learn the importance and initial skills for developing original studies, construct feasible and relevant research questions, and are assisted in the development of context-based interdisciplinary research at the individual and collaborative level. SD and SD research are embedded within the curriculum as the SDGs are the departing point from where possible research topics are then further developed. A key component of this course is a research project on socioeconomic aspects of sustainable development: social (in)equality, geopolitical tensions, gender, age, economy and the livable society. By participation in this module that targets SDGs 3, 5, 8, 10 and 11, the students develop a critical attitude toward interpretation of and reporting on data for sustainability assessments.

*Research Practice* is a five ECTS compulsory course given in the third block of the AFY program. It offers training in research skills constructed around SD. By further building on the *Resource Foundations* course described above, it allows students to dive deeper into the SDGs by stimulating students to ponder on the possible implementation of these general goals within the local context of Aruba. In an initial four-week project, students are tasked with formulating a research project that provides information needed to develop more sustainable practices at the university level and on the university campus grounds. Student projects either focus on ongoing (un)sustainable practices on campus, on ongoing (un)sustainable practices by university students, on the biodiversity currently present on campus or on technological innovations that could be implemented by the university. Data collection methods used by the students include campus community surveys, biological inventories, lab measurements and behavioral observations. The findings of the research are then presented to the entire campus community in the form of poster presentations that are orally introduced by the students themselves during a final symposium in the university's main auditorium. This module strives for engaging students to rethink their role within their community (i.e. university campus or broader community) as possible actors of change toward a more sustainable society. In addition, it promotes a different view of the role of the university from a place of knowledge delivery and creation toward becoming a vector for SD and ESD. A further description of this module that focuses on SDGs 3, 6, 7, 12 and 16 can be found in [Eppinga et al. \(2020\)](#).

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*Introduction to Earth and Environment* is a five ECTS elective course given in the third block of the AFY program. This course strives to give an introductory overview of important theories and disciplines within the natural sciences. Within this course, attention is given to the interconnection and interaction of humans and the natural environment, highlighting some key sustainability challenges that the world, especially SIS, are currently facing (e.g. loss of natural areas and biodiversity and the unsustainable use of natural resources). The course is structured in three interconnected and complementary parts. The first part focuses on giving the students the necessary theoretical background by introducing them to broad theories and functioning of the Earth system, its biosphere and the climate system. In the second part, students are given the opportunity to apply those broad theories and put them into practice within the local context of Aruba. They are trained in scientific research methodologies and perform three fieldwork excursions investigating and learning about different sustainability challenges found on Aruba and the importance of the local ecosystems and their ecosystem services. In the third part of the course, students learn to report their findings in a scientific manner via the means of a poster and research report where the theoretical and practical knowledge are combined. The poster is also presented to the broader community of Aruba during a public symposium held in the visitor center of the nature conservation NGO Fundacion Parke Nacional Arikok. This final activity is meant to increase the accessibility of academic knowledge to the local community, and it helps elucidate to students the responsibility and obligations that researchers have toward the broader community. A more in-depth description of this module that addresses SDGs 13, 14 and 15 can be found in [Eppinga et al. \(2019\)](#).

*Source:* Authors' own creation/work

Promoted factors	Elements within the IE&E course that promote the listed factors
Sense of belonging – social belonging and feeling of membership	<p><i>Included activities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students work in teams of 4–5 students and travel as a class toward the field destinations in a bus;</li> <li>• At the end of each field trip, the students are rewarded with food and drinks and have an opportunity to share their experiences; and</li> <li>• Within the course, the groups are asked to prepare together and present a poster presentation</li> </ul> <p><i>Missing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build-in time off outside the classroom</li> </ul>
Self-efficacy – self-confidence in scientific skills and competence	<p><i>Included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are in charge to define the research questions within the assigned topics, making them an active participator in the development of the research;</li> <li>• The students are trained in the development of skills for data collection and analysis using low-cost fieldwork equipment, trained in species identification, as id-sheets for the local fauna and flora are provided and learn the importance of recording their observations accurately, as the data is shared between groups. In addition, they learn how to report their findings through a scientific report and poster; and</li> <li>• Students also realize that with their research, they are contributing to the collection and reporting of valuable data, which are then shared with the wider community of Aruba during the final symposium in the visitor center of the nature conservation NGO Fundacion Parke Nacional Arikok (FPNA). This promotes their understanding of the important role that a researcher has with respect to the wider society</li> </ul>
Develop comfort outdoors – fieldwork and living skills	<p><i>Included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers and supporting rangers from the local nature conservation NGO FPNA support the students in the field and teach them values and model behavior to follow within the field</li> </ul> <p><i>Missing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicitly teach, model outdoor skills?</li> </ul>
Role models	<p><i>Included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The course teachers travel and join the students during the fieldwork and eating;</li> <li>• Throughout the course, 1:1 sessions are organized with the students to promote personal development and mentoring; and</li> <li>• For the research projects and the fieldwork, a diverse staff is hired, ranging from guest lecturers, park rangers of FPNA, local experts in the field, who can contribute to support and inspire the students</li> </ul>
Communal goals and provide a service to society	<p><i>Included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By placing the students in groups and exposing them to the challenging conditions that can be found in the field, they are stimulated to develop group problem-solving skills; and</li> <li>• By conducting research on relevant local environmental challenges and promoting the sharing of their finding with the broader community, the student’s stewardship for nature and environmental quality and health is stimulated</li> </ul> <p><i>Missing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use student-led inquiry to facilitate discovery</li> <li>• Explore ecology and evolutionary biology links to the stewardship of nature, education, environmental quality and health</li> </ul>
Science identity – a recognition by self and others as scientists	<p><i>Included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within the IE&amp;E course, students are assisted in performing performing proper scientific research. They learn the importance of defining and formulating concrete research questions and hypotheses, as well as the value of setting up and preparing well for performing outdoor scientific research, and then perform it. Finally, by analyzing and reporting their own collected data, they learn the fundamental value of using evidence to explain one’s findings</li> </ul>

**Source:** Authors’ own creation/work

**Table A1.**  
Adapted table from Zavaleta *et al.* (2020) to illustrate the factors contained in the course *Introduction to Earth and Environment* that are claimed by the authors and references therein to support and promote learning

In the main text, it was noted that the integration of fieldwork in the curriculum promotes the application of learned knowledge and the emotional connection to local sustainability challenges. More specifically, within the context of natural science-based fieldwork, [Zavaleta et al. \(2020\)](#) and references therein) it was also noted that fieldwork's challenges, setup and activities can promote the enhancement of several other factors in students as, for instance, a sense of belonging to a group and integration, self-efficacy and confidence in one's skills, outdoor skills and a sense of serving the broader society. This [Appendix](#) shows the extent to which these elements can also be recognized within the course *Introduction to Earth and Environment* ([Table A1](#)), which is an elective within the University of Aruba's Academic Foundation Year.

*Source:* Authors' own creation/work

### Appendix 3

In the main text, the main findings of two focus groups with stakeholders of the University of Aruba's Academic Foundation Year (AFY) program were presented. The main text also referred to the specific focus group guides that were developed by the lead author (finalized in January 2021) in preparation. These focus group guides are presented below.

*Source:* Authors' own creation/work

#### Focus groups guide: teachers

*Plan:*

- Review consent and confidentiality and ground rules; ask permission to record (use chat box). Ground rules:
  - Treat everyone with respect.
  - Share and listen.
  - Feel free to jump in “popcorn” style if you like and discuss with each other.
  - Keep video on, turnoff mic if we have trouble (leave on if possible for more spontaneous conversation).
- Introduction (pass the ball to each other), name, where are you now, plus icebreaker question (e.g. a favorite place).
- Discussion questions/assure key themes are covered, give everyone a chance to talk and allow them to talk with each other.

*Questions:*

- (1) I am interested in understanding how the program has shaped how you think about sustainable development, especially in the context of Aruba. I am wondering if you could each share an experience or reflection either from during the program or after; that helps me to understand the impact it had on you. For example, a class project or field trip or perhaps an experience afterwards where you reacted differently than you might have before.
- (2) Are there new places or ecosystems you got to know during the program? Or known places you learned something new about?
- (3) Did the program inspire you to become involved in sustainability projects? Or turn you off from doing so?
- (4) Have you had conversations with family or friends where you realized you had different views on island sustainability?
- (5) Do you feel responsible for the sustainable development of Aruba? Or do you see this as someone else's responsibility?

- (6) Thoughts on why others did not have such a meaningful experience?
  - (7) How did you experience the coaching element of the program?
  - (8) Are there any topics we haven't discussed that you would like to share? Is there a question you wish I had asked?
- Conclude session and thank participants. Feedback – how was this for you?

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### Focus groups guide: teachers

#### *Plan:*

- Review consent and confidentiality and ground rules; ask permission to record (use chat box). Ground rules:
  - Treat everyone with respect.
  - Share and listen.
  - Feel free to jump in “popcorn” style if you like and discuss with each other.
  - Keep video on, turnoff mic if we have trouble (leave on if possible for more spontaneous conversation).
- Introduction (pass the ball to each other), name, where are you now, plus icebreaker question (e.g. a favorite place).
- Discussion questions/assure key themes are covered, give everyone a chance to talk and allow them to talk with each other.

#### *Questions:*

- (1) We will start by reflecting on your own experiences and then move on to thinking about impacts on students. I am interested in understanding how the program has shaped how you think about sustainable development, especially in the context of Aruba. I am wondering if you could each share an experience or reflection either from during the program or after; that helps me to understand the impact it had on you.
  - (2) How important do you consider experiential learning to be within the AFY course(s) you teach?
  - (3) To what extent are the experiential learning experiences you provide related to sustainability challenges on Aruba?
  - (4) What is your view on the current amount of attention paid to the sustainable development of SIS within the AFY program? Would you like to see this changed, and if so, what would be possible ways to do so?
  - (5) Do you feel responsible for promoting sustainable development of Aruba (e.g. through the AFY or otherwise)? Or do you see this as someone else's responsibility? What is the role of the university in promoting sustainable development?
  - (6) Thoughts on why some students have more meaningful experiences than others?
  - (7) What do you see as the role of the coaching element of the program?
  - (8) Are there any topics we have not discussed that you would like to share? Is there a question you wish I had asked?
- Conclude session and thank participants. Feedback – how was this for you?

### Codebook

The codebook that was developed as part of the focus group analysis is shown in [Table A2](#) below.

Name	Description	Files	References
Challenges	Challenges faced by students in the program or with M.A.G.E.C. or otherwise	2	5
Coaching	Experiences with the coaching element of the program	4	6
Communal goals	Communal goals and provide a service to society	1	3
Environmental engagement or action	Volunteer work, political work, personal behavior in support of the environment (Aruba or elsewhere)	1	7
Experiential learning	From students: experiences with experiential learning and from teachers: importance and relation to sustainable development	4	12
Impact of program	How did the program change or shape the students?	3	20
Personal connection to Aruba	How the AFY has (or has not) shaped students' personal connection to Aruba (ecosystems + people) as well as their identity as Arubans and ability to cope with challenges and stereotypes	2	5
Preparation for university	Ways that the program prepares students for university (or does not do so)	1	6
Program improvement	Feedback and ideas on what could make the program better and/or what is not working (or for whom)	2	7
Responsibility	Views on who takes or should or does (not) take responsibility for sustainable development (Aruba or globally)	1	4
Role models	Influence of teachers or other kinds of role models on students	1	2
Role of University SD Aruba	In promoting sustainable development in Aruba	3	4
	How the AFY has (or has not) shaped thinking about sustainable development (in Aruba); and/or thoughts on SD in Aruba	3	17
SD in AFY	For teachers: if the focus on sustainable development within AFY is enough or if more is needed	3	13
Self-efficacy	Self-confidence in scientific skills and competence or in other kinds of skills developed via course or extracurricular activities	2	4
Sense of belonging	Social belonging and feeling of membership	2	2
Solution driven	Focus on "solving" sustainable development problems	1	1
Sustainable development global	How the AFY has (or has not) shaped thinking about sustainable development (globally)	2	3

**Source:** Authors' own creation/work

**Table A2.**  
Codebook that was developed in the analysis of two focus groups with stakeholders of the University of Aruba's Academic Foundation Year (AFY) program

**Appendix 4**

In the Results section of the main text, the input from the two focus groups with stakeholders of the University of Aruba's Academic Foundation Year (AFY) program was summarized and paraphrased. This [Appendix](#) presents the verbatim quotes by students (S) and teachers (T) from which these inferences were partly derived.

*Source:* Authors' own creation/work

**Students**

**Table A3.**  
Moving from interest to action on sustainability

Instructor inspires and supports students	The girl who started [M.A.G.E.C.] was talking to [an AFY instructor] and asking him, what is it that we can do against climate change? Is there anything that we can do? And that is when he told her, when you can find more people who want the same then you can very much do something, like little things on the island itself. [S5 Jan 2021]
Changing personal behavior	I was already interested in sustainability. I wasn't really doing much with it, but I was reading a lot of articles and documentaries because it always interested me. And the course just made me more interested in being more sustainable. Right now, I still eat meat, but I eat it less than I did before. And [I am] also, trying to be green, so trying to use reusable bags, and trying not to buy stuff with plastic around them or going to stores where they don't really sell a lot of plastic and trying to use reusable bottles so you don't really waste that much. And I really enjoy that part. [S3 Jan 2021]
Expanding understanding of sustainable development	I think just as [S4] said, AFY was aligning some parts of [my interests]. . . Before I came to AFY, I was more [focused on] really caring about the environment and climate change. . . [then] I got the opportunity to represent M.A.G.E.C. in Cuba at a youth conference by UNESCO about the sustainable development goals . . . [I learned that] it is not just about climate change, it is also about the fair wages and equality. [S1 Jan 2021]

**Table A4.**  
Fieldwork drives engagement with sustainability on Aruba

It is up to the young generation	I don't think they [most people on the island] are aware. They just think it is like there and nobody needs to do anything about it. Like us, that we know firsthand that this is happening [climate change and sea level rise]. It is up to us to spread awareness. [S6 Jan 2021]
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**Table A5.**  
Developing skills and achieving self-efficacy for university and for sustainable development action

Prepared for any assignment	AFY really helped me and it not only [for] speaking skills or anything but just academically. I feel more prepared to tackle any assignment we do. [S6 Jan 2021]
Supportive teachers	What I really liked about AFY were the teachers. They were really interactive, they cared for you and they will do anything to help you out . . . The way that they guided me to my power now, even now I switched studies, it was just really great to see and to help bridge that gap between high school and college. It really helped me out and then I am still using it to this day, even though I am in a different country, I really do appreciate that about AFY. So, I really enjoyed the aspects that gave me time to learn more about myself and give me time to know what I wanted to do. [S3 Jan 2021]
Passing on expertise	For the Earth and Environment course, it was really nice because, we got to do hands-on work, go to the National Park. I wouldn't say that it has fundamentally changed my view on sustainability but it really highlighted the importance of sustainability. Because before that I was busy with the topic. And with M.A.G.E.C. as a group, we have grown a lot and especially now that we are in SISSTEM [a program at the local university] I think we have more to offer also in M.A.G.E.C. We can use our limited expertise [laughing] to teach the members, execute projects, <i>etcetera</i> . [S4 Jan 2021]

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**Teachers****Education for sustainable development**

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Postcard assignment connects students to local histories

This postcard assignment for instance in which the students would have the opportunity to go on a website where there is an archive with a lot of old postcards from all over the world and select one in which Aruba was also presented . . . The assignment was actually to go out on the island and find that single location where the picture was taken and do some research on that location and sometimes students had no idea that this place actually existed. So that is a beautiful example of how we actually tackle that type of learning. [T5 Feb 2021]

Experiential learning drives engagement

It's a doing process because we can explain the steps but when you are 16, 17 years old or 18 it becomes a little boring . . . it becomes a little bit more exciting when you are out there doing it and analyzing the data and seeing the importance of your study and presenting your study and having people asking questions about your study. We do that. [T4 Feb 2021]

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**Table A6.**  
Experiential learning is key and encompasses more than field trips

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Linking sustainability and health

I am now seeing the importance of the development goals and understanding why they matter more than before . . . I think whenever we speak about sustainability, they [the people of Aruba] would say ok, so that is linked to the environment, but it is more than that [T5 and T3 nodding] and I think that is where we have the opportunity to create an awareness that it has to do with the health, I think now people are realizing the link between health and the environment because of COVID. But it is more than just the environment, there are other links that we can speak about. [T3 and T5 nodding][T4 Feb 2021]

Linking SDGs and justice

The social, the justice, the belonging, those are the factors we don't really think about when the word sustainable comes to mind. And I suspect that is probably true in our students as well, when you mention sustainability, they are thinking how to make things green [T5 nodding]. . . Achieving social justice for people of color in San Nicolas, I don't think people associate it with sustainability. That is not what comes in mind, even though we can make it fit . . . Maybe that is the shift that we . . . should be looking for as a faculty, maybe we should aim to change that perception in our students. [T3 Feb 2021]

**Table A7.**  
Moving toward a more expansive view of SDGs to encompass not just the "green" but also the social and justice aspects

Preparing citizens	I do see my role as a teacher. . . [as] preparing citizens of this island [T4 and T3 nodding]. For me that's why I link it to the sustainability goals, not explicitly, but . . . there is always going to be a link with the goals. Especially if you see instead of just students who are being prepared academically, I am seeing them as citizens, as people who are going to be part of society, so there is always a link with these goals. [T5 Feb 2021]
Identity and sustainability	I never would have said sustainability, but I do think one of my goals and pretty much everyone in high school is to create a sense of Caribbean identity in them, not to just [T4 nodding] leave and never look back . . . but I wouldn't, up until today, I never would have thought [of that] as sustainability. [T3 Feb 2021]
Confronting stereotypes	People will start asking them questions, their accent comes out and then all the stereotypes. So preparing students for that kind of a reality that will hit them . . . is one of the underlying mandates of this kind of experiential learning. [T1 Feb 2021]
Staying on the island	AFY helps to overcome the "automatic pilot" of leaving to study in NL – students have a year to reflect, to grow, for better orientation, to weigh options. As a result, some talented students consciously decide to stay on Aruba for study and career and others may grow in determination to come back after studies (although I have no evidence of that). [T2 Feb 2021]
Confidence to belong	I think we impart as teachers the idea that you can see yourself here, look, people here look like you, there is no skill they have that is different than you. You just got to basically find the skill that you already have and bring it out of you, yourself. So that is what we are really trying to give them [is] to have that ability to realize that they belong. [T1 Feb 2021]

**Table A8.**  
Preparing young  
people as both  
students and citizens

### References cited in appendices

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