The interest in careers with sustainability at their core has grown to such an extent that most major universities now offer a sustainability program. The University of Sydney's program kicked off in 2012 with fewer than 10 students.

That has now more than doubled, with students opting for the master's degree (18 months full time), graduate diploma (12 months) or graduate certificate (six months).

A third of the master's degree is the capstone project in which students design a research inquiry with mentors from the university to arrive at real sustainability solutions. The program is multidisciplinary, with graduates heading for careers in health, business, science and policy.

Billi Hayes, 25, is the environmental and quality manager at high-end furniture store Ke-Zu in Alexandria. She enrolled in the master of sustainability at Sydney University after completing her bachelor of design at the University of NSW College of Fine Arts.

"I wanted to learn how to break a chair down into its component parts for recycling," Hayes says. "We put so much effort into manufacturing something, but no thought about taking it apart and disposing of it."

For her capstone project, Hayes focused on volatile organic compounds emissions and how they were tested in Europe and the US, compared with Australian standards.