Inside a student-led SDG project transforming curricula

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This case study from Liverpool Business School at Liverpool John Moores University presents a structured approach for reviewing, mapping, and embedding the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) across the School.

The Starting Point

The project initially aimed to review, map, and monitor the representation of the UN SDGs in undergraduate business curricula. In doing so, Dr Konstantina Skritsovali worked with student interns and alongside School members over a period of seven months to understand how undergraduate programmes integrate sustainability principles and global responsibility into teaching and learning. The project team analysed course outlines, learning outcomes, and module content to identify where and how SDG-related themes are embedded across modules. Findings from the project informed recommendations for curriculum enhancement, encouraging a more explicit and cohesive incorporation of the UN SDGs into business education.

The output was a map of SDG integration across the business school that enabled a lot of thinking and reflection on how future thinking and sustainability are integrated in existing curricula. However, the true impact emerged in the months and years following the project's completion, as its findings and methodology reshaped the School's practice in unexpected and far-reaching ways.

- Impact one: SDGs as core School narrative

Since the mapping project's completion, SDGs have shifted from peripheral considerations to central elements of the school's identity and communication. What was once mentions of sustainability has become systematic integration of SDG language and frameworks across institutional materials, strategic planning documents, and programme descriptions.

The School now explicitly frames its mission and programmes through an SDG lens. This narrative shift reflects more than branding; it represents a fundamental reorientation of how the School understands and articulates its purpose. The mapping

project provided the evidence base and vocabulary that enabled this transformation, demonstrating that SDGs were not aspirational add-ons but already woven throughout the curriculum in ways that could be strengthened and expanded.

The student-led research created School ownership of SDG integration. Because students identified existing SDG connections while also revealing gaps, the findings resonated with faculty and leadership. The project demonstrated that embracing the SDGs did not require abandoning current strengths but rather recognising and intentionally building upon them. Presentations to the Teaching and Learning Committee and Senior Leadership team sparked conversations that extended far beyond the immediate project scope.

- Impact two: Reimagined programme review and design

The mapping methodology has become embedded in how the School approaches programme review and curriculum design. SDG alignment is now a standard criterion in curriculum development processes, with new programmes and module revisions explicitly considering how they contribute to sustainability education.

Training and mentoring sessions, initially designed to share the mapping project findings, evolved into ongoing professional development opportunities where faculty explore SDG integration in their teaching. These sessions have shifted from reactive responses to the research findings to proactive spaces for collaborative curriculum innovation.

The project demonstrated that curriculum mapping need not be a top-down compliance exercise but could be a collaborative inquiry process that values multiple perspectives. By involving students as partners, the School learned to engage diverse voices in curriculum development, a practice that has continued beyond the original project. The mapping revealed unexpected connections between modules, enabling more intentional connections and integration of sustainability themes throughout students' educational journeys.

Critical success factors

Reflecting on the project's impact reveals several factors that enabled transformation beyond the initial mapping exercise:

- **Genuine student partnership:** Positioning students as partners rather than research assistants proved essential. Their insights and critical perspectives enriched the findings and created buy-in that would not have emerged from faculty-only research.
- **Evidence-based approach:** Grounding discussions in data from the mapping exercise enabled productive conversations that might otherwise have become

ideological debates. Faculty could see concrete evidence of what was working and where opportunities existed.

- **Multiple entry points:** The findings were shared with various audiences within the School but also the Institution: Teaching and Learning Committee, senior leadership, teaching teams, creating multiple pathways for impact. Different stakeholders engaged with different aspects of the research, generating diverse forms of change.
- **Long-term commitment:** The School treated the mapping as the beginning of a journey rather than a one-time project. Training sessions, ongoing discussions, and integration into review processes ensured that insights translated into sustained practice changes.
- **Supportive leadership:** Senior leadership embraced the findings and empowered faculty to experiment with new approaches to curriculum design and assessment. This support was crucial for enabling the cultural shifts that followed.

Lessons for other Business Schools

This case study offers several insights for institutions considering similar initiatives:

- **Start with inquiry, not compliance:** Frame curriculum mapping as collaborative inquiry into institutional practice rather than compliance checking. This positioning invites engagement rather than resistance and opens space for genuine learning.
- **Secure staff buy-in:** Involve staff, students and senior leadership early. There is no "magic wand" to achieve 100% engagement, but by approaching this as an ongoing project through integrated into programme periodic reviews, ownership is gradually shifting from the project team to programme leaders.
- **Invest in student voice:** Students offer perspectives that faculty and administrators cannot access. Creating an authentic partnership with student researchers generates insights and credibility that enhance project impact.
- **Plan for long-term integration:** Consider from the outset how findings will be integrated into institutional processes. Build connections to existing structures like programme review, faculty development, and strategic planning.
- **Embrace emergent outcomes:** The most significant impacts from this project were not anticipated at the outset. Create space for unexpected insights and be willing to pursue emerging opportunities that arise from the research.
- **Connect to purpose:** Link SDG mapping to fundamental questions about institutional/ School purpose and educational goals. This connection helps the School see sustainability integration as central to their mission rather than as an external imposition.
- **Anticipate scepticism and potential resistance:** Expect questions about the purpose and value of the activity and its outputs, and create spaces for dialogue to reassure those involved that this is an opportunity to complement good practice, not to penalise those who have 'insufficiently' engaged with the SDG narrative.

- **Support cultural change:** Recognise that curriculum transformation requires cultural shifts around openness, collaboration, and willingness to question established practices. Invest in building this culture alongside technical curriculum work.
- **Reflect, step back, and then reflect again:** Create regular opportunities for reflection during and after the SDG mapping process to ensure ongoing learning and improvement.

Looking forward

The mapping project's impact is evolving as the School explores extending the action research approach to more curriculum areas and involving more students in its development. Faculty development now emphasises pedagogical innovation supporting SDG integration and assessment redesign. Conversations about the purpose of business education have deepened, with faculty discussing how their teaching prepares students for responsible leadership in global challenges. This reflects a shift from simply adding sustainability content to reimagining the role of business schools. The next step is to transfer ownership from programme leaders to individual module leads. Across the school, this transition is slowly taking place.

For schools aiming to strengthen their sustainability efforts, this case study offers encouragement and guidance. The journey from mapping to transformation is challenging but achievable, with results seen in changed conversations, new practices, and a renewed sense of purpose in addressing global challenges.