4.4

People with higher education value solidarity and innovation more, while security is valued equally across educational levels

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KEY MESSAGES

- In Estonia, the value placed on innovation and achievement has declined in recent years, except among people with higher education.
- Solidarity is valued more highly during periods of crisis and less highly at other times. Apparent educational differences in solidarity are largely explained by gender: people with higher education place greater importance on solidarity, but this pattern is observed primarily among women with higher education.
- Appreciation of nature is widespread in Estonia, but women and people with higher education place greater importance on environmental values.
- Security is valued less highly than before, and the importance attached to it does not vary by educational level. Women and people with lower incomes place greater importance on security.
- The value placed on hedonism is increasing in Estonia.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the relationship between values and educational attainment. Values are abstract beliefs that, according to several theoretical approaches, guide people's preferences, behaviour and choices in different situations.[1] They reflect what individuals consider important in life. From the perspective of education, the study of values is particularly relevant because values are formed at a young age through the interaction between personal characteristics and the surrounding environment, including the education system, the home environment and upbringing, as well as society more broadly.[2] The development of a person's value system is also shaped by everyday practices – that is, by individual choices and behaviour.[3] Values are relatively stable over the life course, but they may change in response to major societal events (e.g. economic crises, pandemics, famine or armed conflict), personal life events (e.g. completing education, entering employment, marriage, having children or retirement) or age-related physical changes.[4]

Empirical research on the causal relationship between values and behaviour is limited, and it is not possible to determine conclusively whether values shape behaviour and choices or whether choices and actions have a greater influence on the formation of values.[5] Educational choices and levels of educational attainment may therefore reflect value preferences formed in youth, but the relationship may also arise because educational experiences shape individuals' values.[6]

In this article, we analyse five value orientations: innovation–achievement, solidarity, security, hedonism and appreciation of nature. These dimensions were selected considering the challenges facing contemporary society. Valuing innovation and achievement is important for societal development, the implementation of change and the acquisition of new knowledge. Solidarity is essential for social cohesion and for addressing shared societal challenges. Security can be regarded as a scarcity value, as both societal and individual appreciation of security may increase when it is perceived to be lacking. Hedonism, or the pursuit of pleasure, requires resources but may also function as a scarcity value. Appreciation of nature is particularly salient in the context of climate change, and we analyse its importance across different educational groups.

Data and methodology. There are several approaches to measuring values. In this article, we use a modified version of Schwartz's framework,[7] constructing five value orientations:[8] innovation–achievement (success and its recognition, creativity, new challenges and economic influence), solidarity (equal treatment of people, acceptance of differing opinions and helping others), security (societal and personal safety), hedonism (enjoyment and leisure) and appreciation of nature, which have previously been analysed in Estonia.[9]

The empirical analysis draws on data from a nationally representative survey of the Estonian population conducted as part of the European Social Survey. Data have been collected in Estonia every two years since 2004. Depending on the survey round, the sample size ranges from 1,300 to 2,000 respondents.

We analyse the values of people aged 30 and over, on the assumption that most individuals in this age group have completed their education. Respondents are divided into four educational groups: below upper secondary education, general upper secondary education, vocational upper secondary education and higher education. In examining overall changes in values, we also include Finland as a relevant comparison country. For a more detailed analysis of the factors shaping values, we use regression models that, in addition to education, include age, gender, value trends over time and income.

INNOVATION, SOLIDARITY AND THE NEED FOR SECURITY ARE DECLINING, WHILE HEDONISM IS INCREASING

Generally, among the five value orientations analysed, appreciation of nature is considered the most important, followed closely by security and solidarity. Innovation ranks fourth in importance, and hedonism is the least valued of the five in Estonian society.

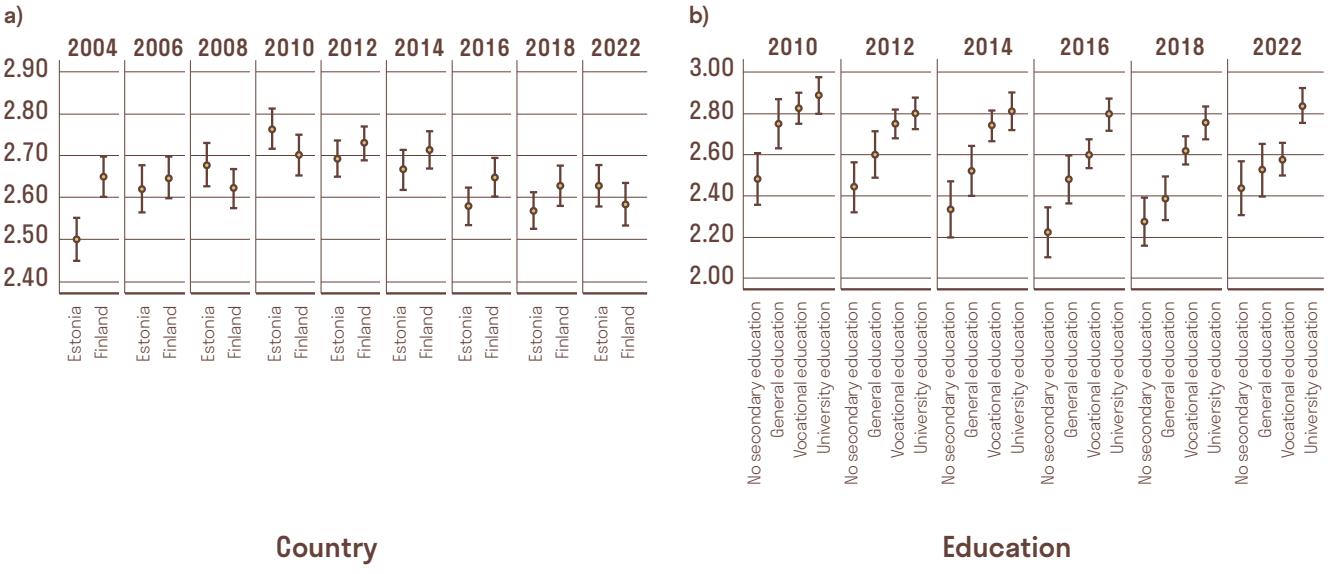
People with higher education value innovation and achievement more than other educational groups do. Previous research on the relationship between values and education has shown that openness to change is more characteristic of those with higher levels of education. Valuing the development of one's ideas and abilities both motivates individuals to continue their educational path and fosters independent thinking, intellectual openness and flexibility.[10] People with higher education also attach greater importance to achievement values. The influence of education on achievement values may reflect the role of standards-based assessment of learning outcomes in schools,[11] as well as stronger ambition to advance in life. Values have also been found to be significantly associated with academic performance[12] and with choice of field of study at university.[13]

Earlier studies in Estonia similarly show that people with lower levels of education place less importance on self-realisation values,[14] while those with higher education attach greater importance to innovation[15] and consider work and achievement more central.[16]

Figure 4.4.1a shows that in Estonia the value placed on innovation and achievement increased rapidly between 2004 and 2010, after which it declined, with a similar trend observed in Finland. In recent years, considerable effort has been made in Estonian schools to foster entrepreneurship among young people. It is therefore relevant to ask whether the value placed on innovation has also declined among younger cohorts. A separate analysis of Estonians aged 15–25 shows that since 2014, both innovativeness and orientation towards achievement have decreased among young people.

Figure 4.4.1a Change over time in the value placed on innovation and achievement in Estonia and Finland

Figure 4.4.1b Association between innovation–achievement values and education level in Estonia



SOURCE: figure by the authors based on European Social Survey data[17]

Figure 4.4.1b indicates that the decline in valuing innovation and achievement occurred across almost all educational groups, with only those with higher education largely unaffected. More detailed regression models, controlling for education, time trends, gender, age and respondents' assessments of their household income, do not account for the decline in the value placed on innovation and achievement. For example, the decrease cannot be attributed to changes in living standards or income, nor can it be explained by shifts in the age structure of society. Although younger people are generally more open to innovation and place greater importance on achievement than older individuals, population ageing does not account for the observed decline of innovation and achievement values.

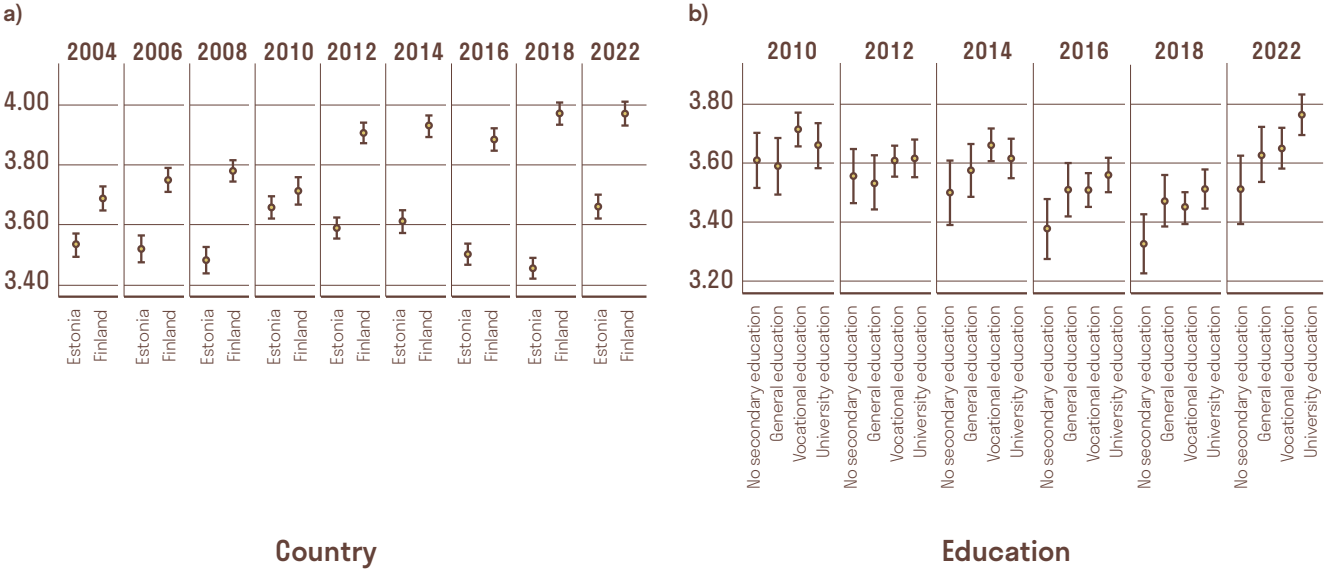
SOLIDARITY DEPENDS ON EDUCATION

Previous research has shown that tolerance increases with educational attainment.[18] In Estonia, periods of higher and lower solidarity are clearly distinguishable (Figure 4.4.2a). The 2009 economic crisis led to an increase in the value placed on solidarity, which lasted until 2014. From then on, the importance of solidarity declined again until 2018. In 2021, solidarity returned to its 2010 level due to the spread of Covid-19. In terms of the importance attributed to solidarity, Estonia differs markedly from Finland. In Finland, solidarity has generally remained at a higher level than in Estonia, with particularly large differences emerging from 2012 onwards.

From 2021, people with higher education in Estonia place greater importance on solidarity than those with lower levels of education (Figure 4.4.2b). However, more detailed regression models controlling for age, gender, income and survey year show that these educational differences are explained by the gender composition of the educational groups. Once gender is taken into account, differences by education level disappear. Women place greater importance on solidarity than men, while other characteristics have no significant effect.

Figure 4.4.2a Change over time in the value placed on solidarity in Estonia and Finland and its association with education in Estonia

Figure 4.4.2b Value placed on solidarity across educational groups in Estonia



SOURCE: figure by the authors based on European Social Survey data[19]

APPRECIATION OF NATURE VARIES OVER TIME AND DEPENDS ON GENDER

Nature has long been important to many people in Estonia, regardless of educational level. The importance attached to caring for nature increased in 2010 and 2018, but generally it has fluctuated over time (Figure 4.4.3a). In 2021, however, the importance attributed to the natural environment declined, mainly due to reduced support among groups with lower levels of education (Figure 4.4.3b). Regression models show that differences between people with higher education and other educational groups in valuing nature are linked to gender: women place greater importance on nature than men, and women are more strongly represented among those with higher education.

THE NEED FOR SECURITY DOES NOT DEPEND ON EDUCATION

Previous studies in other countries suggest that people with lower levels of education have a stronger need for security, as education enhances the ability to cope with life and may reduce the perceived importance of security. For individuals with lower educational attainment, stability and secure employment are more important than for those with higher education.[20]

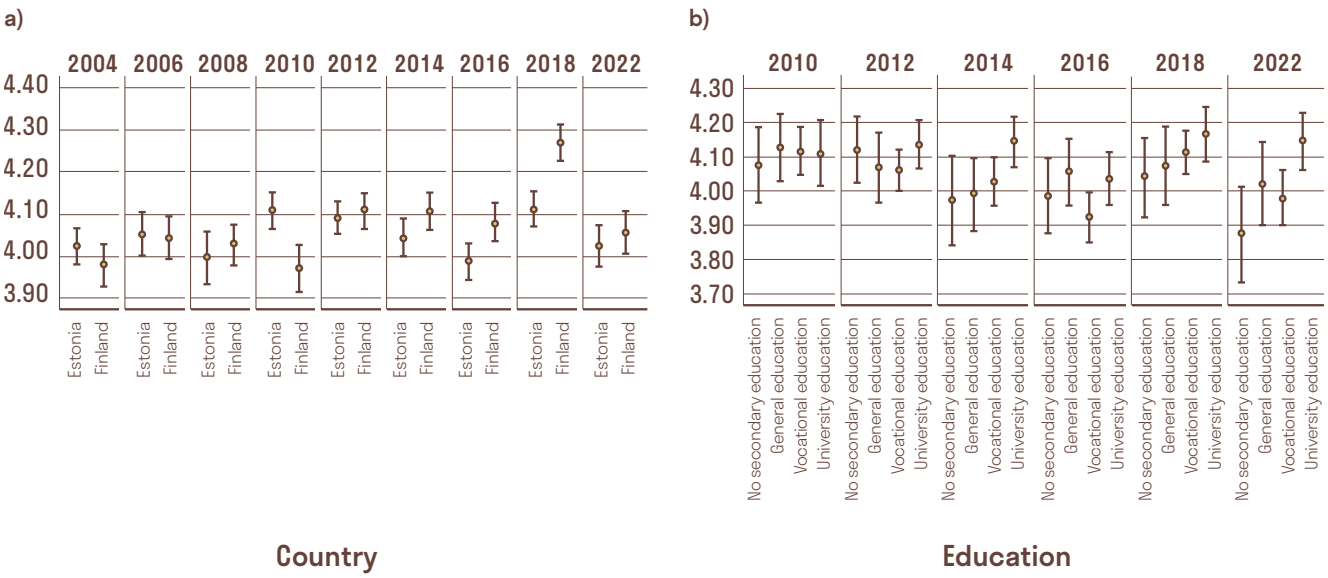
Since 2014, the value placed on security in Estonia has steadily declined, reaching a level comparable to Finland over the observed period (Figure 4.4.4a). However, there are no differences between educational groups in Estonia. Security is valued equally across all educational levels. Its importance depends primarily on gender and income: women and people with the lowest incomes report a greater need for security.

HEDONISM IS LEAST VALUED BY THOSE WITH THE LOWEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Hedonism, previously the least supported value orientation in Estonia, shows a clear upward trend (Figure 4.4.5a). Estonia, which had earlier lagged behind Finland in valuing enjoyment,[21] is now catching up with its neighbour. The sharp increases in 2010 and 2021 are particularly notable. Differences between educational groups are

Figure 4.4.3a Change over time in the value placed on nature in Estonia and Finland

Figure 4.4.3b Association between appreciation of nature and education in Estonia



SOURCE: figure by the authors based on European Social Survey data[22]

modest. Only people with below upper secondary education consistently report lower levels of support, although by 2021 these differences were no longer statistically significant. Analysis of the change in hedonism suggests that the increase cannot be explained by changes in population composition but is more likely associated with rising prosperity and greater societal security.

SUMMARY

We analysed how five value orientations – innovation–achievement, solidarity, appreciation of nature, security and hedonism – developed across educational groups in Estonia between 2010 and 2021. The analysis shows systematic differences by educational level in the case of innovation–achievement, solidarity and hedonism. People with higher education place greater importance on innovation, achievement and solidarity, while those with below upper secondary education attach less importance to hedonism. Appreciation of nature is also considered more important by people with higher education than by other groups. However, the differences between educational groups are not large.

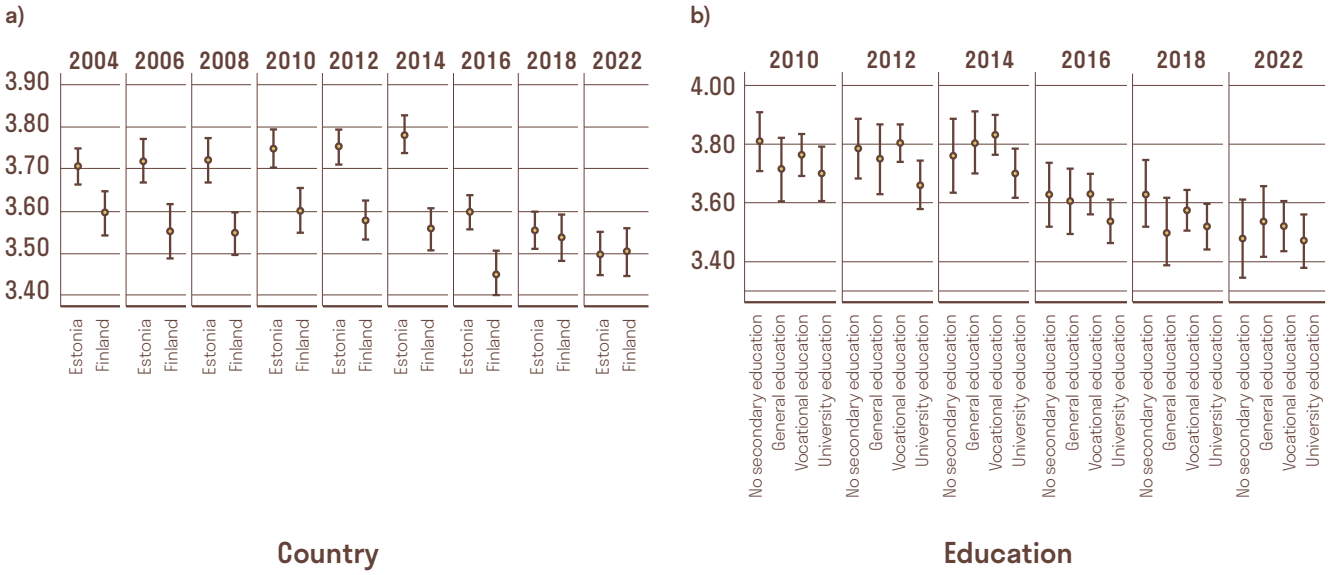
The value placed on innovation and achievement increased rapidly between 2004 and 2010 and has since declined at all educational levels except among people with higher education. Those with higher education have also been the main drivers of innovation values in Estonia. The decline cannot be explained by population ageing but may reflect a reduced desire for novelty and a growing reluctance to take on challenges.

The value placed on solidarity has fluctuated. During the Covid-19 pandemic, solidarity was considered more important across all educational groups. Overall, since 2018, people with higher education have attached greater importance to solidarity than other groups, primarily because women with higher education place particularly strong emphasis on solidarity.

The importance attached to caring for nature increased sharply in 2010 and 2018. In the context of climate activism and the green transition, this is not surprising. More notable is the decline in 2021 among people with lower levels of education, which may indicate fatigue with climate and environmental issues amid worsening economic conditions during the pandemic.

Figure 4.4.4a Change over time in the value placed on security in Estonia and Finland

Figure 4.4.4b Association between security values and education in Estonia



SOURCE: figure by the authors based on European Social Survey data[23]

The value placed on security has declined in Estonia from 2014 onward, with no differences between educational groups. The long-term decline is likely linked to improvements in overall living standards.

By contrast, the value placed on hedonism increased and approached the level observed in Finland, where it had previously been considerably higher.

Overall, values changed over time and within educational groups. Some orientations, such as security, shifted in the same direction across all educational groups. For most values – innovation, solidarity, appreciation of nature and hedonism – changes occurred both over time and between educational groups.

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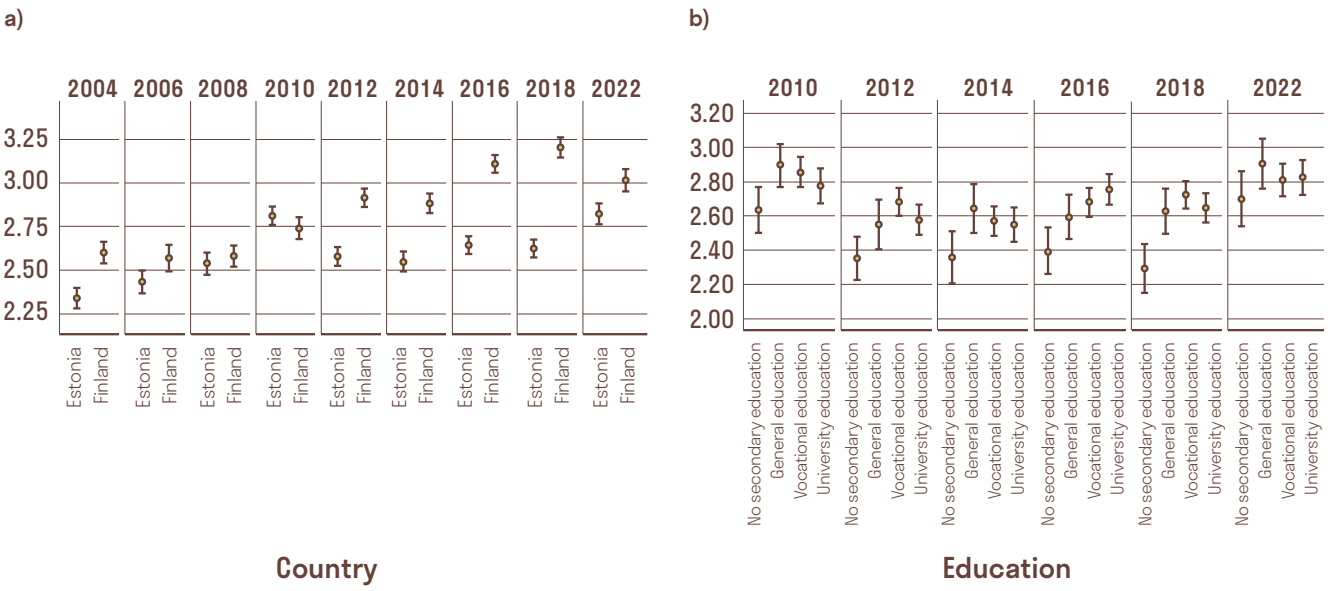
Figure 4.4.5a Change over time in the value placed on hedonism in Estonia and Finland

Figure 4.4.5b Association between hedonism and education in Estonia



SOURCE: figure by the authors based on European Social Survey data[24]

REFLECTION

Äli Leijen

The analyses presented in the article show that, among the five value orientations examined, appreciation of nature is considered the most important in Estonian society. This is followed by security and solidarity. Innovation ranks fourth, and hedonism is valued least. Values have fluctuated over time and, for example, hedonism has shown an upward trend compared with earlier years. Somewhat unexpectedly, the data indicate that the value placed on security did not increase following the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Data collected in 2021 instead show a decline in the importance attributed to security, particularly compared with 2014. Future survey rounds may reveal further shifts in the value attached to security. Compared with Finland, the most recent data show the largest differences in solidarity. While the article focuses primarily on comparisons over time and between groups, this reflection considers how values are shaped and put into practice.

First, value formation requires deliberate attention. If values are not acknowledged, examined and consciously cultivated, they will develop implicitly. In Estonia, greater emphasis should be placed on values within the national curriculum, particularly in relation to the development of general competences. To date, the curriculum has largely presented lists and brief descriptions of key competences, with less attention to the broader vision and value framework within which these competences should be cultivated.

Second, articulating and naming values is not enough. Greater focus is needed on how values are translated into practice and how they can be effectively cultivated. Declared values do not always correspond to behaviour, and behaviour may not reflect stated priorities. For the past 18 years, appreciation of nature has consistently been identified as the most important value in Estonian society. This might suggest that environmental concern is expressed in consistent and systematic action. However, experts note that raising awareness of climate change and environmental issues, and encouraging new behavioural patterns, still require sustained effort in Estonia.[25] The relationship between values, attitudes and behaviour has been widely studied, and it is well established that attitudes do not automatically lead to behavioural change.[26] In education for sustainable development, increasing emphasis is therefore placed not only on shaping knowledge and attitudes but also on supporting concrete changes in behaviour.[27]

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