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University sustainability career information events for future leaders

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Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, employability, career event planning.

Abstract

Education for Sustainable Development and graduate employability are key agendas within Higher Education, and career-related events provide a context that caters to both simultaneously. There is a need for greater integration of academic department and career service teams in developing event management that systematically considers the potential to raise awareness of sustainability-related careers. This can maximise student personal and professional growth through sustainability-related career events, which simultaneously benefit the student through shaping personal and professional ‘purpose’, society through impact on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and university impact-related measures. By approaching events as a source of empowering students to become aware of, and actively seek out careers in which they can have a positive impact on people and planet, universities can provide a pipeline of sustainability ‘actioners and transformers’.

This chapter illuminates the potential actions between career service teams and academic departments in developing information-related events about sustainability-related careers. It extends a popular employability framework to sustainability, presented with an illustrative case in a UK study context aligned with the sustainability ‘Thinker, Actioner and Transformer’ typology. An analysis of career service information enables clear recommendations to be provided on how academic teams, career and other operational services might coordinate approaches. It is proposed that the ultimate commitment of growth in transformation might well be to nurture students as activists for change, presented through the topical analysis of ‘fossil-free’ career events. This is very much a starting point, and it is hoped that the chapter provides an opening for further discussion.

Introduction

This chapter explores the nexus of sustainability and employability, within the context of Higher Education career events. It provides insights into how sustainability-related career information events can be managed to most effectively support the personal and professional development of graduates. The management of such University events for young adults (primarily aged between 18

and 24) sets the context for 21st-century leadership that addresses the United Nations 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs).

Surprisingly little literature can be found on the Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2017) agenda as it relates to graduate employability, and there is a marked dearth of insight as it relates to career events. There is however evidence of a movement towards such alignment, with Norton and Penaluna (2022) for Advance HE (the UK Higher Education professional body) capturing current educational policy and practice initiatives as the '3Es for Wicked Problems: Employability, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship' (Norton, 2022).

Séraphin et al's (2020) typology of 'Sustainability Thinker, Actioner and Transformer', aligns with Bloom's (1968) taxonomy of learning which classifies learning objectives as a hierarchical model of complexity beginning with a basic comprehension of knowledge (i.e. Thinker) through to the advanced evaluation and creation of knowledge (i.e. Transformer). If education is to be effective in developing the sustainability skills required for graduates to become 'change agents' (Cook, 2020) (i.e. Transformers), and students are to be prepared for the burgeoning 'green' skills job market (LinkedIn, 2022), then it follows that education should provide an integrated approach to sustainability and employability.

Progress towards the SDGs depends upon a systematic and integrated approach to embedding them in educational processes. In the UK, educators may be aware of the importance of employability outcomes in measurements such as the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), or UK Quality and Assurance Agency for Higher Education's guidance on 'Education for Sustainable Development' (QAA and Advance HE, 2021). Several global accreditation bodies (such as AACSB and EQUIS within a Business School context) require evidence of societal impact in strategic, curriculum and scholarly activities. This provides the 'formal curriculum' (Blasco, 2011) context for nurturing the progression of sustainability 'thinkers'.

It is proposed here that more insight is needed into how Education for Sustainable Development and employability can be more aligned, and that university events are a mechanism to develop this. This chapter therefore responds to the call for universities to embed sustainability more into the curriculum and linking it to employability to help prepare students for careers (Gamlath, 2022), and to continued interest by students to learn about sustainability (SOS-UK, 2022). The broader 'informal curriculum' (Blasco 2011) can be a powerful influence on developing students as sustainability 'actioners and transformers' in operational areas such as sustainable and ethical catering, transportation and building design. International University sustainability ratings such as the Times 'Higher Education Impact Ratings' and the student network 'People and Planet' ratings, illustrate the importance of Universities 'walking the talk'. Yet curiously such rankings tend not to extend to University services that are linked to the student learning and employability experience, such as Career Services.

If universities are viewed as complex multi-internal stakeholders comprising differing academic faculties, student service and administrative teams, then a lens of SDG17 'Partnership' is a guiding imperative. This also extends to career event management which depends on outreach and connection to organisations and alumni. Career Services teams are a central component of student empowerment, working alongside academic teams to inspire, inform and shape student employability. Academics may be time challenged to integrate job market information and opportunities alongside other module learning outcomes, and therefore rely on Careers Services. Yet academics hold subject expertise that can support and develop information provided by Career teams. Equally, by keeping abreast of job market openings and skill requirements, academics are

better placed to support students' development in formal curriculum delivery. It is therefore important for academic departments, careers teams and operational services to work together, and support students' employability trajectories through combining expertise in initiatives such as careers-related events.

This chapter maps the type of events UK university careers teams promote that can engage students in sustainability 'actioners and transformers'. It provides insights gleaned from mapping University career web site pages to identify what type of information is provided related to sustainability careers, leading to recommendations for greater integration across University structures in event planning to support student employability for sustainability-related careers. To begin, the 'SOAR' employability framework (Kumar, 2015) is presented in the next section to illustrate connections between sustainability related events as part of employability. Finally, a case example of the 'Fossil Free Careers Campaign' (People and Planet, 2022a) mapped against Séraphin, Yallop et al's (2020) 'sustainability transformers' typology, exemplifies the power of event management design to inform and shape students as future leaders and activists.

SOAR employability framework to inform sustainability career information events

SOAR stands for Self, Opportunity, Aspirations and Results, and has been used and evaluated globally and in the UK as a learning and development tool which leads to transferable Higher Education graduate-level skills and attributes (Kumar, 2015). It is a reformulation of the DOTS model which traditionally underpins many careers education programmes. DOTS stands for Decision-learning, Opportunity-awareness, Transition skills and Self-awareness. SOAR reformulates DOTS so that learners start with 'Self-awareness', and addresses evaluation and impact of learning behaviours and attributes through the final stage of 'Results', which is vital to understanding self and collective impact of learning.

The SOAR employability framework (Kumar, 2007, 2022) sets out a process map of how student learning *for* and *about* the SDGs can be facilitated alongside academic, personal and professional development. It is based on the principles of appreciative inquiry (Cooperider & Fry, 2012) which is key, since such holistic, whole-person pedagogy is said to be central to the development of 'global competence' (OECD, 2022). Applied to the design and implementation of careers related information events by Universities, the SOAR framework provides an integrated structure to formal academic interests with careers services, for the mutual benefit of both student development and supportive progress to the SDGs.

SOAR's first step of 'Self-awareness' engages students' mindset and heart set in contributing to the SDGs, which might for example be achieved through careers events which feature guest speakers working in sustainability, and passionate about what they do. 'Opportunity' aligns students' knowledge and skillsets to collaborate on projects and activities both on campus and beyond. Events based on volunteering opportunities and feature local through to international projects can be instrumental here. The third step of 'Aspirations' might feature alumni events, who showcase their career journeys and what is possible post-degree. The final stage of 'Results' encourages reflection on meaningful and mindful engagement in career planning, and might be facilitated through internal events both with career services professionals and the academic team.

Consideration of the SOAR framework in event planning, facilitates consideration of the employability-sustainability connections applied to all projects which can trigger further collaboration. Discussions can be further extended through consideration of Séraphin, Yallop et al's (2022) typology as seen in Table 1 which presents an example of a sustainability related event at Oxford Brookes University in 2023 (Oxford Brookes University, 2022). The event in this case is an

Instagram cooking competition (@lovestudentleftovers) based on creative leftover food recipes rolled out over some months, followed by a closing and panel discussion event and on campus celebration activities. The event was initiated as part of the United Nations supported 'Principles of Responsible Management Education' 10th anniversary celebrations of the UK network, on the theme of good sustainability. The event was designed to raise awareness of food waste problems and solutions among the student population. Supported by academic members of staff, the competition and on campus events are organised by students.

Table 1: Applying the SOAR employability framework and Sustainability typology to an event

SOAR employability framework (Kumar 2015)	@lovestudentleftovers Competition (Oxford Brookes University 2022)	Sustainability Typology (S��raphin, Yallop et al 2022)
Self	Students learn about the project and step forward to engage. They design website and social media materials to capture interest in food waste and promote engagement in the competition, and get to know students from other programmes and faculties working on the event.	Thinker
Opportunity	Students network with local community partners and seek promotional opportunities with partners both online and on campus.	Actioner
Aspirations	Student participation as organiser, competition entrant or on campus attendee enables engagement with business and community partners, and knowledge building to inspire career aspirations. The Careers Service follows the on campus event up with an alumni 'food' careers event.	Actioner
Results	Students are supported by academic teams and career services to capture and develop learning reflections that result from engagement in the event, to inform career planning for further SDG Impact.	Transformer

Analysis of University Career pages

Research Method

An exploratory, scoping analysis was carried out of UK University Career external facing website pages for explicit mention of employability for green/sustainable/corporate responsible/environmental careers. Qualitative information was captured to identify the types of information and events featured that support student awareness of sustainability-related careers such as:

- Information on job sites/recruitment agencies
- Supporting resources – professional associations, trade/public/media/governmental organisations
- Internships/placements/work experience (internal/external)
- Current sustainability jobs advertised
- Employer insights/events/fairs with sustainability focus
- University opportunities – (awards, challenge projects, volunteering)

- Graduate/alumni connections and insights
- Connection to University Sustainability Team (role profiles, project opportunities such as auditing, teams and committees, Green Impact)

The People and Planet (2022b) University League rankings for 2021-2022 were followed in identifying and collating information, but the results were not compared against these rankings since it was found that relevant information might only be available on internal University pages. Initially, the plan was to analyse pages specifically part of the Careers/Employability sections of University websites. However, it soon became apparent that information relevant to careers such as volunteering opportunities, or opportunities and insights might also be located within faculty course pages, sustainability management team pages or as part of blogs/event entries were identified through a web search but did not necessarily feature on career pages, or volunteering information was often not featured on career pages.

Therefore, the search process became one of entering into the web search 'sustainability and careers' alongside the University name. This identified potential separate pages, alongside direct examination of the pages offered within the Careers/employability sections of websites. Although the particular interest of this study was sustainability careers information for business and management, it frequently needed to be considered alongside broader information provided for faculty areas such as environmental science studies as there is clear integration between the two and they were often not distinguished between.

Due to the limitations of accessing all areas of University careers pages, the results provide only an indicative exploration of differing University approaches across the range of criteria. The qualitative insights gained in terms of the type of content provided, how it is presented, accessibility in terms of where it features on web pages, and the degree to which careers information is integrated with academic study related information, revealed the most interesting insights.

Findings

With increasing imperative for Universities to be demonstrating engagement in the SDGs, it is common practice for Universities to feature how sustainability projects and events are addressed at operational, teaching and research level. Where this is not reflected in careers information either reflects a lack of integration, a minimum and arguably surface level of engagement, or at worst, greenwashing if bold claims are made on the website that are only loosely substantiated. Worse, are cases where the University pages make a strong commitment to sustainability, but Business and Management career pages make no reference to sustainability at all. There is significant disconnect here, and presents significant opportunity for Universities to engage in events that develop cross-university collaboration.

Key findings below indicate how various types of University events can be more explicitly aligned with employability strategy:

- **Sustainability strategy**

Information on sustainability management is frequently presented under operational/campus, teaching, research and sustainability engagement. Other campus services such as 'catering' initiatives are detailed, but the links to careers as a University service are lacking. In some limited cases, the features of the sustainability management team were fully explored and applied to careers through for example career profiles and advice of employees working within these teams, and the opportunities for students to engage in operational/campus related sustainability projects

with explicit reference to how this can build skills and experiences for employability. It was extremely rare however for such explicit links on sustainability pages to be linked from the careers websites. It is recommended that operational/campus opportunities are presented in the same way as volunteering opportunities (i.e. directly linked from career pages).

- **Volunteering**

Almost all University websites analysed offered volunteering opportunities, but these were not systematically linked to careers pages. By doing so, it would help to reinforce the connections to students and potentially increase engagement (and thereby personal and collective impact).

- **Internal operational opportunities**

The website review identified best practice examples as offering opportunities for students to gain skills and experiences through working on campus related events. This might include setting up competitions, projects and funding opportunities, supporting with campus audits as part of Green Impact and Responsible Futures accreditations, and Internship opportunities with the operational team.

- **Faculty and career service collaboration**

In many cases, careers specialists are located within academic departments. Best practice cases identified in this research in terms of the richness of career information on sustainability, mirrored broader academic expertise within the context of sustainable business management. This might reflect collaboration between academics and professional careers advisors. Such collaboration would seem beneficial in relation to identifying and keeping up to date with job market reports and insights, and career development opportunities such as Internships. Blog pages written by academics with careers professionals are beneficial, and can be extended to students and alumni. There is also great opportunity here to align training events such as the popular 'Carbon Literacy Project' as career development alongside enriching academic learning.

- **Communication capture on the sustainability-employability nexus**

There is significant opportunity to develop a more consistent and integrated approach to the sustainability-employability nexus. The research found that careers information might be located under careers/employability team pages, within Student Union pages, or within academic department/programme pages. Added to this, relevant events and opportunities might be offered through student engagement pages and/or sustainability management team pages. Some very useful insights might be captured within blog pages that might not be linked to key pages. It is therefore recommended that an employability perspective is considered in relation to all services and academic departments. Developing a system of hashtags or consistent guidelines in approach to shared information links across pages can be helpful.

- **Presentation appeal for engagement**

If sustainability related information and events are to reach out and inspire interest and engagement, they need to be appealing. The research identified that career information pages related to sustainability vary from very basic design approaches based on basic text- based information which might include links to PDF documents, through to more visually appealing pages with images and supported by media such as videos and podcasts. Information needs to be accessible and engaging, down to even the most basic detail of adding contextual information to job

roles rather than just a list of role titles. The development of engaging communicative approaches can in turn generate interest and engagement in broader campus events.

- **External website career event information**

Universities strategically design career information for prospective and current students. Some secure career pages are only comprised of career tools, others encompass all information on career training and events. It is suggested from this study that even where information is securely held, clear indication on the nature of the information also needs to be presented on the public facing site. For example, if there is rich and detailed information on career sectors, or events relating to sustainable careers, to describe this on public sites.

The introductory section to this chapter set out the potential alignment in university sustainability career information events with SDG17 on 'Partnership'. Career opportunities for graduates, span public, private and civil society, and an open approach enables shared learning and collaboration. Interestingly, only one university was found to include the direct links to other Universities with detailed sustainability for career resources. This seems a time efficient approach, and one which recognises and celebrates leaders in the field.

'Fossil Free Careers' Fairs Campaign

'People and Planet' (2022) (a UK student network that campaigns for social and environmental justice) is running a campaign which calls on University careers services to stop "end recruitment pipelines into the oil, gas, and mining industries". This requires Universities to stop advertising vacancies of any extractive industry businesses, and to stop inviting them to attend careers events. Birbeck University (2022) was an early signatory, providing a policy statement that:

"Birkbeck Careers will not hold relationships with any companies that have not demonstrated a commitment to positive environmental and ethical business models. This is part of our commitment to increased sustainability and addressing the climate crisis. This includes, but is not limited to, attendance at careers events and other recruitment opportunities, posting role vacancies, sponsorships and advertising".

It is not the purpose here to discuss the operational considerations for Universities in whether or not to become a signatory to this campaign, but rather to illustrate how student engagement in the campaign generates engagement in becoming a 'sustainability transformer'. At the time of writing, the campaign website details that four Universities have made a 'Fossil Free Career' statement/policy. While this might appear limited, the impact is more significant in the presentation of 58,640 students at these Universities. Furthermore, the campaign site states the support of ten UK Students Unions which collectively represent 238,395 students in committing to boycott any oil, gas and mining recruitment events. The reach of the campaign is therefore clearly aligned to triggering awareness and 'sustainability thinkers'.

A 'Fossil Free Career Guide' (People and Planet, 2022a) encourages student 'action' under such appeals as "students have the power to win". Rich resources and advice are provided for students on how to initiate and build a campaign at their respective Universities including representation at events such as (Re)Freshers Fairs. Campaign training is offered to build student skills, and broader engagement is encouraged in raising money for this "radical, student-led organisation". It is a very clear example of developing "sustainability transformers" through the employability-sustainability nexus. Séraphin (2022) points to the importance of 'Becoming' (i.e., learning a new way of doing

things) as part of the 'life course framework', which links to the role of education in empowering students to become 'sustainability activists'.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how events related to sustainability and employability in a University context, can be formulated and managed in order to generate greater individual and collective impact. Careers-related information and events for sustainability can be effectively approached through the lens of sustainability thinker, action and transformer in order to generate greater cross-University collaboration. This was illustrated through the case example of a student online and on campus event. The latter case example based on the 'Fossil Free Careers' campaign further underlines the sustainability-employability nexus, and the rise of the student 'activist'. This can be considered powerful in developing future leaders that speak up and speak out on behalf of people and planet, as part of the movement of employee 'activism' (Reitz & Higgins, 2022).

Séraphin, Yallop et al's (2020) analysis of empowerment draws on Boley and McGehee's (2014) forms of empowerment as psychological, social and political forms. Applied to the context of activism experiences in Higher Education, students can be identified as empowered psychologically through a purpose-driven cause, 'social' empowerment through spending time with friends away from developing a collective identity with peers and a broader network and 'political' empowerment through taking action to speak out and mitigate climate risk. It can be seen as instrumental in the development of 'significant life experiences' (Chawla, 2007) that influence lifelong pro-environmental and sustainable behaviours in a professional and personal context.

It is therefore proposed that sustainability-related careers events offer significant potential to contribute transformative, whole-person teaching pedagogy (Mezirow, 2016). Insights based on the review of University career website pages provide several recommendations concerning alignment and integration across University functions. By generating more awareness through sustainability-related careers projects and events, Universities can simultaneously enrich students career development and organisational impact for collective benefit in progressing positively towards the SDGs.

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