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ACADEMIC ALIGNMENT

Employability?
Isn't that what Careers do?

A joint approach to curriculum
design and development

Raising graduate outcomes
through academic partnerships

establishing a coordinated approach to **EMPLOYABILITY AT SCHOOL LEVEL**



Fiona Winfield, School Employability Manager in the Nottingham Business School (NBS) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), outlines NTU's approach to embedding employability across the curriculum and discusses the challenges and impact of introducing a school-wide module.

In 2012, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) created a new Employability Coordinator post for every academic school. Initially intended as a year-long secondment for a senior academic with the remit to embed employability across NTU, this is now a permanent, full time School Employability Manager post (with one FTE per School).

EMPLOYABILITY AUDIT

The secondments coincided with a university-wide review of the undergraduate curriculum. In parallel to this, the Employability Coordinators worked with academic colleagues to audit their undergraduate provision, assessing where employability-related activity already resided and to start the conversation about what needed introducing or improving, and why. Within the Employability Team at university level, we agreed to use [Dacre Pool and Sewell's CareerEDGE Model \(2007\)](#) to guide us to consider aspects of employability in addition to career management, and to help the students to understand that a degree alone is insufficient.

Following the audits, each Employability

Coordinator drew up suggestions and worked with senior management and academic colleagues within their School to implement their findings in different ways.

THE NOTTINGHAM BUSINESS SCHOOL (NBS) APPROACH

Within NBS we introduced a final-year module, Leadership & Employability (L&E), which was rolled out to all 1,200 finalists. To allow for the different disciplines, we introduced eight versions, each having a common synoptic assessment of an individual reflective report and a group assessment, most having a sustainability-focused project.

To support students' reflection, on entering their final year they carry out a Personal Gap Analysis, to assess themselves against the NBS Graduate Attributes. Working with their personal tutor, they select specific gaps (or weaknesses) and set up a personal development plan (PDP), seeking out a minimum of 25 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) to help fill identified gaps.

For the reflective report, while the CareerEDGE model is introduced and explained as part of the module, students can use another model of their choice (or indeed their Personal Gap Analysis) as their framework. As part of their reflection, they are asked to consider their time at NBS, both from an academic perspective and, more importantly, in terms of their wider life experiences (including any extracurricular

“ WE NOW ENSURE THAT UNDERGRADUATES START TO THINK ABOUT THEIR EMPLOYABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FROM DAY ONE ”



“ EMPLOYABILITY COORDINATORS WORKED WITH ACADEMIC COLLEAGUES TO AUDIT THEIR UNDERGRADUATE PROVISION ”

activity). We want to enable students to reflect on these learning opportunities in combination, to be more self-aware, and to be able to articulate what they have to offer a future employer or business partner.

We also want students to develop into responsible leaders. The introduction of the module came not long after the 2008 financial crash and we were conscious that issues relating to ethics and sustainability needed to be woven into everything we taught. Writing the reflective report gives students the opportunity to consider how they can be a responsible leader in the future, linking in with their own employability.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

To introduce the module across such a large diverse cohort was quite an undertaking and needed buy-in across the School. Not every academic colleague was enthusiastic at the prospect. In particular, some felt less confident in facilitating students' reflection. In response to this, staff development was offered and central lectures, handbooks and other support material were prepared.

The reaction of students was also very

mixed. Many found reflection challenging and aired these views. Others, however, realised the importance of being self-aware, even though they found it difficult. Many also found the freedom to be creative in their reflection too challenging and wanted clear direction and a clear structure.

MEASURING IMPACT

Anecdotally, we know that the module has had a huge positive impact on many students. Feedback has referred to feeling more confident and less stressed in interviews, an awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses and the ability to articulate these and demonstrate to employers how they have sought to improve themselves. Many students had not realised just how interested interviewers would be to hear about their sustainability-focused group projects.

Furthermore, since 2012, NBS has also seen a dramatic improvement in graduate prospects, as measured by DLHE: the overall NBS score has increased from 73.2% in the 2013 survey to 89.6% in the 2018 survey.

FRONT FOOT

Following the introduction of the module, working closely with NBS's Personalisation Team of Academic Mentors, we now ensure that undergraduates start to think about their employability and development needs (and sustainability) from day one. We have also introduced a similar approach at master's level.

When, in 2015, NTU's new strategic plan required all courses to refresh their curriculum and embed employability and sustainability (among other elements), NBS was already on the front foot. The required employability aspects involved career planning, translating theory into practice in work-like contexts, and a synoptic assessment incorporating reflection on their employability – all of which had already been firmly embedded at NBS.

Further evidence of the success of our work came in November 2017, when we won the [EAUC's Green Gown Award for Employability \(Larger Institution\)](#), based on the module. Judges commented that it was "an excellent example of taking a strategic approach to embedding sustainability within curriculum development, genuinely linking these two key aspects and creating responsible business leaders".

As we approach the eighth iteration of the L&E module, diagnostics, reflection and CPD are embedded throughout NBS, with employability and academic colleagues working closely together. By linking employability to responsible leadership, we also firmly believe it allows our graduates to stand out from the crowd.



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