

The University of Nottingham Strategy – Consultation Green Paper

Sustainability Committee Response

The University's Sustainability Committee took some time at its most recent meeting to discuss and reflect upon the consultation green paper. The Sustainability Committee welcomed the opportunity to input to the process and has identified a number of opportunities for consideration which are set out below.

The University of Nottingham has built a reputation for its commitment to sustainability. As a university, we are recognised for embedding sustainability in our teaching, research and operations. This commitment is drawn from the heritage of the University's origins captured in the words of Jesse Boot at the opening of the University in 1928, where sustainability was clearly in his mind.

... In each succeeding age the University will spread the light of learning and knowledge and will bind science and industry in the unity that is so essential for the prosperity of the nation and the welfare of our fellow citizens...

As a major global organisation we need to more explicitly recognise that we have an environmental, economic and societal impact locally, nationally and internationally.

Increasingly, our students, staff and our partners both in industry, academia, government and the local community recognise and expect the University to be a leading advocate of sustainability in its teaching, learning, research, decision-making and operations. The recent student-led climate protests across cities and the emerging Climate Emergency declarations by Governments and major organisations are further evidence of the importance of this issue to society. We cannot ignore the issues and we believe that it is our responsibility, as a university, to address them.

In an increasingly competitive student market how we perform is an increasingly important element of student choice. We influence our students through our curriculum, teaching and research and also by the environs, the campus experience, our decision-making and through the leadership of our University. Sustainability is a source of competitive advantage and value creation and should be embedded in all organisational strategies and decision making.

The development of a new strategy provides a timely opportunity for us to further develop, and indeed showcase the importance that sustainability plays in what we do and, more importantly, how we do it. We believe we have the opportunity to enhance this impact by taking decisions which understand where there are both positive, and negative, impacts so that we take good decisions. For example, adopting a sustainability impact assessment in our decision-making processes to identify where we might mitigate or ameliorate negative impacts as well as illustrating where we might maximise positive impacts. The very process of pausing, thinking and reflecting before taking decisions which consciously influence our

sustainability has to be a good thing. It will precipitate thought and help us make better decisions.

The University's Executive Board recently discussed the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, recognising there is much we are already doing. It was acknowledged that there has been a strong focus on environmental sustainability as we have developed and created new campuses. There was also recognition that sustainability is prominent in some teaching and research programmes but that it wasn't universal. We also know there is significant wider activity, investment and achievement we might describe as corporate social responsibility which is fragmented and which could be more readily captured and integrated.

It's the Committee's view that we should adopt a wider, social, economic and environmental scope and embed this across our core strategy such that the University is more readily able to demonstrate its contribution to society at a local, national and international level.

The Committee's recommendations for the strategy comes under four areas:

- 1. Make Sustainability an explicit part of our strategy rather than implicit**
- 2. Work to ensure that our decision making, reporting and governance explicitly considers sustainability**
- 3. Be bold and ambitious with our targets and don't be afraid of failure**
- 4. Further enhance and work with the communities within which we operate so our commitment to sustainability is inclusive and contributes to a larger civic vision.**

We recognise there is a challenge in understanding how we can more effectively do this within the context of all the other challenges and pressures we face as a University but we believe sustainability should be embedded as a core value of the University strategy.

The Committee suggests **using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework** within which we progress as an institution both in *what* we do and *how* we do it. The SDGs outline those high level global challenges which drive demand for the highest quality teaching and research which underpin much of what we already do but will provide sufficient 'stretch' and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and engagement both internally and with our partners.

The 17 Goals and associated 169 targets bring together the most pressing global challenges—including ending extreme poverty and hunger, halting climate change, breaking down gender barriers and stemming the loss of natural assets – in a single framework. This framework is being increasingly used across organisations and funders as a way of demonstrating and aligning strategic direction to recognised global challenges.

The use of the SDGs as a tool isn't alien to the sector nor the University. Our Research Strategy and Beacons, together with our Global Research Themes and Research Priority Areas demonstrate clear alignment to the global challenges that sit behind the 17 goals and are built

around the vision of ‘making ground breaking discoveries and developing powerful solutions to global challenges’. The time is right to further expand this across all of our global activities through the new strategy

Clearly there will be some areas where we are performing better in relation to the SDGs than others but we shouldn’t shy away from this. It is also recognised we will find some SDGs more challenging to achieve and contribute to. Some may create risks or mean we need to take a different course in the future but by using the SDGs as a guiding principle we will be better able to understand our position. We may choose to focus on those SDGs which are most important to us and where we can make the biggest contribution.

Clearly simply adopting the SDGs as a guiding principle without a clear delivery plan would be inappropriate as such the University should consider having a **PVC with responsibility for sustainability** and our agreed delivery plan who would have responsibility for this agenda and work with key services and Schools to develop the enabling strategy and ensure that the SDGs are a key component of all strategies and processes.

We recommend commissioning a **baseline review** of current activity in relation to the SDGs whilst identifying where changes in existing process and protocols should be made to ensure effective reporting against the SDGs through the strategy’s own reporting framework.

We believe it is essential that we are **bold, challenging and ambitious** in our targets that we set in relation to sustainability. Whilst we have already achieved a lot we recognise there is much more we should, and could, do. Recently there have been a number of high profile commitments made by others in the city and in the higher education sector, including:

- Nottingham City Council announcing a target of being carbon neutral by 2028
- The University of Bristol declaring a climate emergency and reaffirming its commitment to fighting climate change
- The University of Leeds committing to phase out single- use plastic by 2023

These bold and ambitious targets are not only a demonstrable **public commitment to tackling global challenges**, but help to **foster a collective responsibility** within organisations that bring out **positive cultural change** and ownership. The University of Nottingham has a rare opportunity through the new strategy to build upon its sustainability achievements with bold, ambitious objectives that support its core business and underpin the important role it plays in the local, national and global economy.

On behalf of the Sustainability Committee,

Prof Pete Licence, Chair, Sustainability Committee
Andy Nolan, Director of Estates (Sustainability)