

# Strengthening Sustainability Content in the Elective Curriculum

*Authored by Student Sustainability Associates Lauren Buchanan and Rob Self*

Over the past several years, [Student Sustainability Associates](#) (SSAs) have investigated the prevalence of sustainability topics in the [Harvard Business School](#) (HBS) first year [Required Curriculum](#) (RC). The outcome has been an implementation of new, sustainability-related cases into the existing RC curriculum. Interested in building on this work, we sought to develop an understanding of the sustainability course offerings in HBS second year [Elective Curriculum](#) (EC).

With increased interest in environmental topics by incoming students as evidenced by year-over-year growth in interest metrics tracked by the [HBS Business and Environment Initiative](#) (BEI) and the founding of the Sustainability Club, we saw sustainability curriculum as a driver for admitted student matriculation into the HBS program. Further, during our own business school application processes, we were struck by how challenging it was to identify HBS's sustainability and environment related course offerings, and how few there seemed to be compared to the other leading business schools.

This realization led us to develop a project aimed at analyzing the EC sustainability course offerings, making information about the existing offerings more accessible to RCs during the course selection process and to provide recommendations on how HBS can expand its sustainability course offerings.

## Methodology

To deliver on our analysis we devised an action plan which consisted of four major parts:

1. Refining the scope of the project with input from the BEI, SSAs, and HBS Faculty.
2. Creating an initial quantitative benchmarking of the EC curriculum relative to peer schools and best-in-class sustainability schools to inform the second iteration of analysis.
3. Further diving into course analysis with input from faculty to identify and recommend EC course offerings and improvement plans.
4. Circulating the findings of our analysis by:

- Providing interested RCs with a comprehensive list of sustainability course offerings at HBS, and graduate schools eligible for cross-registration (namely Harvard Law School, Harvard Kennedy School, and MIT Sloan).
- Working with the BEI to institutionalize this analysis on a yearly basis.
- Partnering with faculty to develop future sustainability course offerings driven by student input.

## Project Findings

In analyzing course offerings at HBS relative to the [Stanford Graduate School of Business](#), the [Wharton School of Business](#), the [MIT Sloan School](#), the [Columbia Business School](#), the [Bard MBA in Sustainability](#), the [Duke Fuqua School of Business](#), the [University of Michigan Ross School of Business](#), and the [Yale School of Management](#), we found that HBS lagged its peers in the quantity of sustainability related business school course offerings. On average, HBS offered less than half as many sustainability related classes per teaching unit than its peers in the EC year, although some HBS courses without sustainability or climate change in their titles included cases and class discussions about these topics.

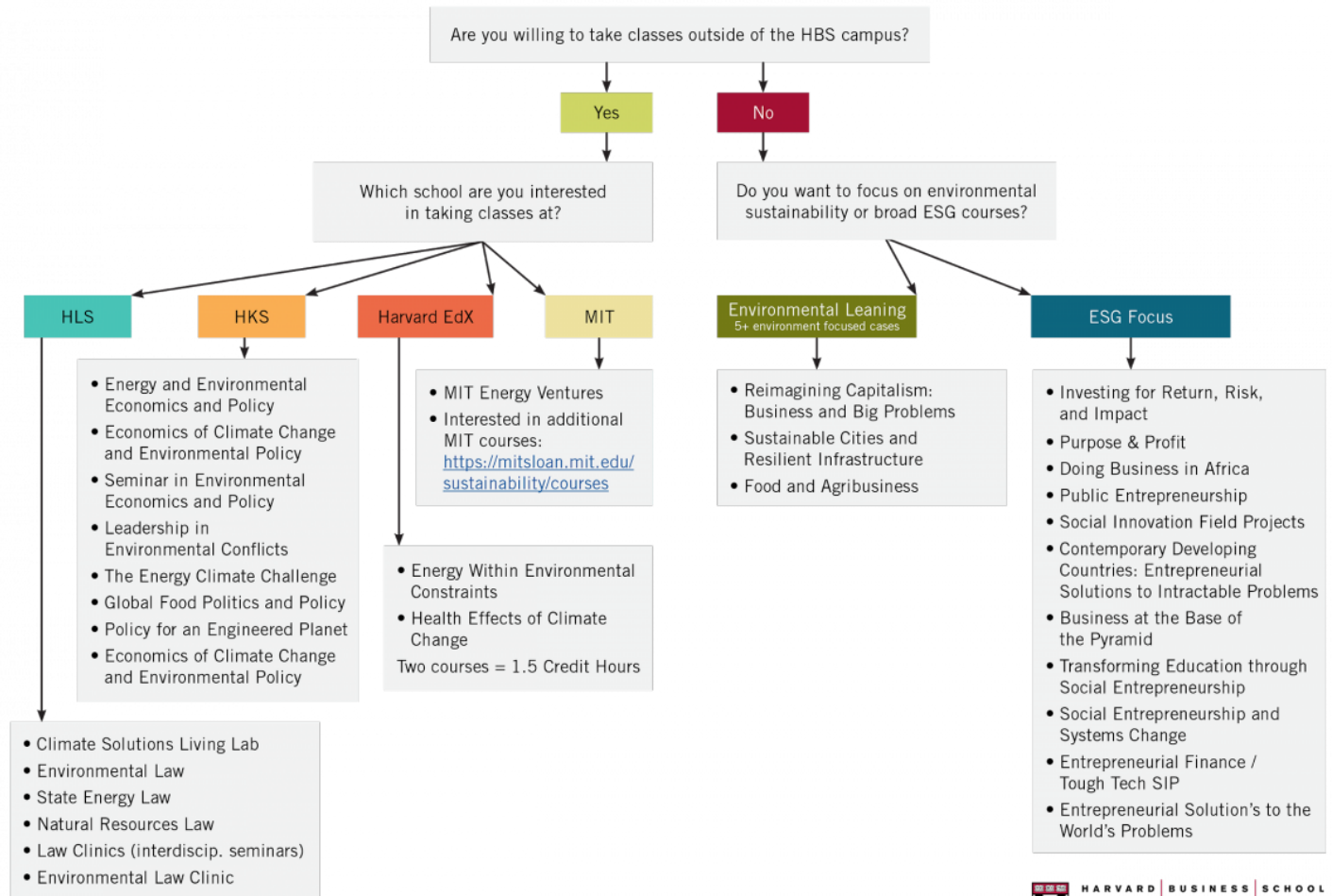
With these findings, we dove deeper and organized course offerings across schools into the HBS course Units to allow faculty at HBS to analyze their own Unit's performance relative to other business schools. We found that while most other business schools have a Clean Energy course, a Sustainable Finance course, and a Sustainable Operations course, HBS currently does not offer any such courses.

After many discussions with the faculty at HBS (such as [Senator John Heinz Professor of Environmental Management Michael Toffel](#) and [John and Natty McArthur University Professor Rebecca Henderson](#)), the BEI, and fellow SSAs, we interpreted these findings and developed an action plan to improve the schools offerings. Some of the important take-aways were:

1. EC course offerings are based on student demand. For a specific course offering to exist, students must fill the class through the EC course ranking system. Supply and Demand drive the existence of all EC courses.
2. To facilitate sustainability related course offerings, data of student demand can be instrumental in making the case for adding a new course.

One immediate outcome of the analysis was the creation of “EC Sustainability Classes Infographic” - an easy-to-read infographic to help current RC students choose their EC courses. The infographic lays out HBS course offerings and Harvard cross-registration opportunities that EC students have successfully taken in the past.

# EC SUSTAINABILITY CLASSES INFOGRAPHIC



# Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the business school benchmarking exercise and our conversations with faculty, staff and students, we recommend the following next steps:

1. Develop a Short Intensive Program (SIP) related to Sustainability to be offered in January 2021.
  - One related offering for 2021 is Tough Tech led by Jim Matheson.
  - We also recommend the creation of SIP that is entirely environmental sustainability focused and ideally has “sustainability” or “climate” in the title, which is important in conveying to students that environmental issues will be central (rather than tangential) to the class.
2. Investigate new EC course offerings in lagging Units
  - Energy Course - FIN, BGIE, STRAT
  - Operations Sustainability - TOM
  - Sustainability / Clean Tech Entrepreneurship - ENTR (could partner with Greentown Labs in Cambridge)
3. Survey RCs on potential course offerings
  - Develop sustainability course prototypes and survey RCs just after EC course selection to quantify interest in new courses
4. Work with BEI to handoff EC Course Infographic for yearly updates and distribution to students.
5. Work with BEI to ensure sustainability related courses don't compete for the same time slots in EC year.

## A Note of Thanks

We would like to thank Jennifer Nash and Elise Clarkson for their help on this project as well as Professors Mike Toffel and Rebecca Henderson for their continued support. Additionally, we would like to thank Courtney Fairbrother, Leah Ricci, and Allison Webster from the Harvard Operations Sustainability group for their support and input.