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# “Future-proof your Degree”

## Embedding sustainability and employability at Nottingham Business School (NBS)

Nottingham  
Business  
School

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of how a UK business school has explicitly linked sustainability to employability and embedded these into all levels of its undergraduate and postgraduate degree portfolio.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This case study features Nottingham Business School’s (NBS’s) journey of linking sustainability with employability to achieve the University’s strategic objectives and help deliver on the sustainable development goals (SDGs). After reviewing all courses, a cross-school approach was adopted in re-designing the curriculum, first at undergraduate and later postgraduate level. Partnerships, both internal and external were developed, involving the employability and enterprise teams, the University’s students and alumni, local employers, local authorities and businesses and charities. Feedback from graduates is included.

**Findings** – When NBS introduced new undergraduate modules in 2012, there was resistance with concerns over already crammed curricula and the perceived irrelevance of sustainability. This changed as students realised that an understanding of sustainability was benefiting them at interviews and adding value to their employers. While it cannot be proved that increased self-awareness and sustainability literacy have a direct effect on graduate prospects (as measured by the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey), NBS has seen the percentage of students in graduate level employment and/or study increase from 71 to 89.6 per cent over the past five years.

**Originality/value** – Linking sustainability to employability, and embedding these in the curriculum, should benefit any institution, its students, employers and society, and can be replicated anywhere in the world.

**Keywords** Employability, Responsible leadership, Sustainability literacy, SDG, Higher education curricula

**Paper type** Case Study

### 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the introduction of a level 6 module, with sustainability at its heart, across the final year of the undergraduate platform at Nottingham Business School (NBS), and reflects on how it has helped the NBS students to improve their employability and future-proof their degrees. The paper also explores other sustainability-related initiatives that were later added to further enhance the acquisition of sustainability and employability skills across both the undergraduate and postgraduate platform. In 2017, this project won



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the EAUC UK and Ireland Green Gown Award for Employability (large institution) ([Green Gown Awards, 2017](#)).

Building on a history of various sustainability-focussed modules and case studies used in different parts of the NBS curriculum, it was agreed by the School's senior leadership team in 2011 that NBS should be more systematic about incorporating sustainability across *all* levels. This was due in part to colleagues' research interests, but also to the external influence of accrediting organisations such as the European Foundation for Management Development and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Added to this, evidence of research by Accenture ([Lacy \*et al.\*, 2010](#)) and the [BSB Group PLC \(2011\)](#) demonstrated that students, graduates and employers had a growing appetite for the development of students' sustainability literacy. This is an area that is also well covered by academic research (see for example [Bourn and Shiel, 2009](#); [Gordon, 2009](#); [Van Buren, 2003](#)). NBS also wanted to improve the students' self-awareness and leadership capacity and assist them to develop appropriate graduate attributes, thereby improving their longer-term employability.

Following on from the commitment by the School's management, and as part of a larger review of the curriculum across the whole of Nottingham Trent University (NTU), a bold move was taken by NBS in 2012. This involved the introduction of a new final year module "Leadership and Employability" (L&E) into all undergraduate NBS degrees. This was designed as a capstone module with one of its aims being to allow students the space to reflect on their previous studies, work experience, skills development, emotional intelligence, and therefore their employability, within a synoptic assessment ([Figure 1](#)).

At first sight, this might not appear bold, but what made this module stand out was the inclusion of the topic of "sustainability", both as part of the personal, individual reflective synoptic assessment, and also in a discipline-related group project, carried out in partnership with various internal and external agencies. Embedding sustainability education has been highlighted as a challenge by both researchers and practitioners ([Cebrián \*et al.\*, 2015](#); [von der Heide and Lamberton, 2011](#)). NBS's initiative to introduce the module was therefore bold considering this background. Rolling it out across all undergraduate business degrees was further testimony of the School's commitment towards embedding sustainability in the curriculum and ensuring delivery of the University's strategic goals ([NTU, 2010](#); [NTU, 2015](#)) and ultimately the sustainable development goals (SDGs) ([UNESCO, 2017](#)).



**Figure 1.** Guidance given to students for the individual synoptic reflective report within the L&E modules across the NBS undergraduate platform

## 2. Developing self-aware future leaders

The graduate job market is very competitive and students need to set themselves apart if they are to succeed in securing a graduate role (High Fliers, 2019). One thing that many graduates apparently lack is self-awareness (Scott, 2014) and this is also cited as a key competency for sustainability literacy (UNESCO, 2017). To ensure NBS students and graduates work actively to develop this ability, since 2012 at the start of their final year, we ask all undergraduates to assess themselves against a set of graduate attributes. This helps set a benchmark to allow students to reflect and assess their personal development towards the end of the year. The first iteration of the module used the graduate attributes published in the 2010 NTU Strategic Plan (NTU, 2010), which the University expected *all* of its students to develop over the course of their degree. We introduced NBS students to these through a “Graduate Attributes Matrix”, which they completed in discussion with their Personal Tutor, assessing themselves to recognise their own strengths, weaknesses and in turn, identify any gaps. Figure 2 shows an extract from the current matrix. NB since the module was first launched, we have replaced the original NTU graduate attributes with an NBS set.

When assessing themselves against each graduate attribute, where students give themselves a low score for a particular attribute, they are encouraged to add to their personal development plan and seek out extra-curricular activities to help fill the gaps identified. Diagnostic tools and self-assessments provide a useful approach that allows students to take ownership of their own learning and encourage them to act to address any identified gaps (Falchikov and Boud, 1989). Originally entitled “self-selecting” events and opportunities, this allowed NBS students to personalise their learning and development, and in 2013, these were re-badged as “Continuing Professional Development” (CPD) opportunities. The change in terminology was meant to familiarise students with this widely used concept in different organisations and professions, so encouraging them to continue to work on their professional development after graduation and develop the habit of long-life learning (Jackson, 2014).

To facilitate their engagement, a list of suitable activities and volunteering and other roles is publicised, together with an electronic calendar of CPD opportunities created for NBS students on the NTU Intranet. This includes a wide variety of business and industry leader talks, workshops, external visits and business challenges from which students select

SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE/ATTRIBUTE The below are based on the 7 NBS Learning & Teaching Graduate Attributes and commonly required skills sought by employers	YOUR RATING 1 = lowest 5 = highest	EVIDENCE/ EXAMPLES	LINK TO CPD & YOUR PLAN
<b>Analytical / Problem Solving (APS)</b> 1. Using critical thought to underpin academic arguments 2. Using logical thought to solve problems using data or information 3. Having ability to use, analyse and interpret numerical data 4. Creatively finding new solutions to complex problems 5. Critically identifying valid and reliable sources of information to support your work			
<b>Commercial/Industry Awareness (CIA)</b> 1. Experience of working within a relevant professional setting related to your future 2. Ability to apply theory to practice in organisational settings 3. Awareness of labour market, job opportunities, and recruitment processes, within area of interest 4. Awareness of current affairs			
<b>Leadership &amp; Responsible Leadership (RL)</b> 1. Taking responsibility for a group of people 2. Managing the delivery of a project/task 3. Motivating, influencing, supporting & coaching others 4. Being aware of ethical issues in relation to your discipline/ future 5. Understanding/Appreciation of social, economic and environmental sustainability issues and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals			
<b>Global Citizenship (GC)</b> 1. Experience of working with people from a different culture/language to you 2. International awareness and openness to the world 3. Being aware of equality & diversity issues			

**Figure 2.**  
An extract from the L&E matrix showing a selection of graduate attributes against which NBS undergraduates rate themselves

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relevant personalised activities to address any identified skills or behaviour gaps. Further detail will be provided in the ensuing sections. Each student has to select, and later reflect upon, a minimum of 20 hours of CPD each year. Some attributes, such as those relating to “intellectual agility” for example (the aptitude for independent, critical thought), or skills relating to information gathering, communications and organisation, are relatively easy for students to comprehend and to evidence. In the mapping exercise, the more challenging skills tend to be those under the heading of “global citizenship”. In the original version, this not only encompassed “international awareness with an appreciation of social and cultural diversity . . . respect for human rights and dignity”, it also included an “understanding and appreciation of social, economic *or* environmental sustainability” (NTU, 2010: online). This is consistent with study findings from various scholars showing that students find the areas of global citizenship and associated competencies somewhat challenging (Fraser, 2011; Grudzinski-Hall, 2007). In NBS, when explaining this to students, this was reinforced and made more prominent by amending this attribute to read *and* rather than *or* environmental sustainability.

Where the student highlights a gap in time management, communication or research skills, it is relatively easy for them to find resources or events to improve themselves. With respect to “intellectual agility”, the NTU library offers relevant workshops and we organise inspirational guest lectures, which students can attend. “Global citizenship” and “responsible leadership capacity” can however seem more difficult for students to develop. This is where the discipline-related group project is able to play an important role. The difficulty that NBS students have had in grasping global citizenship and responsible leadership concepts mirrors evidence highlighted in research findings (Grudzinski-Hall, 2007; Kelly and Alam, 2009) requiring innovative approaches to engage students in practical and meaningful ways to address this. With approximately 1,200 students enrolled on the L&E module in 2012/2013 (its first iteration), across a range of degrees from Accounting and Finance to Human Resources, and from Marketing to Economics or International Business Management, it was necessary to accommodate the disciplines in different ways. While the synoptic reflective report was common to all, we introduced a group project that would be tailored to each discipline. This would not only allow the development of transferrable skills and students’ leadership capacity, it would improve their understanding of sustainability (in its broadest sense). To ensure relevance and currency, we developed the group projects in partnership and collaboration with various local organisations. In some cases, the relationship has continued over the intervening years, in others the projects have evolved and different relationships have been forged. The partnerships allow for collaborative approaches to address sustainability challenges, and depending on the specific nature of the problems that the students are tackling, they contribute towards a number of different SDGs, an approach highly commended in extant studies (Gray and Stites, 2013). Table I shows a selection of some of the partners with whom we worked, together with associated projects.

Before students undertake the project work, they learn about sustainability in general and the SDGs in particular. This enables them to make clear links between the projects selected and the respective SDGs to which that project relates. In some cases, the link with sustainability, and more recently the SDGs, is overt. Taking the BA Business students for example: for nearly seven years, the successive cohorts have worked on a greenhouse gas (GHG) consultancy project linked closely to SDG 13 (Climate Action). Each year, in collaboration first with Netpositive and, more recently, Investors in the Environment (iE), local organisations and businesses have been recruited as clients. Under the supervision of module tutors, the local organisations have provided data on their usage of electricity and

gas among other things, that could contribute towards climate change. This has enabled the student groups to help each organisation to save money and reduce its carbon footprint. We also require the students to make recommendations as to how the organisation could engage employees and customers to be more responsible, and many innovative ideas have been put forward and subsequently adopted. The project outcomes have directly related to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

In the case of the BA Marketing and the BA Business Management with Marketing students, the group project has been through various incarnations, partly dependent on the incumbent module leader and his or her specific research interests. As shown in Table I, SASIE Ltd, a local renewable energy business, has been one of the partners, linking neatly to SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). For their group assessment in this instance, the marketing students focussed either on the development of an energy saving device or on renewable energy itself, and how these could be communicated and marketed to customers and stakeholders more effectively. In the previous year, the cohort worked with one of two different organisations: Nottingham City Homes, who wanted to encourage their tenants to be more environmentally aware and sustainable, or Nottingham City Council, who wanted to encourage residents to recycle more of their waste. In both cases, the client organisation asked the students to recommend the best ways to communicate with their respective audiences and to suggest initiatives to increase engagement, linked to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The student groups were briefed by the client organisation as if they were consultants, and the students subsequently presented their recommendations and proposed strategy to the client, after a period of research and reflection.

The above examples provide overt links to specific SDGs, but with some of the disciplines, the students may have initially been unaware of the links to sustainability and the SDGs. Take for example the Human Resource Management and Economics students, who have previously worked in parallel projects on graduate retention in Nottinghamshire in partnership with NBS alumni, the local City and County Councils and the local newspaper – the Nottingham Post. As some students assume sustainability relates just to environmental issues, they have perhaps not immediately realised that *economic* sustainability is important for the region, thereby linking this project to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). More recently, the Economics project has

L&E version	Project	Partners
Business	GHG Mgt consultancy	Local companies/NHS/Councils and iE
Marketing	Marketing consultants: tailored recommendations	SASIE Ltd Nottingham City Council; Nottingham City Homes
HR	Graduate Retention within Nottinghamshire	Local Authorities/alumni/employers/ Nottingham Post
Economics	Nottingham Smart City strategy	Nottingham City Council/employers/alumni
Accounting and Finance	Live Accounting and Finance challenges	Various including: Mazars, Experian, Capital One, Notts Fire and Rescue . . .
Entrepreneurship	Consultancy – Community groups and social enterprises	Notts County Council/social enterprises

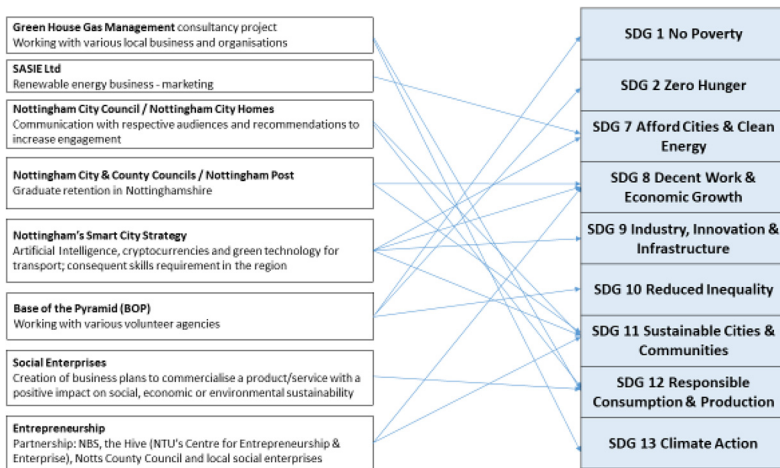
**Table I.**  
Examples of the partnerships forged to deliver the discipline-related group projects within various L&E modules

focussed on Nottingham’s Smart City strategy, in a partnership between Nottingham City Council, NTU and the University of Nottingham. This was quite wide-ranging and depending on their preferences, could potentially lead the student groups to focus on sub-topics relating to various aspects of technology (e.g. Artificial Intelligence, cryptocurrencies and green technology for transport), and the consequent necessary development of appropriate skills in the region. These projects link to not only SDG 8 and SDG 11 as in the previous year but also SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy).

The International Business Management students have in the past focussed on the concept of the Base of the Pyramid, which relates to the fact that around 60 per cent of the world’s population exists on an annual income of less than \$1,500 (Hart and Casado Canaque, 2015). This can potentially relate to any of the SDGs (WBCSD, 2016), but would especially link to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). Over the years, this cohort has worked on projects in partnership with the Red Cross, the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum (NNRF) and the Arkwright Meadows Community Gardens, for example. More recently, the groups have been asked to create a business plan for a social enterprise commercialising a product or service that would have a positive impact on social, economic or environmental sustainability; links can be seen here to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

The Entrepreneurship students meanwhile have worked with the Hive, NTU’s Centre for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise, Nottinghamshire County Council and a variety of local social enterprises, linking to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Each of the above examples has necessitated close collaboration with a variety of different partners and agencies, and has enabled the University to work towards one of its strategic aims in its latest 2015 Strategic Plan – that of “Enriching Society” (NTU, 2015). This strategic aim seeks to develop positive social impact through engagement by both students and staff with a variety of different activities that add value to society. The student projects make a big contribution especially to small businesses, social enterprises and charities, which may not be able to afford to hire consultants or spend money on extensive research projects. Figure 3 shows the mapping of selected L&E group projects with relevant SDGs.



**Figure 3.** Summary of SDGs mapped to various NBS L&E group projects

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As can be seen from [Figure 3](#), the L&E student projects can be mapped to more than 50 per cent of the SDGs so far and it is hoped that any new projects will map to as many of the remaining SDGs as possible.

### 3. Barriers to success

Having introduced the L&E module in 2012, it was soon realised that topics such as sustainability, self-awareness, emotional intelligence and reflection needed to be introduced much earlier, as soon as the students arrived at NBS, and even needed flagging up at open events as being important threads throughout all years. We also tried to ensure a wider understanding of the relevance by discussing such issues in NBS's Link magazine, which is aimed especially at NBS students ([Winfield and Howarth, 2013](#)).

Many students find reflection difficult, especially those studying on one of the Economics or Accounting and Finance degrees, who may have previously concentrated more on quantitative modules. There were some negative reactions to being forced to reflect and to become more self-aware, articulated through Course Committees, the National Student Satisfaction Survey and module feedback questionnaires. By introducing these topics at all levels, they became much more embedded.

As regards the group projects, these have not always been easy to manage either. Taking the BA Business project for example, in the early days, there was resistance from many of the students who protested that GHG Management had nothing to do with their degree. It was quickly seen that when introducing the module and the group project, the emphasis needed to be on the personal development of working on a real-life consultancy project, with a genuine client and data; the GHG focus was merely a vehicle and at that time had to be down played. Clearly, there would also be a benefit to the students from developing their own carbon literacy, i.e. an understanding of how carbon emissions affect them and their environment ([Molthan-Hill et al., 2018](#)). For many, this was not immediately obvious and it was sometimes only when they started to attend interviews for graduate jobs or were in their first graduate post that they understood how they could add value in a way they had perhaps not envisaged. Because many of the students did not understand the relevance or the benefits, there was immense resistance at times and negativity towards this valuable exercise. It would perhaps have been simpler for NBS to take the easy option and remove this project, but the School was determined to try and make it work and to get the students to be more positive towards it. This lack of understanding and resistance also meant sometimes that the students found it difficult to reflect on what they had gained, and therefore found it difficult to articulate the development of their "global citizenship" graduate attribute. Evidence from the literature supports the notion that the development of soft skills for students doing technical business subjects tends to be an issue ([Ramlall and Ramlall, 2014](#)). Pursuit of such skills therefore requires a delicate, measured and persistent approach. Consequently, as the years progressed, as well as introducing the group project differently at the start of the year, we also spent much more time helping the students by making the links and benefits much more explicit and discussing these regularly in one-to-one mentor meetings and group seminars. We also invited alumni to discuss their reactions and feelings, and demonstrate how they had reaped the benefits in the longer term.

It was clear as well that beyond the group projects, we needed to introduce other initiatives to increase the students' understanding of, and engagement with,

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sustainability. In 2013, NTU introduced its in-house Sustainability in Practice (SiP) online course, open to all students (and indeed staff). The SiP course consists of four mini-modules, which allow the students to explore their understanding of sustainability, then examine and discover the links with their degree and other disciplines. The course culminates in the production of an artefact, demonstrating how sustainability links to the student's own discipline and degree course. The artefact could be a poster, mood board, short video, an innovative product, even a sculpture or a poem for example (depending on the student's degree and discipline). The artefacts are assessed, mainly by members of NTU's Sustainable Development Action Forum, and those who pass are awarded a certificate.

As sustainability is such an integral part of NBS's L&E module learning outcomes, it was felt that time should be given to allow completion of the SiP within the module, so from the 2013/2014 academic year, this was encouraged during the spring term. Operationally however this soon presented NBS staff with another problem. It was realised that with such a large number of students, this would be an enormous task for a small group of colleagues, who would need to assess each artefact to confirm whether the student had passed their certificate or not. It was therefore agreed in 2014 to introduce a short online multiple-choice test that would allow NBS students to undertake and pass the course, with the option to continue and submit an artefact to gain the full certificate. This is nowadays included in the NTU student's Higher Education Achievement Record – HEAR, an electronic transcript, which includes specific extra-curricular activities and achievements. This lightened the assessment load for colleagues, as it allowed us to ascertain that the student had absorbed and understood the essentials, without being an onerous assessment task for tutors, which again might be seen in a negative light. While a student could pass the L&E module without undertaking the SiP (if they could evidence an understanding of sustainability from a business challenge, volunteering or work experience for example), to incentivise students, CPD hours could be claimed; with 5 hours for the course and short multiple-choice test, or 10 hours for the full certificate.

As time progressed, SiP Challenge Days were introduced, which allowed students to undertake the course over a full day of activities, working with others from across the University rather than sitting alone at their computer (Dharmasasmita *et al.*, 2017). Many students welcomed this multi-disciplinary approach and the SiP course itself has developed from an initial focus purely on food, to a choice of energy or clothing, thereby appealing to a greater variety of students.

Other ways in which students can develop their understanding of sustainability and the SDGs outside of the curriculum include various opportunities to volunteer to be an Auditor for Responsible Futures (in partnership with the NTU Students' Union), or to be an Eco Champion, working with the NTU Sustainable Development Team. We also regularly promote student challenges and competitions, such as the Universities Business Challenge where the scenario is based on an organisation with a sustainability focus (see [www.ubcworldwide.com/](http://www.ubcworldwide.com/) for more information).

Another such opportunity is the annual Global Enterprise Experience (Geebiz) challenge organised by Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand). One of the NBS International Business students who participated in this event in 2018 wrote a blog article in which she stated that this challenge was “one of the best opportunities I have found whilst being a student at NBS” (Thomas, 2018: online). The Geebiz challenge brings together students, entrepreneurs and employees from all over the world to work in virtual teams over a three-week period; by 2018, “over 10,000



participants from 655 universities and 80 organisations in 115 countries had participated” (Geebiz, 2018: online). Sustainability is integral to the challenge: “[t]eams write a six-page business concept proposal for a low initial cost venture that profitably progresses a United Nations Sustainable Development Goal” (Geebiz, 2018: online). Eloise Thomas’s team focussed on SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, with their final concept focussing on:

[. . .] creating employment opportunities for women in the Dominican Republic [. . .] by giving them the opportunity to collect the Sargassum from the beaches and coastlines which is then turned into a plastic-like material and made into an eco-friendly reusable coffee cup (Thomas, 2018: online).

Another way that students can develop their understanding of sustainability and the SDGs is to join the University’s Enactus Team, which is supported by the Hive (NTU’s Centre for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise) (The Hive, 2018). There is also the opportunity to be involved with AIESEC (originally *Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales*), an international youth leadership organisation based locally at the University of Nottingham; this also has an SDG focus (AIESEC, 2018).

All of the above are promoted and encouraged as CPD activities for the NBS students. There are guidelines and students select different types of CPD activities, the main criterion being the *relevance* to their own future, which they must be able to articulate. All of this prepares them well for job applications and job interviews (and indeed the world of work). The approach adopted by NBS, to embed the development of a wide range of transferable skills by enabling students to engage with sustainability-related issues, is well supported in the literature (Edwards, 2014; Fallows and Steven, 2013; Perkmann and Salter, 2012). Inviting the University’s partners to submit real-life projects further brings to life the challenges that students work on as part of their degree studies, simulating real-life consultancy challenges that they may well encounter after graduation. The diversity of events, activities and speaker sessions offered to students as part of CPD activities caters for wide-ranging interests and ensures that each student can find something relevant to their interests and future. The table below summarises the variety of events offered in the 2017/2018 academic year together with the associated total hours (Table II).

2017/2018 CPD opportunities promoted by NBS	Total events	Total hours
Employer talks/events (including Jobs Fairs and professional body events)	119	295.5
Employability skills workshops/talks (including Prepare for Internship programme)	107	146.0
Volunteering, Challenges and Competitions	62	227.0
Enterprise and Entrepreneurship events/talks	27	93.5
International events/talks	25	27.0
Inspirational lectures	14	23.5
Responsible Leadership events/talks	18	62.5
Further study talks and taster events	4	17.0
Misc. (including externally organised events and study skills workshops)	25	91.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>983.0</b>

**Table II.**  
CPD Activities and  
numbers of hours  
promoted via the  
NBS employability  
calendar in 2017/  
2018

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#### 4. Embedding sustainability and reflection throughout Nottingham Business School leading to employability enhancement

Having established the L&E module at level 6 in 2012/2013, it was soon clear that students would benefit from being more self-aware and reflective, and undertaking CPD activities, at all levels. By 2015/2016, L&E was in its 4th year and NBS had appointed a Principal Lecturer in Personalisation along with a team of Academic Mentors to work with the undergraduates (and later postgraduates) at all levels. Via zero credit-bearing Personal and Professional Development modules in levels 4 and 5, and an equivalent credit-bearing module for postgraduates, all students were now required to carry out a personal gap-analysis, create a personal development plan, and select relevant CPD activities throughout their studies at NBS. Global citizenship and the need for an understanding of sustainability, and more recently the SDGs, was thereby embedded, with clear links throughout.

Although the initial aim of introducing the L&E module was not *explicitly* to improve our students' employability, we have seen that over the ensuing years, our students' Graduate Prospects (as measured by the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey) have steadily improved. They have risen from 71 per cent of 2011/2012 NBS graduates working or studying at graduate level, six months after graduation (January 2013 survey) to 89.6 per cent by January 2018 (HESA, 2018). It is not straightforward to compare NBS to the national outlook, but if we examine the data from the "Business Studies" JACS code, NTU scores 84.6 per cent compared to 76.7 per cent for the sector (HESA, 2018). While it would be difficult to attribute the improvement in the outcomes of the students *directly* to the inclusion of sustainability and responsible leadership in their curriculum, we have anecdotal evidence that this has helped them to stand out from the crowd. One Human Resource Management undergraduate, for example, returned from an assessment centre to report that she had spent most of the interview discussing the graduate retention research they had undertaken in L&E, along with her Graduate Attributes Matrix and the CPD she had selected (Isabelle Walker, personal communication, 7 August 2017).

As mentioned earlier, the benefits are not always immediately apparent and the effect may not be felt straight away. A 2015 marketing graduate reflected that the "knowledge of sustainability that I gained during my degree has helped me more within my career than I could have realised at the time" (Claire Russell, personal communication, 20 August 2017).

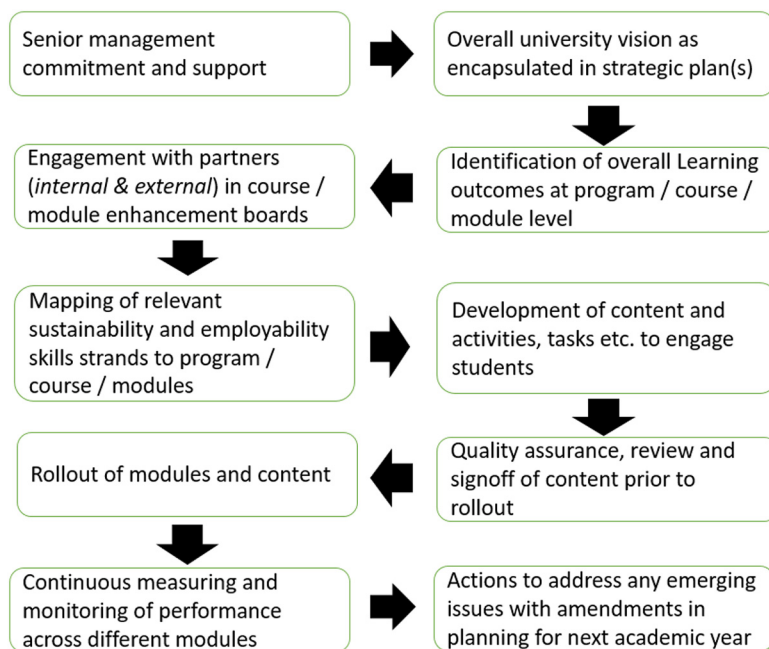
Another 2015 marketing graduate, elected as Vice President - Entertainments and subsequently President of the NTU Students' Union, admitted that he was originally quite sceptical, not understanding fully the relevance of the L&E module, but then realised that he:

[...] was able to think broader, reflect on actions I take to see how I can improve on future decisions. [...] On a personal note, the module dictated how I approached my work, my strategic long term thinking was something I received commendation for during my time working and I know I gained that from undertaking the L&E module (Timi Oluwasanmi, personal communication, 24 August 2017).

Finally, it also helped at least one business graduate to decide upon her future direction:

[t]he Leadership and Employability module enabled me to reflect upon my personal ethical and environmental values and how I could link these to a future career... I now work with SMEs to embed a culture of sustainability within their core business objectives (Ella McManus, personal communication, 7 August 2017).

As mentioned in Section 2, according to UNESCO (2017), eight key competencies have been identified for sustainability and one of these is self-awareness. This is also cited by Hunter (2015) as being critical in helping to achieve the SDGs. It is likely therefore that the fact we



**Figure 4.**  
Summary of the process steps adopted by NBS in embedding sustainability and employability skills across the curriculum

have pushed our students to be more self-aware and reflective has helped them to perform better, both at interviews and in their careers.

The process adopted at NBS could be replicated by any higher education institution, albeit with some adaptations to suit local requirements, depending on stakeholder preferences. The process as documented at NBS can be summarised in [Figure 4](#).

## 5. Nottingham Business School and Nottingham Trent University: next steps and conclusions

It is interesting to note that, while in the past we have had to down play the inclusion of carbon literacy in the GHG consultancy project, BA Business students currently on work placement have reacted very positively to the fact they will be working on such a project in their final year. They are so much more aware of the issue and its relevance, and many are pleased to know we are including such an important topic as part of their core curriculum.

Many modules at NBS include case studies or consultancy work linked to the SDGs and the plan is to make sure this is more explicit in future, so that students can develop clear links and potentially use these examples when attending interviews. NBS is striving to ensure that the SDGs are referred to regularly and more systematically across the curriculum.

To ensure sustainability and the SDGs are prominent from day one, when the first year undergraduates arrive at NBS each autumn, their first teaching week is dedicated to the “NBS Discover” project, where approximately 1,600 students explore the city of Nottingham and research a specific topic; in 2018/2019, the focus was single use plastics. This is then a “golden thread” throughout the first year as part of their “Personal and Academic Development” module. In line with L&E, this is one large 20-credit point module across the

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undergraduate platform in NBS, with discipline-related versions, to ensure relevance to, and therefore buy-in of, both staff and students.

In 2015, NTU published its latest Strategic Plan (NTU, 2015) and one of the outcomes has been a review of all courses in every school, through an exercise entitled “Curriculum Refresh”. Through this, many of NBS’s initiatives relating to employability, sustainability and personalisation are being extended throughout the institution. The integration of the SDGs has also become a requirement in every school/faculty, with every degree having to specify which SDG will be featured. Work experience or work-integrated learning (via internships, consultancy projects or simulations for example) is required across all degrees at NTU. Finally, a synoptic assessment is required towards the end of every degree, allowing reflection by the student on his or her employability.

Some colleagues from other faculties lament the fact that, with so many competing initiatives and requirements, often imposed by professional or external accrediting bodies, it can be hard to enthuse fellow academics to develop the relationships and partnerships necessary to embed the SDGs throughout the curriculum. At NBS however, we have demonstrated that by firmly linking sustainability to employability, it is possible to help our students to future-proof their degrees and enrich society; hopefully, others will now follow suit.

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Cole, D. and Tibby, M. (2013), "Defining and developing your approach to employability", HEA, York.

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