

Beyond the Bottom Line: Overcoming SDG Myopia in Work-Based Learning

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a broad and ambitious framework to address global sustainability challenges, encapsulating a vision for 'peace and prosperity for people and the planet' by 2030 (UN, 2015). The necessity of business school engagement in achieving these goals is widely acknowledged (Mio, Panfilo, & Blundo, 2020). There are currently a variety of initiatives across the world dedicated to supporting business schools and, more broadly, universities to work towards achieving these goals, such as Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

Business schools serve as critical platforms for knowledge dissemination, collaborative partnerships, research, and leadership development; they are instrumental in nurturing future leaders and refining the skills of current ones, thus influencing the trajectory of sustainable development in business (Parkes et al., 2020; Rasche et al., 2020). However, despite the increasing emphasis on aligning business schools' strategic aims with the SDGs, prior research indicates that the strategic integration of SDGs within business school activities frequently lacks depth, with connections to measurable outcomes and practical implementation often being insufficiently explicit (Smith et al., 2023; Weybrecht, 2023).

Contributing to this challenge is what can be termed as SDG myopia—a narrow focus on goals that does not recognise interdependencies and the broader, systemic implications of sustainability. In other words, the strategic integration of SDGs within business school activities can lack depth, with connections to measurable outcomes and practical implementation often being insufficiently explicit (Smith et al., 2023; Weybrecht, 2023). Thus, this myopia can be particularly problematic in the context of work-based learning, which fails to account for the complex, interdependent nature of workplace environments. WBL is often employed within business schools to link academic learning with practical application in professional environments, where the impact of SDG alignment can be most tangible. However, it can be challenging given the variability and complexity of workplace settings. This chapter explores the implications of the lack of depth and breadth regarding SDG integration and proposes pedagogical interventions to address this within a WBL context.

2. Defining Work-Based Learning

The term 'work-based learning' refers to any learning that is situated within the workplace and is defined as a "learning process which focuses university level thinking upon work (paid or unpaid) in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve specific accredited outcomes of significance to the learner, their employer and the university" (Fernandez-Berrueco et al 2016; p36). However, within the HE sector, it primarily relates to "using the workplace as a vehicle for subject-specific learning" (Lester & Costley, 2010; p561).

WBL can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. However, the lack of alignment between work-based learning projects and the SDGs prevents students from understanding sustainability issues and the complexities of implementing sustainable practices in business (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019). The potential of WBL to foster collaboration between academia, industry, and communities is often underutilised. Without strong partnerships between business schools and local enterprises, the co-creation of sustainable solutions that address both global and local challenges remains limited (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 2000). This lack of collaboration hampers the broader societal objective of sustainable development.

3. Problematising SDG Myopia in Work-Based Learning

SDG myopia, characterised by a narrow focus on specific goals at the expense of a holistic understanding of sustainability, poses a significant barrier to the effective integration of SDGs into WBL. Addressing this myopic perspective requires examining several underlying issues to fully harness work-based learning's potential in advancing sustainable development. A primary factor contributing to SDG myopia is the fragmented approach often adopted by business schools, which results in an insufficient emphasis on the interdependencies among the SDGs. While certain SDGs may be addressed through targeted courses or initiatives, there is frequently a lack of cohesive integration across the curriculum (Stokes & Smith, 2023). This compartmentalised approach fails to capture the SDGs' interconnected nature, resulting in a superficial understanding of sustainability challenges (Meadows, 2008). SDG myopia persists partly due to the lack of a holistic, systems-thinking approach in business education (Senge, 2006) and a recognition of the complex interdependencies between different SDGs; therefore, the promotion of a comprehensive understanding of sustainability requires a shift towards a holistic approach to engaging with the SDGs (Weybrecht, 2023).

Pedagogical strategies in business schools also contribute to SDG myopia; traditional teaching methods prioritising theoretical knowledge over practical application can limit students' engagement with complex sustainability challenges. Furthermore, limiting experiential learning opportunities aligned with the SDGs can impede students' ability to effectively cultivate the skills and mindset necessary to address these challenges (Kolb, 2015), and business school curricula are not always designed to fully integrate experiential learning and real-world projects, leaving students without hands-on experience addressing sustainability issues (Nauman, 2021).

Moreover, business schools often prioritise immediate outcomes, such as employability and short-term business success, over long-term sustainability objectives (Thomas and Ambrosini, 2021). This short-termism is reflected in the incentives and performance metrics used to evaluate students and faculty, which may not align with the broader goals of sustainable development. To address this, business schools must adopt 'temporal ambidexterity', balancing short-term and long-term objectives and aligning incentives with achieving the SDGs (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015).

The broader curriculum in many business schools is often not sufficiently structured to integrate sustainability as a core component. SDG-related content is often peripheral, preventing students from grasping the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental issues (Sterling, 2010).

Additionally, educators may lack the knowledge and skills to teach sustainability effectively and integrate SDGs into their courses. This gap in faculty development further hinders the effective dissemination of sustainability principles (Barth & Rieckmann, 2016). Several factors compound this: 1) there is often inadequate institutional support for integrating SDGs into work-based learning, 2) business schools may lack the resources for sustainability research and the mechanisms to recognise and reward faculty and student achievements, and 3) the absence of strong partnerships with organisations committed to the SDGs further limits the impact of supporting initiatives (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015).

In the context of WBL, these challenges are compounded by the need for alignment between academic institutions and industry partners. Yet, there is a misalignment between academic objectives and industry practices, which can lead to inconsistencies in the application of SDG principles (Wall et al., 2017). This misalignment can limit learning experiences where students can see the direct impact of sustainability in their professional practices. However, the SDGs have the potential to act as a point of reference, aiding educators in identifying and understanding the opportunities available (Storey et al., 2017). Accordingly, several successful initiatives demonstrate how SDGs can be effectively integrated into business school curricula to support ongoing engagement and motivation (Annan-Diab et al., 2017; Okolie et al., 2022) alongside a move from teaching about sustainable development to educating for sustainable development (Strachan et al., 2023).

4. Embedding SDGs in Work-Based Learning: Lessons From Practice

Universities and business schools are working on new ways to embed the SDGs in higher education, demonstrated by initiatives such as Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME), voluntarily signing up to commitments such as the SDG accord and joining SDG-focused networks such as the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) (RuizMallén and Heras, 2020). Whilst work-based learning at the HE level is still primarily viewed as a means for individual development (Garnett 2016), current research highlights the transformative role that work-based learning can play in tackling the SDGs, such as reduced inequalities and climate literacy (Wall et al. 2017). However, WBL pedagogy, institutional constraints, and inadequate skills and knowledge of educators are considered significant challenges to realising the transformative role of work-based learning (Nottingham 2017; Brodie and Irving 2007).

In light of the above, a consortium partnership between Liverpool John Moores University, University of Chester and Oxford Brookes University, funded by the QAA, developed a toolkit to support HE professionals in embedding the SDGs into work-based learning programmes. At each institution, initiatives are dedicated to embedding the SDGs into the business school, such as SDG reporting, PRME membership and commitment to initiatives such as SDG TeachIn. The toolkit development occurred in three stages: mapping of **WBL final projects**, semistructured **focus groups** and **interviews** with MBA students, and a **sprint day** with HE professionals from across the UK HE sectors.

At each institution, 50 MBA (work-based learning) final projects were analysed, determining the sectors represented, the understanding and promotion of 'social impact', the motivations for the project and the expected outcomes, and mapping projects against the SDGs. This stage identified that 41.3% of final

projects were from the public sector (such as healthcare, public administration, and social care), highlighting the influential potential of work-based learning for embedding SDGs into public life. This is supported by Coll et al. (1999), who highlight how graduates from work-based learning programmes often assume key decision-making positions in their respective industries upon graduation. When mapping projects to the SDGs, SDG8, SDG4, SDG9 and SDG17 were the most popular goals aligned, highlighting the specific ways WBL can tackle SDGs. The challenges work-based learning faced when translating their final projects for wider impact were primarily related to organisational culture, resourcing, and financial constraints.

Previous research has identified a need to understand how learners and graduates understand and perceive sustainable development education (Sharma and Kelly, 2014). Although some studies have examined environmental sustainability from the perspective of current students (Dagiliūtė et al., 2018), limited research has explored the perceptions of alumni (Yang et al., 2021).

In this study, eight MBA graduates participated in interviews or focus groups. These discussions focused on their understanding of social impact, EntreComp, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their experiences during the MBA programme, and the 'gaps' in teaching and learning they identified. A central theme that emerged was the limited understanding of the SDGs due to their insufficient integration into the MBA curriculum highlighted through insufficient coverage of SDG topics within the programme, lack of depth in the discussions when these topics were covered, and the perception that the SDGs were treated as peripheral rather than central to the core curriculum. This 'SDG myopia' was further evidenced by a perceived lack of encouragement from supervisors to consider social impact and the SDGs in final projects, with graduates expressing a desire for a community to share best practices related to creating social impact within their sector. This highlighted the inadequate institutional support for embedding impact, corroborating previous assertions that business schools do not effectively integrate the SDGs (Sterling, 2010) and that educators lack the necessary knowledge and skills to incorporate the SDGs into their teaching (Barth and Rieckmann, 2016).

Reflecting on the inadequate institutional support and lack of knowledge and skills within the sector, the consortium organised a 'sprint day' of academics interested in sustainability, entrepreneurship education, pedagogy, and WBL to present current findings and develop a series of resources to support educators to embed SDGs into the curriculum. Resources were designed at three levels to reflect the varying levels of influence, experience, and time that educators may have: activity level, module level and programme level. These resources were developed in 30-minute sprints and pitched to current BSc entrepreneurship students to gain real-time feedback from students on the practicality and effectiveness of the resources. These were then finalised by team members of the consortium before being published in March 2024 – with 10 programme-level resources, 7 module-level resources and 22 activity-level resources. Many of these resources utilised creative and innovative pedagogical approaches, aligning with current HE priorities to diversify teaching pedagogy (Sanger 2020).

5. Critical Reflections

Our goal in this project was to identify the challenges for embedding the SDGs into workbased learning teaching and practice. We identified that a lack of institutional support and resources and a gap in educators' knowledge and skills relating to SDGs meant that workbased learning in its current form was contributing to SDG myopia and not fulfilling the transformative potential it offers in tackling the SDGs. The toolkit was designed with the varying levels of expertise, experience, and influence that educators had in mind, as well as the institutional constraints which many educators need to navigate in the current HE context. This is reflective of the current state of higher education, where many early-career academics have limited influence over their teaching material (such as module and programme design), whilst many senior leadership teams have limited time to implement individual activities.

Additionally, it was designed with the understanding of the differing needs of work-based learners, particularly with the knowledge that upon graduating, many of these assume key decision-making positions within their respective industries. This meant that resources needed to be designed with the 'future' in mind, applicable to a diverse array of fields (to reflect the needs of different cohorts of work-based learning) and with varying levels of 'influence' required by the learner. Not every work-based learner will be in an executive decision-making position, but every work-based learner has the potential to embed impact into their workplace – so focusing on just those in senior management or only on 'large-scale' operations excludes a good number of work-based learners from embedding impact. By focusing on the broad applicability and practical integration of SDGs, the toolkit aims to counteract SDG myopia by ensuring that all learners, regardless of their future roles, are supported to address sustainability in their professional practices.

6. Future Directions

Current research on embedding SDGs into higher education primarily focuses on impact reporting, sustainability literacy mapping, and curriculum mapping (Adams, Jameel, & Goggins, 2023; Cripps & Smith, 2023; Wright et al., 2020; Zizka, 2019). However, there is a notable gap in evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions, specifically within the context of WBL. Future research stemming from this project could address this gap by investigating the impact of the resources created on both work-based learners and pedagogical practice. By addressing these areas, future research can provide a greater understanding of the most effective ways to embed SDGs into WBL in an interconnected way and, thus, minimise SDG myopia; potential areas for future research include:

Experience of Using the SDG Toolkit

Understanding the experiences of work-based learners using the SDG-focused toolkit, including their perceptions of its utility, ease of integration into their work environments, and overall effectiveness in enhancing their understanding and commitment to sustainability.

Effectiveness of Pedagogical Practices

Examining the impact of integrating SDGs into WBL on pedagogical practices and student engagement to evaluate how different teaching methods and curriculum designs noted in the toolkit affect students' understanding and application of sustainability concepts.

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