



Nottingham Trent
University

STRENGTHS · PROFILE

CASE STUDY

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is one of the largest and most influential higher education institutions in the country. With over 40,000 students and staff spanning five university sites, they are proud to have been recognised as the most popular university in the UK for the last four years.

NTU were the first university to sign up to the Government's social mobility pledge, demonstrating a commitment to improving the prospects of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A quarter of NTU's students come from households with a combined income of £15,000 or less.

The Challenge

The transition to university requires students to build new friendships and relationships, enter new social groups, and develop future aspirations in relation to their career. There are also strong indicators across the Higher Education sector that many students have struggled with the challenges posed by COVID-19, this has meant that after the excitement of the first few months of university, many students begin to question their motivations for their specific area of study.

Some students from disadvantaged backgrounds expressed feelings of being grateful to have a chance at university but because of the disruption of the pandemic, many were lacking in confidence or a sense of community to help them grow further.

Finally, third year and post-graduate students about to take their first steps in the working world, sometimes lacked the right language to easily talk about what they are good at and what motivates them, for job applications and interviews.

The School of Animal Rural and Environmental Sciences (ARES) within NTU wanted to support students with something that would help them to recognise where their natural passions and strengths lie, to appreciate why they were studying at university, and why the course and their possible future chosen career paths were the right fit for them.

The Approach

The School of ARES partnered with Cappfinity to use the Strengths Profile tool, initially as a trial in three courses to help students develop a deeper understanding of their own learning agenda, sense of self, self-knowledge, self-efficacy and purpose. The response from students was so positive that in 2020, a School of ARES Teaching and Funding bid was awarded to expand this work.

Every student was offered to complete a Strengths Profile assessment at the start of the year, to help them understand what their strengths are and how to apply them to their studies to be their best self. Several members of employability staff trained to become Accredited Strengths Profile Practitioners, to gain deeper insight into strengths, including how to support NTU's students to use their strengths to drive action in their studies.

Understanding the knowledge and language of strengths was hugely important to encouraging students to use strengths to articulate who they are as individuals. This was done using a mixture of initial workshops to get students started with Strengths Profile and identify their own individual strengths, followed by self-directed study and reflection on how these strengths could be used to support their studies and lifelong learning.

Debriefs between students and Accredited Practitioners were crucial for creating realistic plans on how to reach study and career goals with more energy. This was particularly important when entering the second semester, as this is the time when the reality of degree-related study really starts to set in for most students.

To date, over 500 students across 20 courses and study levels at The School of ARES have been supported to know, be confident and make positive personal and professional choices using their strengths.

The Outcome

Being able to better understand and articulate their strengths has helped final year students to engage with employers on a more meaningful scale. Students have developed their own graduate identity for employers by being able to say 'my strengths are this...' This has proved hugely beneficial for job applications, LinkedIn profiles and job interviews.

Students who previously may have questioned their choice of course now saw how their strengths aligned with their passions and interests enabling them to have a greater appreciation for how their areas of study were still relevant. It also supported the development of self-confidence and why possible careers across a range of sectors would be a good fit for their strengths.

NTU learned some valuable insights from the strengths data of the students to help support how they then developed their future narratives and self-confidence and we have been able to utilise this to shape additional and future support sessions and approaches. This work will continue as NTU partner with Cappfinity to develop ideas and approaches to best support the students etc.

Summary of the results

Undergraduates

Realised Strengths - their top realised strength was Unconditionality. This was 13% higher than the global average showing their strong sense of community, friendship and natural tendency to treat people kindly & equally. They also had common realised strengths of Gratitude and Service demonstrating they appreciated the environment and community at the campus and built relationships by always being willing to help each other.

Unrealised Strengths – strong themes for the student were Legacy and Mission at 9% & 6% higher than average. The students at the School of ARES are passionate about making the world a better place and to develop their purpose in life in the future.

Learned Behaviours – both Work Ethic and Detail were 6% higher than average indicating the natural pressure felt by students of completing assignments and achieving their desired grades.

Weaknesses – Time Optimiser was 14% higher than average highlighting to NTU the likely outcome of increased online studying through Covid for students and helping to shape the future medium of support for student development.

Postgraduates

Realised Strengths - the top realised strengths were Unconditionality, Authenticity, and Gratitude and were in line with averages. These were similar to the undergraduates' sample with the addition of Authenticity, being more experienced and honest in their approach to life.

Unrealised Strengths – strong themes of Legacy, Mission and Innovation, respectively being 5%, 5% and 2% higher than average. A confidence boost that the students had made the right career choices with their focus on the environment, to achieve high animal welfare and support the conservation of the natural world.

Learned Behaviours – the same themes as undergraduates with Work Ethic and Detail although the percentages compared to average increased to 11% and 15% higher. The postgraduates were very hard working and determined to do their best to make a difference and perhaps feeling the increased expectation with the level of study.

Weaknesses - Time Optimiser was again the top strength with 19% higher than average. By knowing this, NTU are now able to put further support in place for postgraduates around planning, organising and community to support their studies.

Student feedback

"The Strengths Profile tool has really helped me to understand who I am a little better. It was like a light had been switched on when I saw everything laid out; my biggest surprises were my unrealised strengths, which I'm now trying to use more and I'm already seeing the benefits. The weaknesses have also been really enlightening, as I'm now more aware of them and can work around them. The profile has given me a dose of confidence moving forward - I feel like I know myself better and I'm more secure in my motivations." –

Student 1

"Being able to do my Strengths Profile has helped me understand myself and the way I tackle university a lot more. I am able to stop and take a step back and understand why I feel the way I do and am able to refocus on myself and appreciate what I have achieved. Completing my Strengths Profile has been incredibly useful and I would recommend everyone should do it, it may reveal a side to you that is surprising." – **Student 2**