

# Bridging the Gap

## Barriers and solutions for young people entering the environmental sector

### *A report*

Tomorrow's Natural Leaders, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust  
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Ribbleshead Viaduct by Tim Hill (Pixabay)

## Executive summary

The environmental sector is both a rewarding but challenging sector for young people to enter. The sector also lags behind many others in terms of (especially ethnic) diversity. This is an unfortunate state of affairs given the vital importance of fostering new generations of environmentalists in a world increasingly ravaged by biodiversity loss and climate change. As young people on Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Tomorrow's Natural Leaders (TNL) Programme, we took it upon ourselves to support the sector's efforts in addressing these issues.

During the final year of the TNL programme (2019/20), in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was decided that the TNLs would organise a survey and online youth conference to address the barriers faced by young people and those from minority backgrounds wanting to enter the environmental sector and discuss some possible solutions.

We sent an online survey to environmental sector organisations (ESOs) in summer 2020, asking (amongst other things) about the representation of young and/or Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) employees in their organisation; if they valued young people in the workforce and why; what qualifications and experience are typically required for entry-level jobs; what opportunities they had for young people; and what barriers they thought faced young people wanting to enter the sector. We also delivered a conference on Zoom on International Youth Day 2020 (12 August), bringing together young people interested in entering the environmental sector and ESO representatives. The conference included discussions in breakout rooms along with presentations.

Fifty-five different ESOs responded to our survey. The main results included:

<p><b>1. Young and BAME employees</b></p> <p>The representation of young people in ESOs was often high, although BAME and young BAME representation was generally poor.</p>	<p><b>2. The value of young people</b></p> <p>ESO's overwhelmingly valued young people in their organisations, especially for their fresh ideas and perspectives.</p>	<p><b>3. Experience required for entry-level jobs</b></p> <p>Most ESOs required entry-level job applicants to have at least a Bachelor's Degree, although the majority required no previous volunteering/work experience.</p>	<p><b>4. Soft skills required for entry-level jobs</b></p> <p>Self-motivation/initiative and communication skills were noted as being the most frequently lacking soft skills in entry-level applicants.</p>
<p><b>5. Knowledge required for entry-level jobs</b></p> <p>For most entry-level jobs, a general knowledge of, and interest in, the environment/wildlife/natural history was sufficient. An enthusiasm for the subject was often noted as being more important than specific knowledge as much learning would happen on the job.</p>	<p><b>6. 'Nature Deficit Disorder'</b></p> <p>Most ESOs agreed that young people increasingly had a lack of knowledge of UK wildlife and ecology, although this was usually not a problem for ESOs as learning could take place on the job.</p>	<p><b>7. Partnerships</b></p> <p>Work experience/placements and volunteering were the other opportunities most commonly offered by ESOs. Most ESOs had a partnership with an educational institution such as a university, college or school.</p>	<p><b>8. Barriers for young people</b></p> <p>ESO's felt strongly about the barriers facing young people entering the environmental sector. Many different barriers and solutions were identified, with the responsibility for overcoming barriers thought to lie variously with ESOs, young people, educational institutions and Government.</p>

At the so-called 'Bridging the Gap' conference, which received positive feedback from attendees, issues of diversity within the environmental sector were discussed along with general barriers and solutions for young people entering the sector. Points from these discussions were recorded on Trello boards during the conference and subsequently incorporated into the Bridging the Gap cards. A recording of the conference (minus breakout room discussions) can be viewed here: <https://1drv.ms/v/s!AqofNWfMhHeRhWjCEM8-KDMLv4e?e=pQNDFT>. See Appendix for details on the methods and evaluation of the conference.

Our main recommendations arising from the ESO survey are for ESOs to continue striving to increase the (especially ethnic) diversity of their workforce, and to recognise the value that young people can bring to their organisation as an incentive to provide more opportunities for them to get a foothold in the environmental sector. Other recommendations arising from the survey and conference, including campaign ideas and advice for young people, can be found in the Bridging the Gap cards.

The project is considered to have achieved its outcomes and we plan to re-survey ESOs in the future to assess whether longer-term impacts have been achieved, including an increase in the number of opportunities available to young people in the environmental sector, the number of young people and people from minority backgrounds in ESOs, and the number of partnerships between ESOs and

educational institutions. This report is aimed particularly at ESOs as well as young people (and others) interested in entering the environmental sector.

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## Abbreviations

BAME = Black, Asian and minority ethnic

ESO = Environmental sector organisation

TNL = Tomorrow's Natural Leader

## Project aims

We wished to achieve the following outcomes from this project, evaluated via surveys:

1. Improve employers' attitudes to young people in their organisations.
2. Increase young people's knowledge of the barriers and solutions to entering the environmental sector.
3. Increase young people's knowledge of opportunities within the environmental sector.
4. Show environmental sector organisations (ESOs) opportunities to connect with local educational institutions.
5. Make young people aware that they're not alone in the barriers they face.

In addition, we would ideally achieve the following longer-term impacts, especially in relation to the ESOs we directly engaged with:

1. Increase the number of opportunities available to young people in the environmental sector.
2. Increase the number of young people in ESOs.
3. Increase the number of partnerships between ESOs and educational institutions.
4. Increase diversity in ESOs.

Evaluating impacts is more challenging than evaluating outcomes. We plan to send out a survey one year after the Bridging the Gap conference (i.e. around August/September 2021) to ask ESOs engaged by the conference and survey if any of these impacts had been achieved since the conference/survey. It is possible that the Covid-19 pandemic may reduce the chances of these impacts being achieved in that timeframe, but we also did not want the conference/survey to fade too far into the past before re-engaging with the ESOs.

## Methods

### Survey for environmental sector organisations (ESOs)

A survey was designed on SurveyMonkey aimed at UK-based ESOs. Questions and response options can be seen at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/TY3Q7JM>. All questions were non-obligatory. Amongst other things, we asked employers about what opportunities they had for young people, which we defined as 16- to 24-year-olds; if they valued young people in the workforce and why; what qualifications and experience are typically required for entry-level jobs; and what barriers they thought faced young people wanting to enter the sector.

Organisations were chosen systematically from the ENDS Directory and environmentjob.co.uk. Thus, we included areas such as renewable energy and sustainability along with conservation in our definition of the environmental sector. Although these directories do not contain comprehensive lists of all ESOs, they contain a substantial cross-section of the sector and a range of different organisation types. Smaller organisations may be under-represented as they may be less likely to advertise jobs on the sites chosen.

Email addresses for the chosen organisations were found on their websites. Only organisations with an available email address were sent the survey. The survey link was emailed out to these email addresses between mid-July and mid-August. The end of August was specified as the ideal (but not essential) deadline date for submitting a response to the survey.

Graphs of results were produced in Excel and statistical analyses were performed in R version 3.5.2 (R Core Team 2018).

## Results and discussion

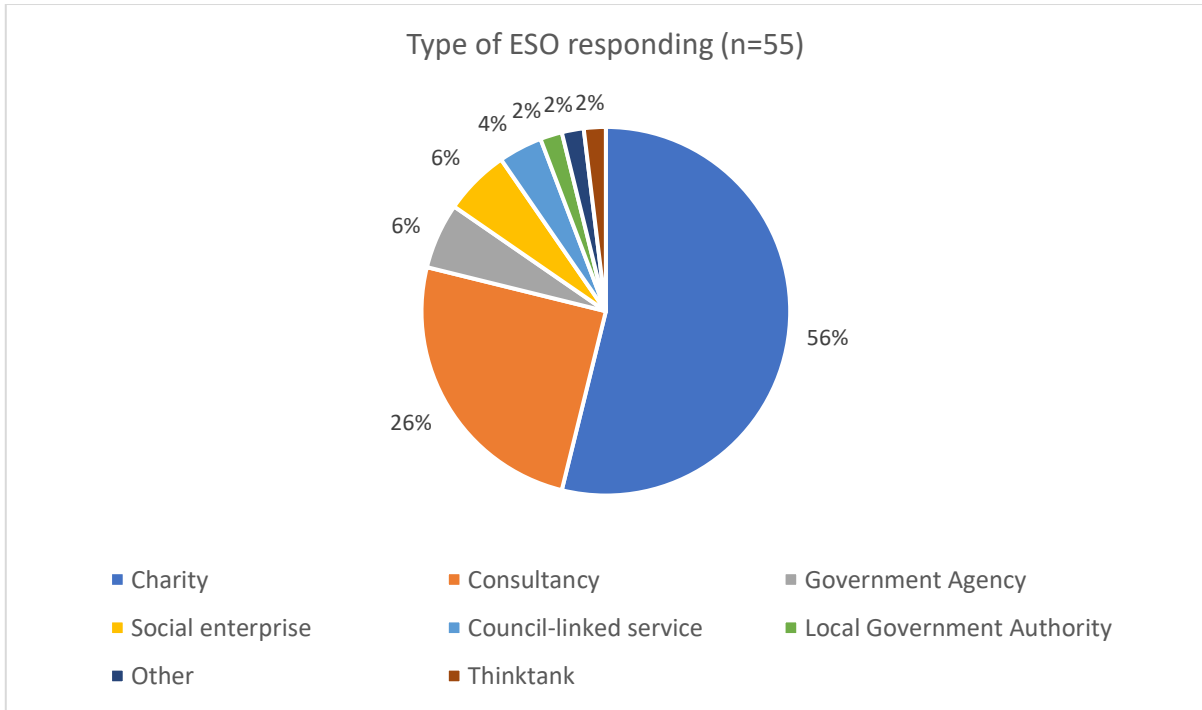
### Survey for ESOs

Note that percentages in some pie charts below are rounded to the nearest whole number. All responses have been made anonymous as this enables us to more safely share honest opinions. Some quotes have been edited to preserve the anonymity of the ESO in question. Some quotes have also been edited for clarity and style.

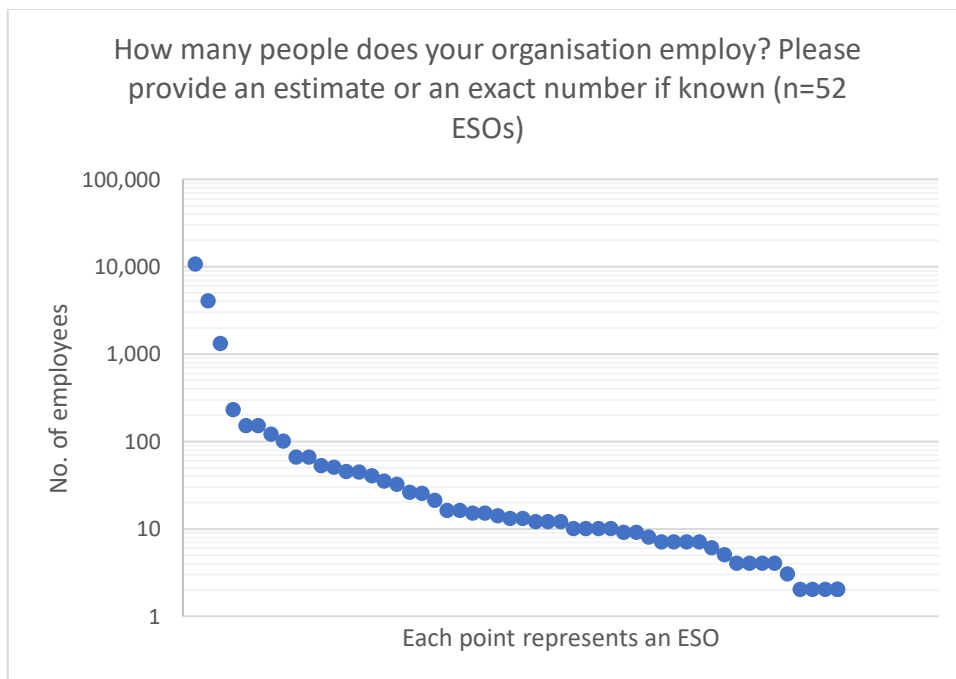
### Sample size

In total, 852 organisations were investigated for contacting. 655 of these were actually sent the survey. The other 197 were not contacted for various reasons, including lack of email address, an invalid email address, a faulty website link, dissolution of the organisation, finding out that the organisation was not sufficiently UK-based or environment-focused, and finding out that a consultancy consisted of a single person. There have been 59 separate responses to the survey and counting, although three organisations answered the survey twice and one was not UK-based, so the results below are based on 55 distinct UK-based organisations. This was a somewhat disappointing sample size given the number of organisations contacted but sufficient to get a rough cross-section of the environmental sector.

### Types of ESO responding

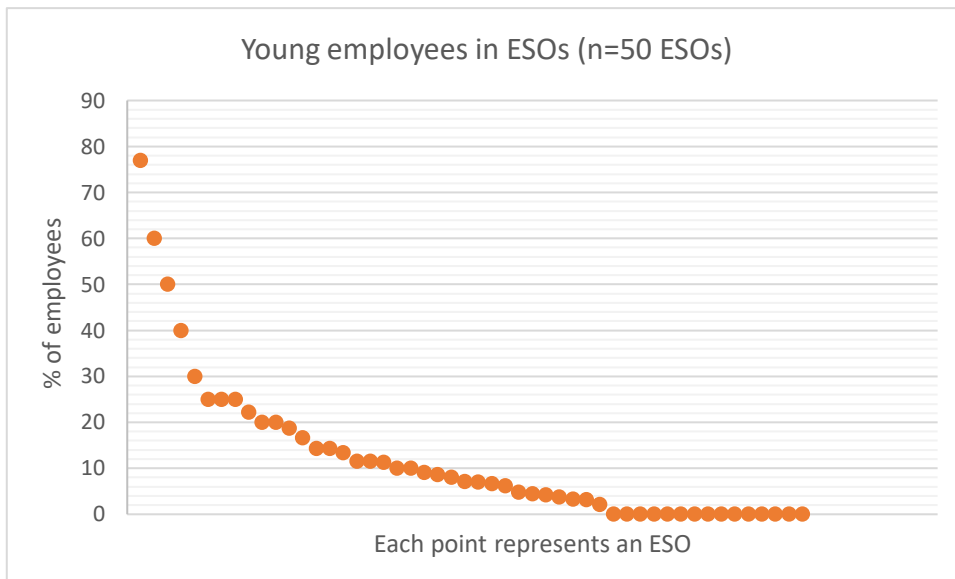


Over half of all ESOs responding were charities, with consultancies being the next most common type of ESO.

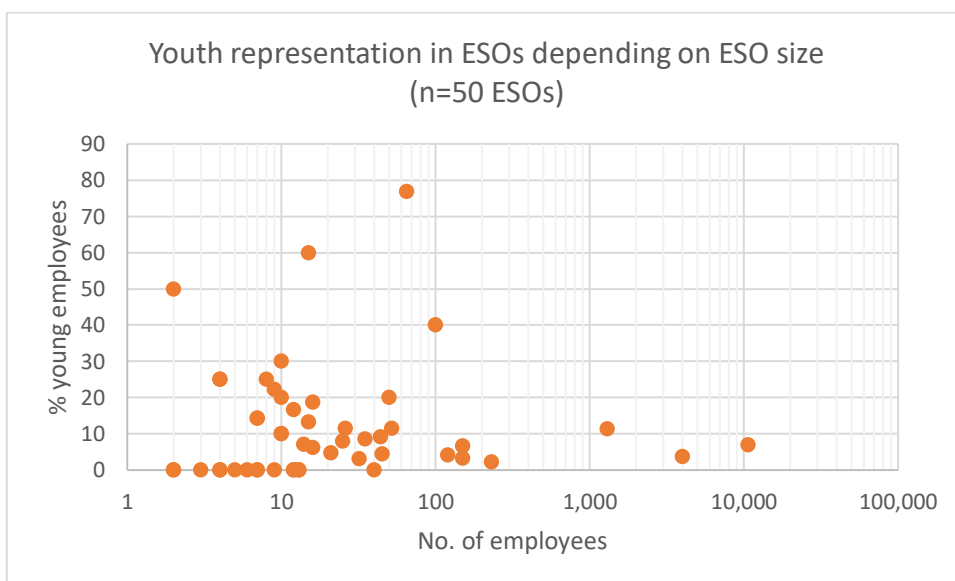


ESOs are arranged in descending order of employee count. Most ESOs had between 100 and 10 employees. Only three ESOs had more than 300 employees (note the logarithmic scale of the y-axis in the graph above). Some figures for employee numbers were estimates. The number of employees of one ESO was unknown, whilst two ESOs had zero employees.

Youth representation in ESOs



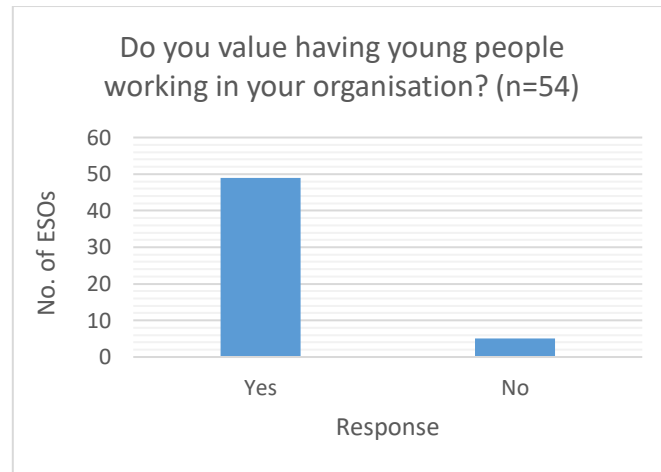
ESO are arranged in descending order of the percentage of employees in their workforce who are aged 16-24. In the vast majority of ESOs, the representation of young people was less than 30%, although note that the proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK is about 11% so it is encouraging that many ESOs are ‘punching above their weight’. The number of young employees in three ESOs was unknown. In two organisations, the number of young employees was n/a as they had no paid employees.



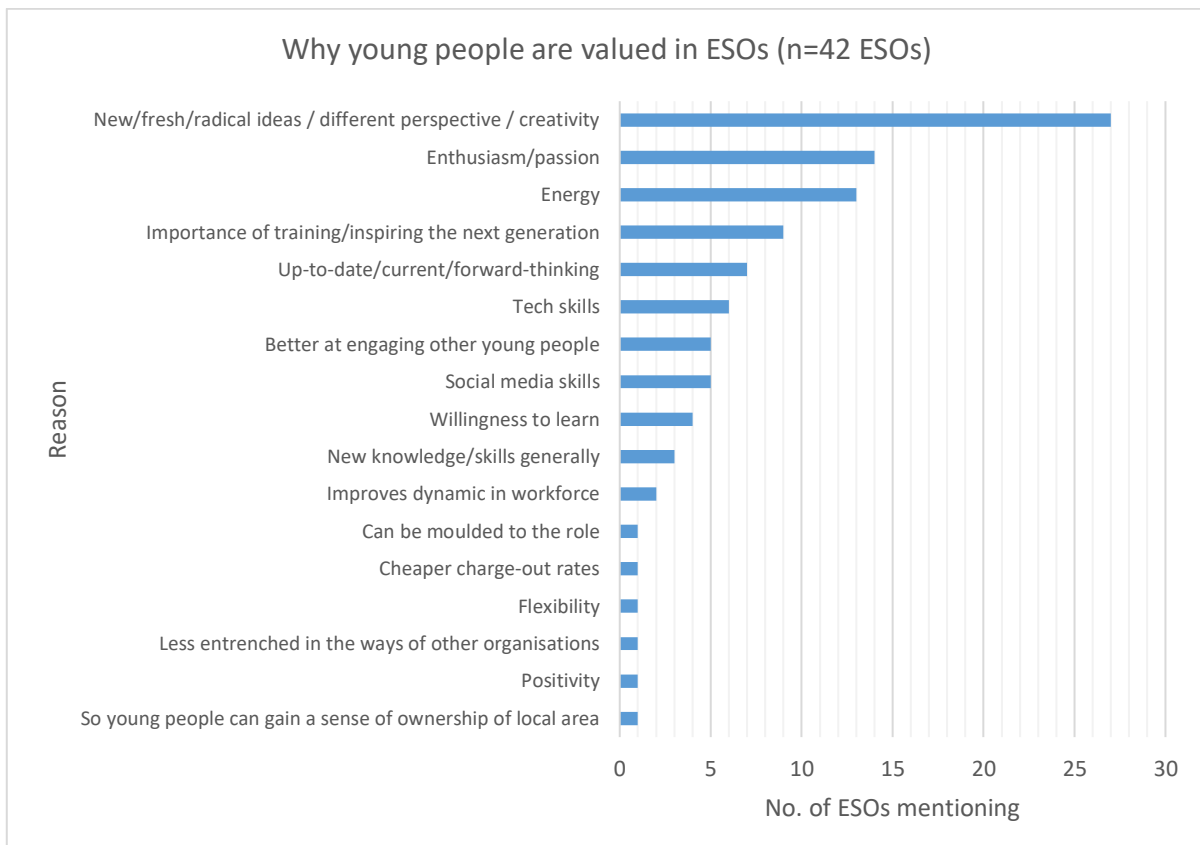
The proportion of young employees did not vary significantly depending on the ESO size (Spearman rank correlation test, n=50, rho=0.16, p=0.28), although it is perhaps noteworthy that the ESOs with

highest youth representation tended to be relatively small (e.g. with 100 employees or fewer). The highest youth representation was in a charity with 65 ‘employees’ (although these ‘employees’ are voluntary – see ‘Limitations of the survey’).

The value of young people in ESOs



The vast majority of ESOs stated that they valued having young people working in their organisation. We asked these ESOs what the reasons were for their positive response.



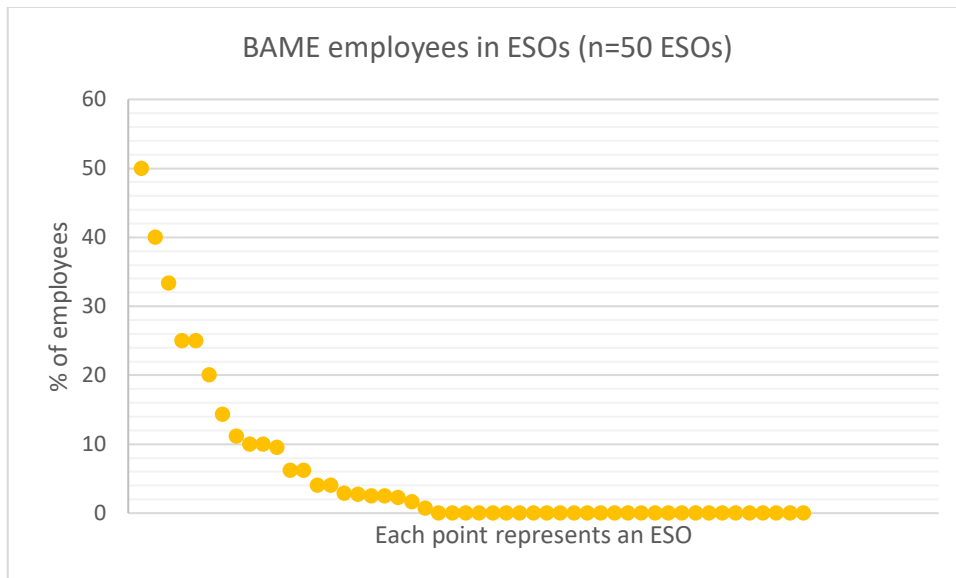


A wide range of different reasons were given, although some trends emerged. The most common reason given was the new ideas that young people bring. This was expressed in different ways, including a different perspective, fresh ideas, creativity and thinking outside the box. We hope that these responses encourage ESOs to bring young people into their organisation if they do not do so already.

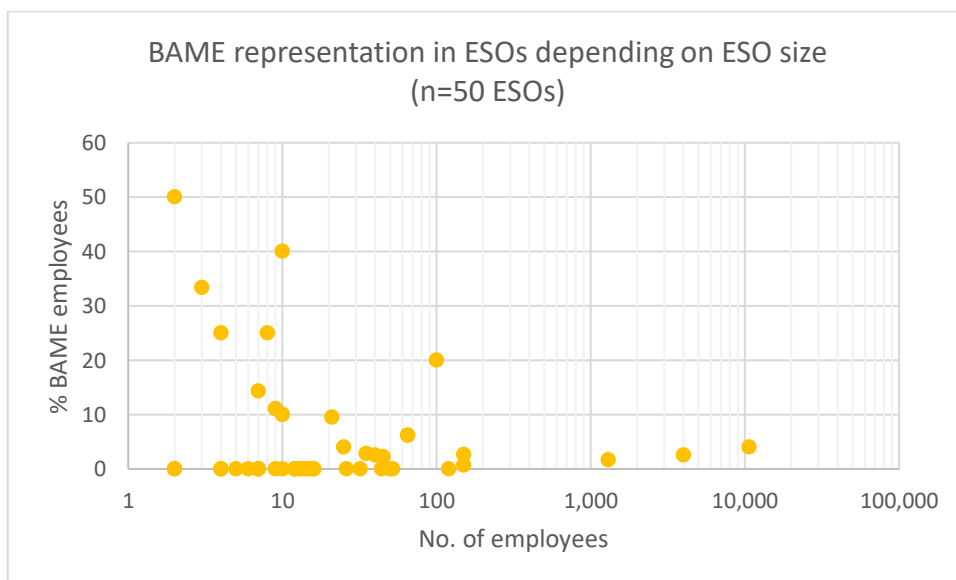
#### BAME representation in ESOs



Mya-Rose Craig, a.k.a. Birdgirl (right), with participants on one of her Black2Nature nature camps for inner-city Visible Ethnic Minority (VME) teenagers.

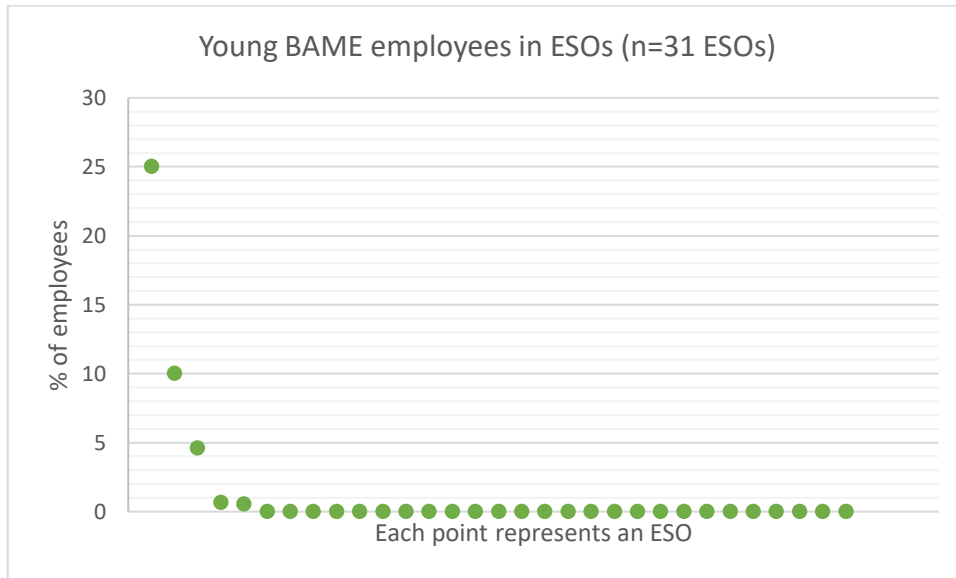


ESOs are arranged in descending order of the percentage of employees in their workforce who are of a BAME background. Sadly, the majority of ESOs had no BAME employees or at least a lower percentage than the national percentage of BAME people (c. 13%, although note that this can be locally much higher in particular areas of the UK). Nonetheless, it was encouraging to see a number of ESOs bucking this trend. The number of BAME employees in three ESOs was unknown. In two organisations, the number of BAME employees was n/a as they had no paid employees.



The proportion of BAME employees did not vary significantly depending on the ESO size (Spearman rank correlation test,  $n=50$ ,  $\rho=0.03$ ,  $p=0.81$ ), although it is perhaps noteworthy that the ESOs with highest BAME representation tended to be relatively small (e.g. with 100 employees or fewer). The highest BAME representation was in a consultancy with two employees.

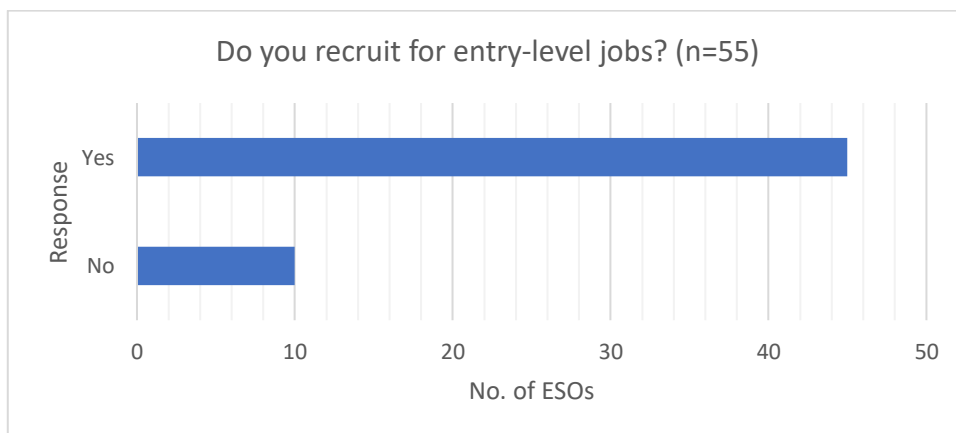
Young BAME representation in ESOs



The vast majority of ESOs responding had no young BAME employees. Seven organisations did not know how many young BAME employees they had. For 16 organisations this figure was n/a as they had no paid employees, no young employees or no BAME employees. The highest young BAME representation was in a charity with eight employees.

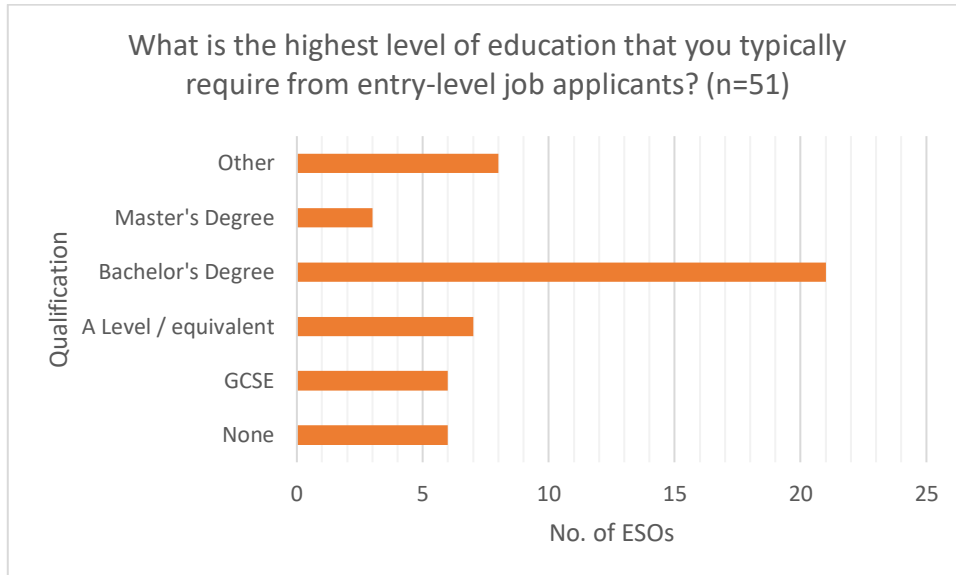
Entry-level jobs

*Availability*

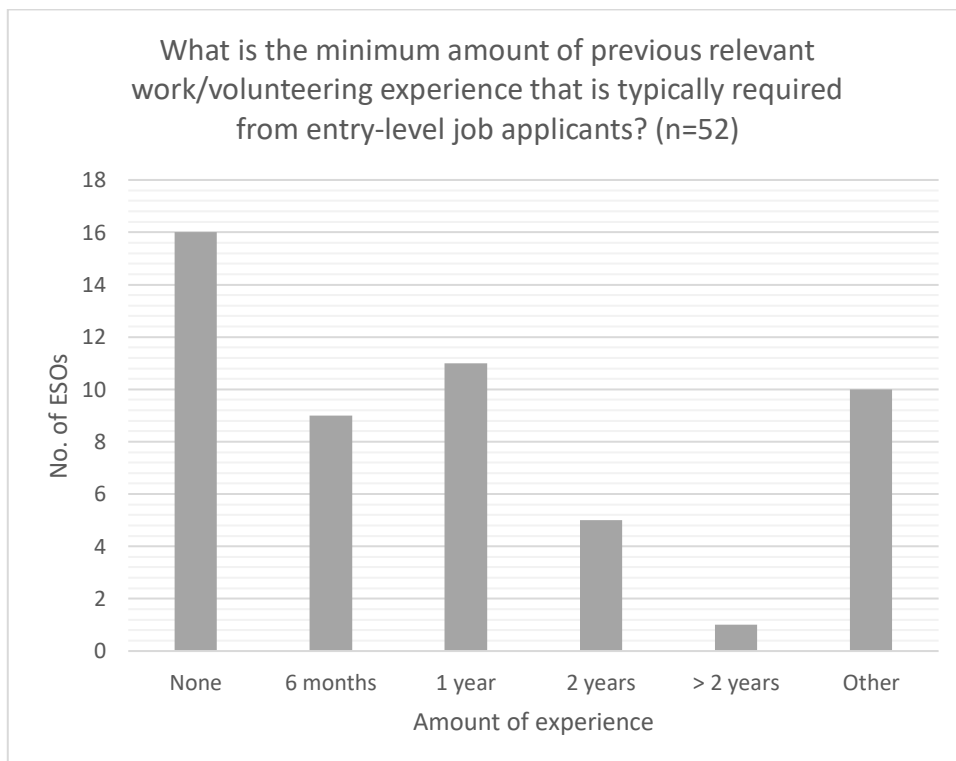


The strong majority of ESOs recruited for entry-level jobs.

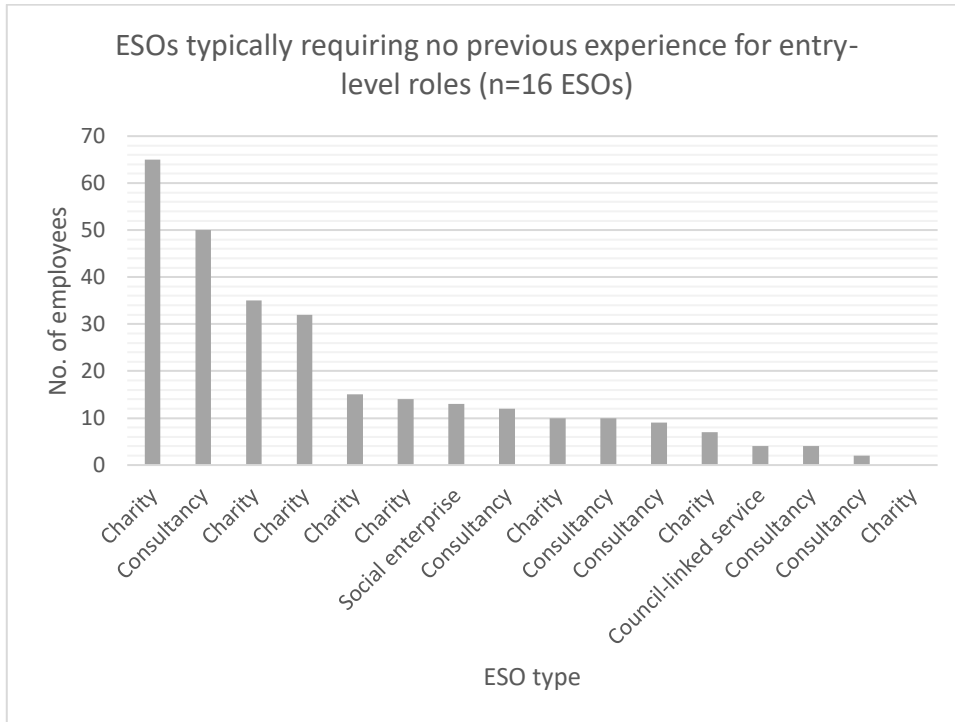
*Previous education, experience and soft skills required*



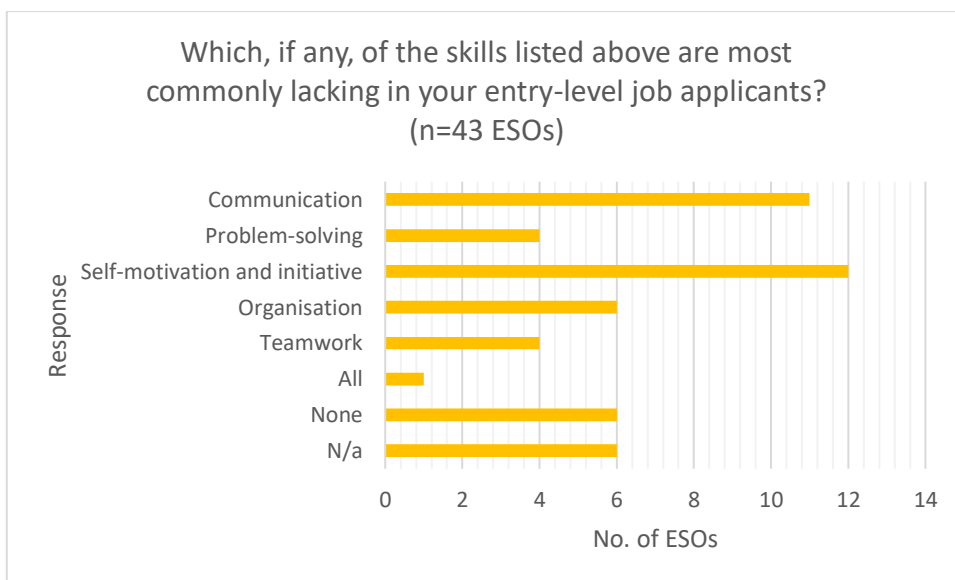
The strong majority of ESOs required at least a Bachelor's Degree for entry-level roles. However, note the number of ESOs which even require no formal certificate of education for entry-level roles.



It may be heartening to young people that the majority of ESOs responding typically required no previous work or volunteering experience for entry-level jobs. We investigated what sort of ESOs came under this category:



The ESOs are arranged in descending order of employee numbers. It can be seen that even some sizeable charities and consultancies typically require no previous experience for entry-level roles. However, the largest ESOs typically required at least some previous experience.



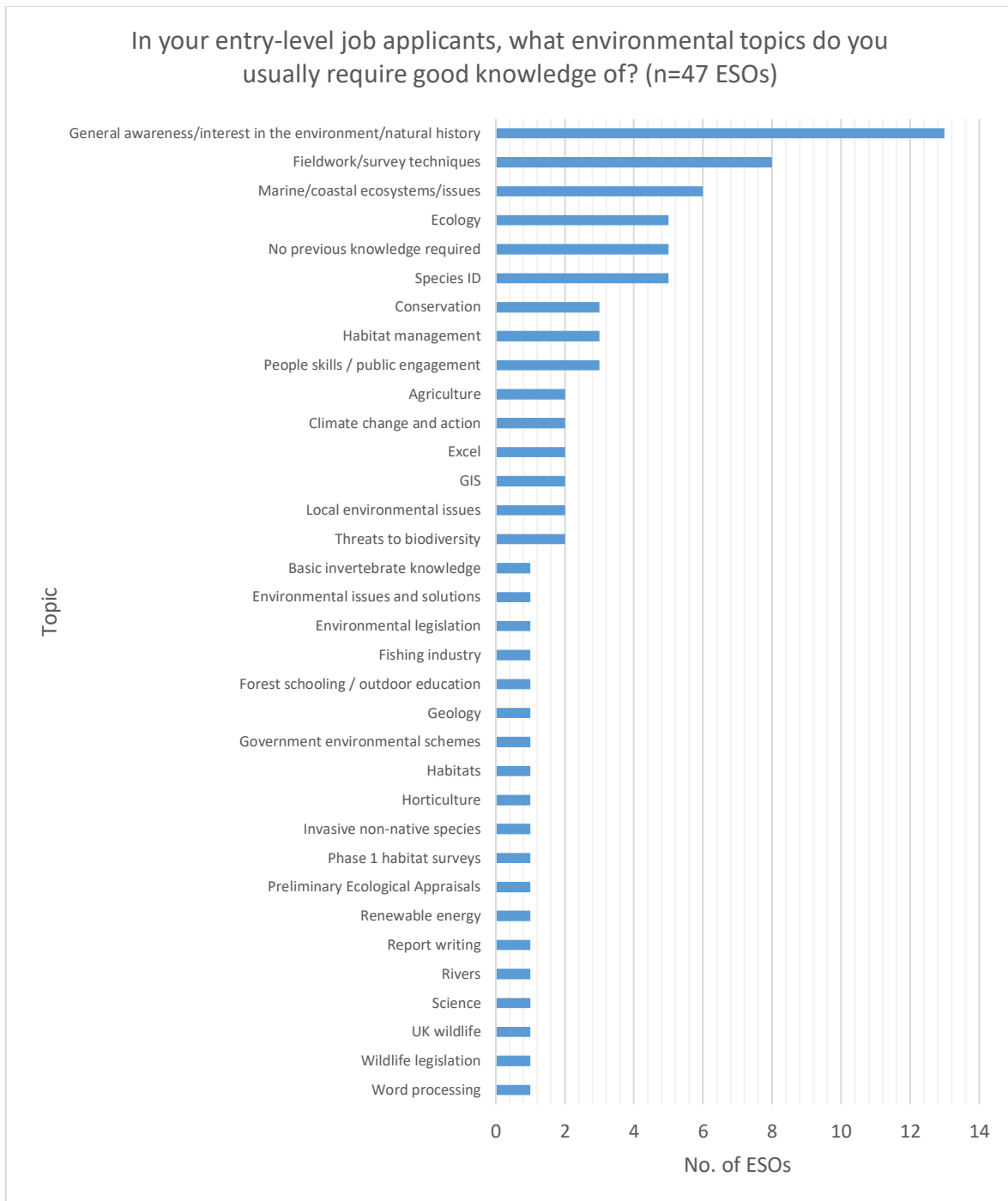
The 'skills listed above' were communication, problem-solving, self-motivation and initiative, organisation and teamwork. Overall, self-motivation and initiative and communication appear to be the most commonly lacking soft skills noticed in entry-level job applicants; young people could bear this in mind when applying for jobs, and emphasise these skills.

There was some criticism of this question in responses: a charity noted that “the number of different roles makes it too broad a question” and a second charity pointed out that “The five skills you list are your priorities - not necessarily ours. We are more likely to look for experience, resourcefulness and unflappability in the face of what can be a demanding role.”

Some other individual quotes were of particular interest. A social enterprise said: “A lot of the young people have to learn to work as a team and not as a group fighting for individual achievements as in a classroom or school work.” A charity said: “A lot of the young people we speak to lack communication and teamwork skills as they seem to be insular.” A second charity said: “If we can see someone is going to be proactive, then we'll take that above qualifications any day.”

#### *Knowledge of environmental topics*

We asked ESOs the following question: ‘In your entry-level job applicants, what environmental topics do you usually require good knowledge of?’ The answers were naturally highly dependent on the organisation in question. Nonetheless, they can be grouped to some degree as follows, which revealed some trends:



Some skills, such as word processing, have been included as they may indirectly be related to environmental topics. For most jobs, a general knowledge of, and interest in, the environment/wildlife/natural history was sufficient. An enthusiasm for the subject was often noted as being more important than specific knowledge as much learning would happen on the job, as some of the individual quotes listed below illustrate. It was difficult for larger organisations with many job types to answer this question.

Nature conservation, wildlife, countryside matters - it's such a massive field (excuse the pun) that we aren't too prescriptive. In a nutshell, we need to know people have a genuine and long-term love of being outdoors - this isn't just a fleeting lifestyle choice.

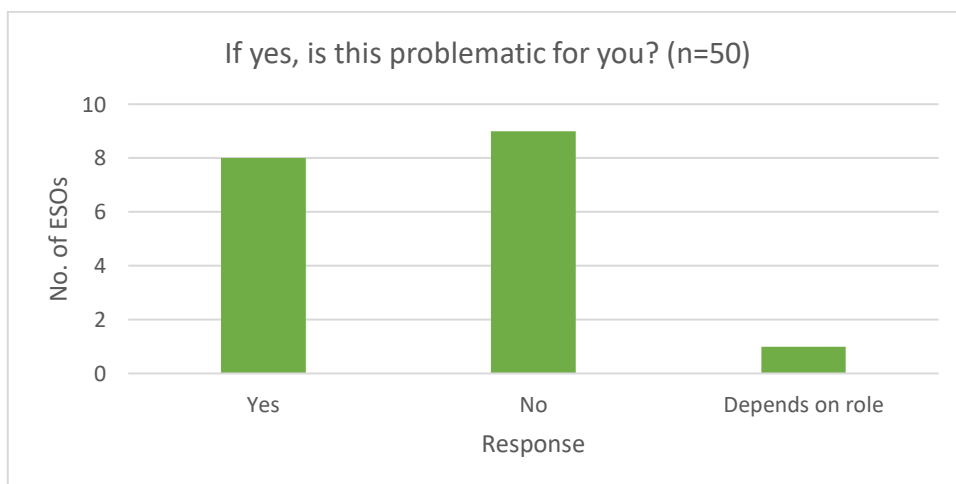
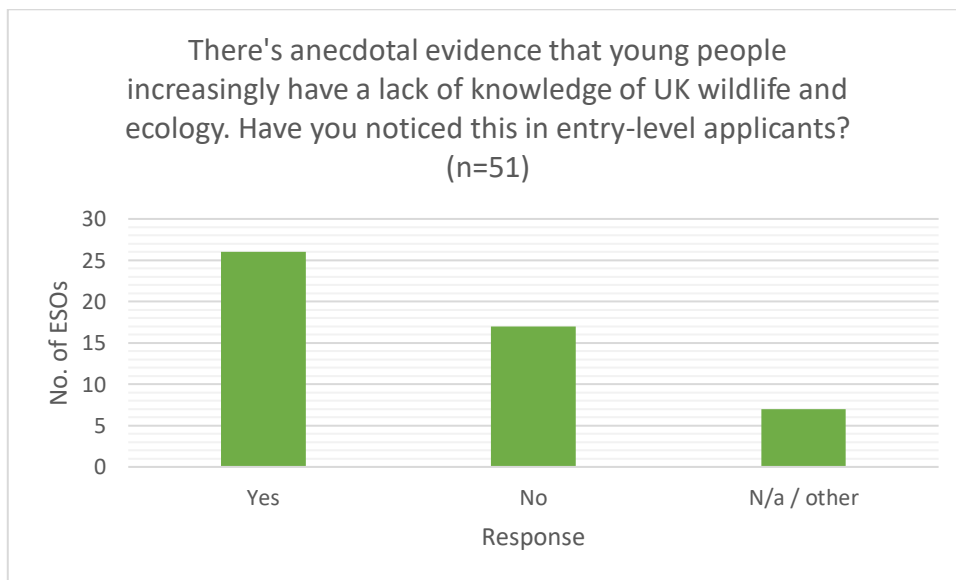
An inquisitive mind and willingness to learn are more important than specific knowledge but a broad understanding and interest in natural history is essential.

General interest in environmental topics is needed, but no specific areas. So long as applicants have an interest and enthusiasm in the environment, that's fine.

Nothing specific - most important is aptitude, attitude and enthusiasm. We teach everything else.

**It depends on the role, so a broad knowledge of environmental topics is advantageous, although some roles will state that they require more specialised knowledge.**

We also asked ESOs about the effects of 'nature deficit disorder', which are often manifest as an increasing lack of environmental understanding in young people – e.g. see RSPB (2013).





Overall, these results corroborate observations of an increasing lack of natural history knowledge in young people. This is by no means always problematic for ESOs as knowledge can often be acquired on the job, although an almost equal number of ESOs also found this problematic. The selected individual quotes below, grouped roughly according to opinion, illustrate the polarised views on this issue.

**No, applicants are usually already skilled.**

No, applicants usually have very good knowledge of this.

No, but our experience is with undergrads on related courses or postgrad applicants who are really well qualified and motivated. What potentially is a problem is the number of very highly qualified young people competing for the jobs.

No, we have low recruitment levels but typically do have a good number of knowledgeable applicants.

**No. We tend to have pretty good applicants.**

Most have undertaken a lot of volunteer work etc. and typically have a good base level of knowledge.

We usually have applicants who have UK wildlife knowledge, and the competition for such roles is steep as there don't tend to be many entry-level jobs in this sector as they are often done by volunteers or trainees.

There is a disconnect from wildlife in young people due to our tech-orientated society. Few young people actively enter wildlife study. A focus on academic subjects at school has squeezed out any form of nature study in general.

The bigger problem is young people not being prepared to do a hard day's work.

**It's been really disappointing that conservation graduates so far have had minimal involvement in the field and fail miserably at simple ID tests.**

Botanical skills particularly poor, yet essential to good quality phase 1 habitat surveys and similar.

**Yes. Species ID is poor. Field skills, e.g. map reading, can be weak.**

Yes, the ability to confidently identify even common UK wildlife is often lacking; this presents a major issue for us.

**Yes we have and yes, it is often a deal-breaker for us.**

Yes, we have noticed this at times. It isn't ideal.

**Yes - if people are interested it tends to be because of family background, rather than it being taught as part of a curriculum. It's not necessarily a problem for us as we always have a few candidates to choose from, but it is a worry for the future of the sector.**

Yes in some instances but there also many applicants with very good knowledge. Not problematic as it is only the knowledgeable ones that get employed!

Yes, it is lacking, but they soon learn and are eager to learn more.

Yes. That's why their attitude to learning/improving is important.

**Noticed it when completing surveys with young people. However, it is not a problem and it provides us with information on what we need to work on.**

Yes, although it can be learnt on the job - but always good to have some basic knowledge.

Most job-relevant knowledge needed will be provided in training and experience gained doing the job.

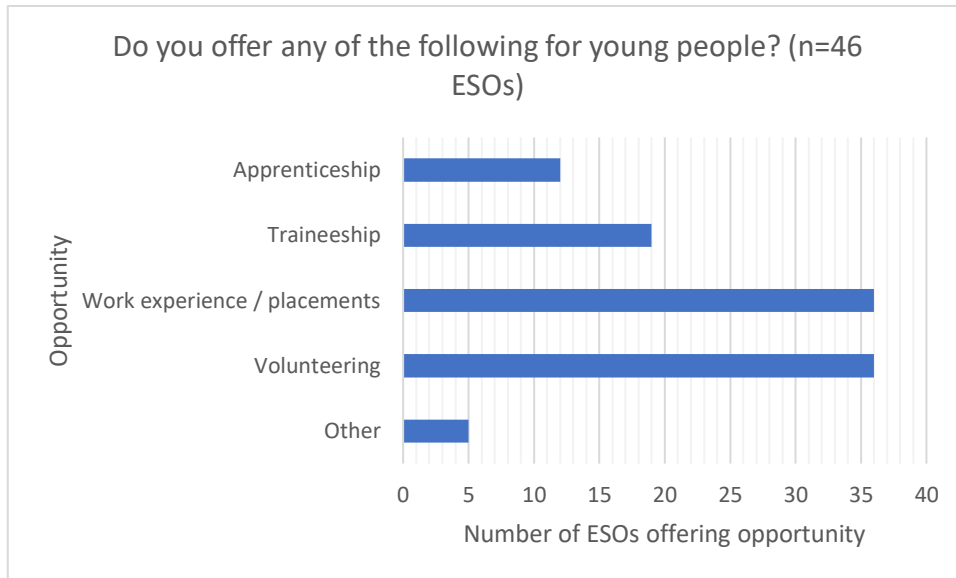
Not a problem - it's about training and developing them!

**There are some applicants who know more about tropical ecology than about UK wildlife. But they are willing to learn so it shouldn't be an issue if they show enough input.**

### Other opportunities for young people

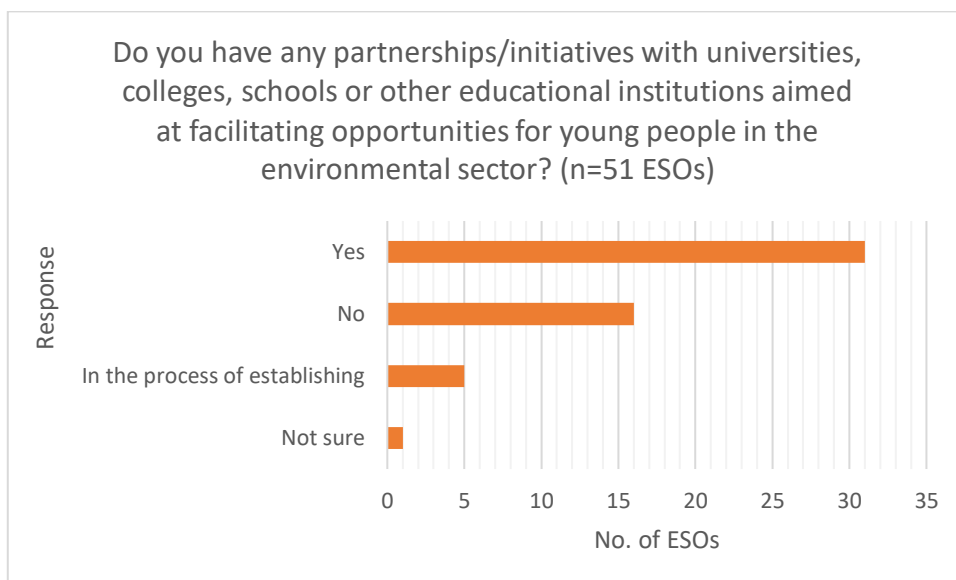


Participants on Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Tomorrow's Natural Leaders programme (plus staff) doing some socially distanced scything at Askham Bog in September 2020. Photo: George Hoey.



Volunteering and work experience/placements were the joint most frequently offered opportunities. This differs from perceptions gauged during the Bridging the Gap conference, which showed that young people think volunteering is the most commonly offered opportunity, and may be reassuring for young people keen on entering the sector. However, these young people may not have come across the ESOs which answered this survey. Responses in the ‘Other’ category included field trips, a graduate programme and the TNL programme. A consultancy said: “We take on young people as sub-contractors for specific tasks where we offer training and pay but it runs the length of a project rather than a set period of time”.

Partnerships with educational institutions



‘Yes’ includes both currently and periodically but not necessarily currently. It was encouraging how many ESOs had partnerships. Some interesting examples of individual responses are listed below – it is hoped that some of these may provide inspiration for ESOs wanting to form partnerships, fulfilling outcome 4 (see ‘Introduction’). If your ESO wishes to find out more about a particular partnership described below, please contact us (contact details at the beginning of this report).

**Tired of frankly appalling applications from relatively recent graduates, our Practice Manager was going to mentor final-year students at a local university to help them with their CVs/job applications, but Covid-19 prevented it.**

We are currently exploring options for providing an accredited course with a professional body.

**We do not have partnerships but universities and colleges do contact us from time to time and when appropriate and possible, we do take up some students.**

We are starting to work more closely with colleges for traineeships and we run structured volunteer programmes with training. We also link to universities for coursework projects, dissertations and to deliver lectures.

**We host occasional BSc and MSc projects within our team. College students undertake practical habitat conservation on our reserves as part of their studies.**

We have sponsored Master's courses and PhDs.

We run a programme across the UK in secondary schools, aiming to work with pupils who are in receipt of pupil premium. There is a very long list of these secondary schools so I won't list them here.

Through our education committee, we accredit 134 degree programmes. As part of this accreditation, we offer advice on employability and placements and run employability workshops.

**We support a local high school by running work experience placements and offer funded or sponsored places on field trips for high schools in the region. We deliver structured field trips as part of a number of university courses.**

We are currently helping develop a new T-Level apprenticeship for students hoping to work with animals, and run our own Diploma in animal management through a college.

We have arrangements with a number of schools, universities and other organisations to offer students both short-term work experience placements and long-term internships.

We run a university graduate scheme.

**We have been involved with a university environment centre and have attended their employment fairs, resulting in several students being offered work as sub-contractors.**

We have looked into getting an apprentice but there was no supporting academic institution to help make it a reality.

We would set up a partnership if any local colleges showed an interest.

We have a working relationship with several educational institutes offering work experience to GCSE/A Level students. We also regularly host postgraduate students and help them undertake the field-based elements of their course.

**We have a youth engagement programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.**

### Barriers for young people entering the environmental sector

We asked ESOs: ‘What do you think are the main difficulties facing young people entering the environmental sector, and who do you think has the most responsibility to help young people overcome those difficulties?’ We received a wide range of (often lengthy) responses, many impassioned, detailed, eloquent and inspiring. We got the sense that ESOs cared strongly about the problems young people face, valued young people in the sector and were keen to remedy the situation. A selection is included below.

**I think the responsibility is on organisations to offer as many entry-level jobs as they can, and to offer a wide range of experiences within the roles. That way people can stand out in their applications - we see a lot of applications with the same list of qualifications, but no real experience of having worked in the sector. We try and give our apprentices as much responsibility as we can, so they can get used to independent working.**

Sadly, exploitation by some companies is a real problem. I believe this is something we need to focus on tackling, perhaps through a graduate employment accreditation or similar.

**No jobs! And when there are jobs available, they usually require an unrealistic set of skills relative to the salary. The government is responsible. They need to provide funding for organisations to create true entry-level jobs instead of hoping young people will volunteer for free. This is elitist and cuts out a huge percentage of people not able to afford unpaid work.**

Lack of paid opportunities, unrealistic requirements of prior work experience and abuse of junior staff with the expectation of long/unsociable hours with a lack of supervision whilst being charged as full consultants. More focused university courses would help but the responsibility lies with the employers, especially larger firms.

**Lack of financial resources in environmental organisations to afford trainees – the priority goes to funding jobs that people can do straight away, as time and effort is needed to support young people. Responsibility lies with national government, funding organisations, environmental organisations and career advisors.**

The industry as a whole needs to rethink the basic standards offered and required for entry-level and other jobs to facilitate a more diverse workforce.

**Young people’s willingness to work. Society makes young people think that it’s handed to you on a plate rather than having to start at the bottom and work up.**

Most graduates seem to think they have ‘identification skills’ because on their university course they had to use a key during a field course one day. Those who organise university courses that supposedly provide ecology skills should engage more in finding out what the workplace actually needs rather than pumping out biology/ecology/conservation students who are great at statistical tests that most will never need yet cannot even identify an oak tree (yes, we have encountered examples of the latter!).

**We are too small a company to give our time to train and educate a person coming in.**

Lack of paid internships; accessibility difficulties (transport) are especially an issue for BAME and lower-income families. It would be great if the Government could fund this in terms of sustainable/ green recovery jobs, e.g. in town planning for natural flood reduction, inner-city rewilding, vertical green space development, etc.

**Very low pay and high competition. Low pay responsibility rests firmly on the shoulders of environmental organisations. High competition could be ameliorated by a greater focus on entry-level jobs.**

We work in a quite a specialist area, and often young people are not aware our field of work even exists. Promotion to young people earlier on of the range of opportunities within the environmental sector and the different skills required for different jobs would be hugely beneficial. For example, computer programming is a critical skill for our industry, yet a lot of environmental students come to us without ever having looked at this area, and computer science students don't know they could work in an environmental field.

**Too many graduates of dubious quality flooding the market is especially problematic for the more introverted but (usually) more interested ones trying to get noticed; few entry-level opportunities other than the modern slavery known as 'seasonal ecologist'; the better consultancies who might develop youngsters are too small to do it whilst the bigger consultancies seem to be exploiting youngsters and giving them some bad habits/turning them off ecology; not enough real jobs at the end of the day, especially on the conservation side; lack of job-ready skills (why are so many graduates leaving university with, at best, only the most cursory knowledge of GIS or Excel?); poor written work. On the other side, poor pay, even later in the career, and usually high living costs as ecology consultancies like to be located in lovely (i.e. expensive) areas. I sometimes think ecology consultancies would do worse than invest some of their reserves (if they have any) in a little flat for their junior ecologists to live in so they can actually afford to live where they work.**

There are legal and safety concerns for the charity and our partner organisations that prevent us working with young people under the age of 16 on surveys.

Sadly, the incessant increase in safeguarding has made it so difficult to work with young people in an environment of field skills. Even when all the requirements can be met - there are constant health and safety issues and, finally, when we have solved all that - it is hard to get youngsters to turn up. We run a wildlife club for 2- to 17-year-olds but it is a real effort to keep them involved beyond 11 years old.

Asking for years of 'relevant experience' from someone who is starting out in a field (no matter their age). This hampers especially people from less fortunate backgrounds who could not afford the fancy volunteering abroad or to dedicate all of their free time during studies to a volunteer position because they had to work in a paying job to make ends meet. Entry-level jobs should be open to all qualified and interested applicants - someone with three years of relevant experience should not have to go for an entry level job (and pay)!

**We all have a responsibility, although it is difficult with funding constraints that don't always make it easy to have entry-level jobs.**

We did look at apprenticeships but they are quite complicated to run and there is a monetary input required that we don't currently have. If the Government could fund environmental apprenticeships and traineeships that were fully costed we would be able to involve more young people in our workforce.

A lack of broad experience in a highly competitive sector makes getting in a long process. There is no 'one size fits all' qualification and very few apprenticeship schemes backed by sound/accredited

outcomes. The Government must take responsibility for this and help charities to deliver a national scheme as the resourcing of such a scheme could not be taken on by any one NGO.

Young people are more likely to lack the underpinning knowledge that we crave. We think young people owe it to themselves to immerse themselves in the countryside if they are not to be continually bypassed in the jobs market. That said, apprenticeship schemes such as those offered by Yorkshire Wildlife Trust or Yorkshire Water are also a great idea.

**I think employers need to focus more on motivation and dedication of applicants rather than on previous experience in the sector.**

Pay for environmental jobs tends to be lower than in most sectors, so it is less likely to be an aspirational career. We need an overhaul of the secondary school curriculum and extracurricular programming to prepare students for the climate and ecological emergency and promote access to nature in relevant ways (see Teach the Future demands: <https://www.teachthefuture.uk/>).

**We find the greatest barrier are schools, the youth sector, parents and ESOs who do not value or appreciate the outdoor environment as a 'learning' environment.**

There are so many degrees that appear to have nature conservation at their heart but so far, all the interviewees we have met have had virtually no experience in identification of species and not much interest either. It has been a disappointing journey and it is much easier to choose someone a little older with experience from a nature reserve.

**Youth unemployment in the current (Covid-19) climate is a major worry. A national environmental task force needs to be set up to help up-skill and employ young people. Drawing on the vast knowledge and skills of current workers in the field could be a way to slow and reverse the steady decline of nature and people's connection with it.**

### Other comments

We provided ESOs a chance to leave any other comments they had. Some of these effectively answered the question about barriers and solutions for young people entering the environmental sector, so have been included in the previous table. A selection of other responses are included below.

**Those applicants that show a commitment to gaining experience additional skills should be encouraged and assisted - without the next generation, local knowledge and skills will disappear when current staff retire.**

We really hope organisations are able to tap into the Government's job creation schemes and job retention schemes to give young people a chance of succeeding in the sector. Now is the time to encourage it, not shrink the number of staff in an organisation if at all possible.

I hope the TNL project proves to the Government and funding organisations that channelling money into environmental youth work is so beneficial not only for the younger generations of aspiring ecologists/rangers/forest schoolers/flood risk assessors/environmental charity managers but ALSO beneficial to nature!! Hopefully a report will be made public at the end of the project and years down the line showing the effects the project had.

It was difficult to answer this survey as we have such a wide range of roles and specialist areas. The main thing to note is that usually when recruiting to entry-level roles, we are looking for potential rather than expecting the individual to have relevant work experience.

**The Covid-19 situation is challenging at the moment. As a small company, with a small office, we've had to stop offering placements this year. How this move forwards in the future we don't know, and may require some new thinking and ways of working to give young people the opportunities.**

Some 'ecology' graduates know less about natural history (and so, really, ecology) than I do, and I am not an ecologist. It is shocking how many of the recent graduates we employ on data entry really don't have either a clue or an interest in the nature in our area (and we are in a nature-rich area!), and don't seem to see the opportunity they have with us to gain that knowledge by osmosis from their colleagues. Many applicants seem to have spent three years at university and all their life before never volunteering with a Wildlife Trust or suchlike, nor even going birding/mothing/beetling/botanising. If I see 'I really like wildlife' and nothing more, no details of which wildlife, nor of activities undertaken to observe, study or help it outside of their degree, on another application, I shall scream. They just seem to do an ecology degree in isolation and expect to get a job in ecology. It's all very depressing.

Thank you for doing the survey. It will be good for organisations to reflect and take stock of how they can become more diverse and inclusive.

This is a really important topic you are discussing, well done.

**How can we help with this project??**

We often refer to young people and communities as 'hard to reach' - it is usually the case that we do not try hard enough, often presuming we know their needs instead of asking them what they want and working with them to provide it.

We are currently applying for funding and have included apprenticeships in the funding bid.

### Limitations of the survey

1. The sample size was small compared to the size of the sector, so may not be fully representative of the sector as a whole. It is possible that the sample is biased towards nature conservation.
2. Larger organisations with a wide variety of different roles struggled more to answer this survey as it was harder for them to describe 'typical' situations for the organisation.
3. The term 'employee' was not defined further and may have been interpreted differently by different ESOs. Although we discounted any definitions of employees that were simply casual volunteers, some 'employees' with defined positions within the ESO may have been voluntary.
4. A small number of estimates for youth/BAME representation in ESOs were based on a regional office and extrapolated to the whole organisation, which may or may not be valid.

### Recommendations



## General

Our main recommendations arising from the ESO survey are for ESOs to continue striving to increase the (especially ethnic) diversity of their workforce, and to recognise the value that young people can bring to their organisation as an extra incentive to provide more opportunities for young people entering the environmental sector. Both the survey and conference highlighted the many barriers facing young people entering the sector – indeed, the impression gained was that the situation is currently dire across much of the sector – but also many corresponding solutions. These solutions, including campaign ideas and advice for young people, can be found in the Bridging the Gap cards (see below).

## Bridging the Gap cards for ESOs and young people

We wanted to create summaries of barriers and solutions that would have clear practical utility for both ESOs and young people interested in entering the environmental sector. These summaries have taken the form of so-called ‘Bridging the Gap cards’. See separate accompanying files for the individual cards. They include the following cards aimed at ESOs:

- *Getting a foothold in the environmental sector*
- *Lack of a ‘young voice’ in environmental sector organisations*
- *Lack of ethnic diversity in the environmental sector*
- *Other diversity issues in the environmental sector, e.g. gender, sexual orientation and disabilities*
- *Lack of environmental understanding in young people*

The following card is aimed at young people:

- *Advice for young people entering the environmental sector*

Nonetheless, ESOs and young people may find all these cards of interest. The cards contain information from both the Bridging the Gap conference (Trello boards and presentations) and ESO survey. Some cards are more detailed than others according to the depth of discussions in the conference or what was mentioned by ESOs in the survey. Note that many of the problems described are different sides of the same coin, e.g. ethnic minorities and poor socio-economic status, ethnicity and religion. These cards have something of a conservation bias.

If you have something you would like us to add to a Bridging the Gap card, let us know (contact details at the beginning of this document) and we will update the card.

## Acknowledgements

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