

# The troubles and opportunities for universities engaging with the SDGs

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Presentation by

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# Research and the SDGs



Three frames:

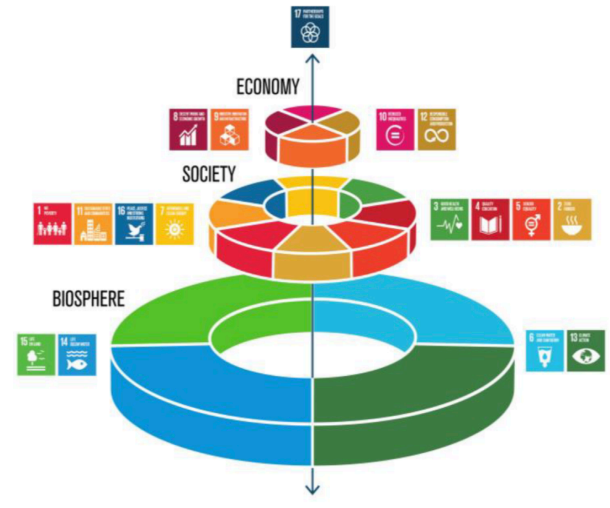
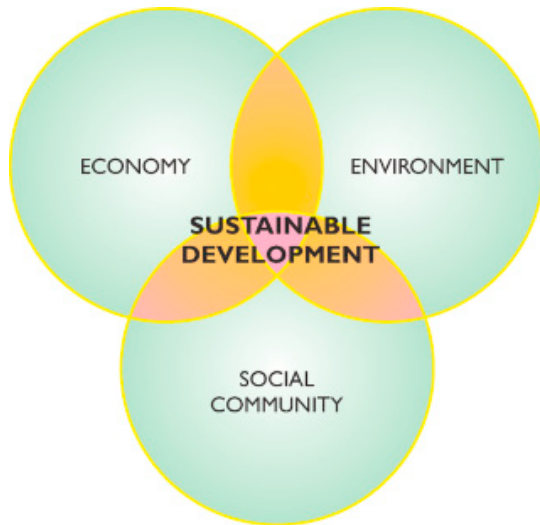
- 1) Research *about* the SDGs
- 2) Research *for* the SDGs
- 3) Research *through* the SDGs

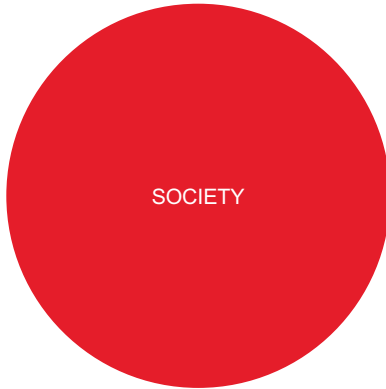
Focus:

- Holistically oriented (i.e. 'big picture')
- Goal (i.e. 'deep dive')
- Indicator focused (i.e. 'measurement emphasis')

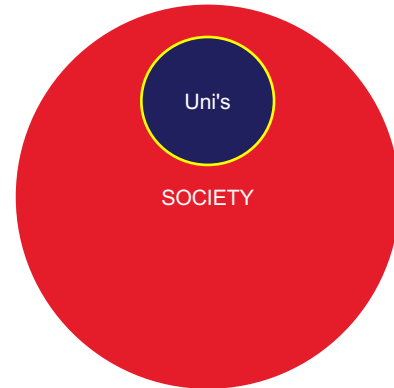
*\*Must align with your research purpose, aim and objectives*

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





**Expectations  
of today's  
universities**





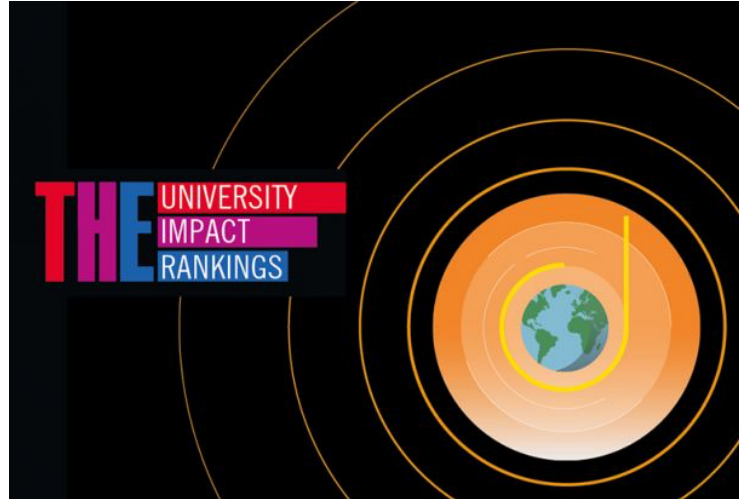
# Places/spaces of paradox

1. Tradition and radical change
2. Wealth and financial precarity
3. Inclusion and exclusion

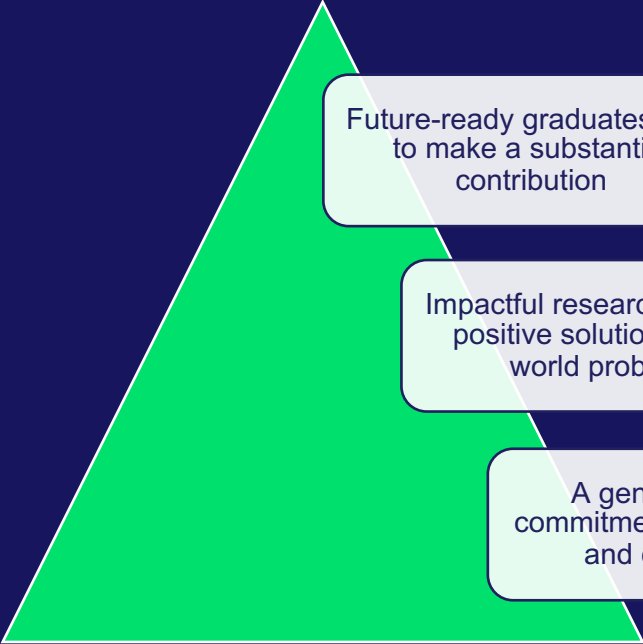
# The new ranking of uni's

## Impact Index: looks at universities in new, more holistic way

- **Research:** to what extent is the university creating knowledge to address the world's problems?
- **Stewardship:** to what extent is the university managing resources and teaching well, and enacting the 'good' university?
- **Outreach:** to what extent is the university directly acting in society to help meet the SDGs?



# The SDG agenda is part of the rising benchmark for today's universities



Future-ready graduates able  
to make a substantial  
contribution

Impactful research providing  
positive solutions to real  
world problems

A genuine practical  
commitment to engagement  
and collaboration

***What problems?***  
***What futures?***  
***What collaborations?***





In 2019 we explored how our university RMIT could position itself in relation to the SDGs

We asked: ‘what it would take for RMIT to be part of ‘transforming our world’?’





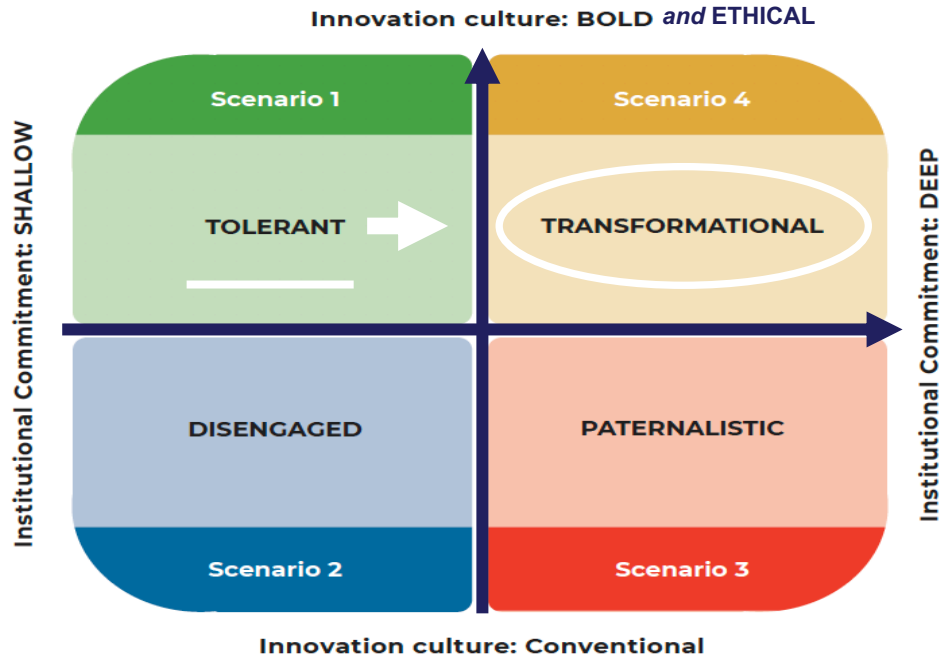


Figure 3. Four possible scenarios for RMIT SDG engagement

# Ethical innovation



**RESPONSIBLE**  
– ANTICIPATORY  
AND  
PRECAUTIONARY



**INCLUSIVE**  
- COLLABORATIVE  
AND SYSTEMIC



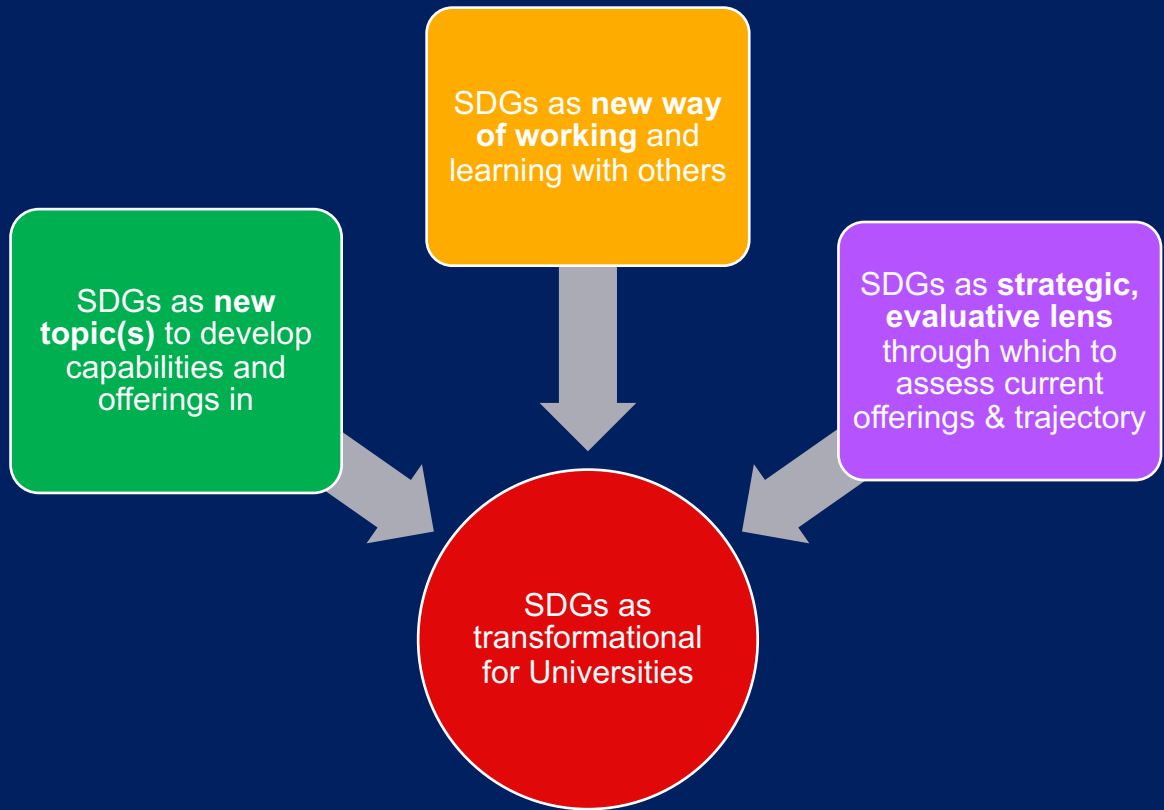
**DISRUPTIVE**  
- BOLD AND  
IMPACTFUL



**ENGAGED**  
– PURPOSEFUL  
AND RESPONSIVE

*(Rickards and Steele 2019)*







## RESEARCH IMPACT AS ETHOS

JULY  
2020

PREPARED BY  
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## Rethinking our approach to research impact - *Is it up to the task?*

*Contemporary  
challenges require us  
to accelerate our own  
learning about impact  
in any one situation  
and in general.*

<https://cur.org.au/project/rethinking-research-impact/>




RESEARCH IMPACT CULTURE	KEY FOCI
<b>1ST GENERATION</b>	<p>Complementing academic rigour by demonstrating research relevance</p> <p>Increasing the reach of research by making it more publicly accessible and encouraging end users to adopt it</p>
<b>2ND GENERATION</b>	<p>Working with partners to ensure research is legitimate</p> <p>Generating value for and with research partners</p> <p>Improving research impact literacy across the institution</p>
<b>3RD GENERATION</b>	<p>Purposefully fostering synergies, insights and learning across projects and other boundaries to enhance positive research impact</p> <p>Attuning to what is most important and what researchers can best contribute within the innovation <i>eco</i>-systems they are part of</p> <p>Cultivating adaptability and continuous improvement in how research impact is imagined and produced</p>

Table 1. Overview of the three generations of research impact culture



# '1ST GENERATION' RESEARCH IMPACT


## RIGOUR, RELEVANCE, ACCESSIBILITY



**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

Jean Moussat Sustainable Development Goals Network Policy Brief Series

**2** END HUNGER



**SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture**

*Associate Professor Lauren Richards & Dr Emma Shortt  
RMIT University*


**Hunger and Development**

Hunger has been a core issue for development since the early colonial era when hungry populations fed – and, in turn, were – the plantation. As John – proved a major greenhouse challenge (Noble, 2011). The focus then and equally now was on the quantity of food available, specifically the amount produced by agriculture. During the colonial era and post-World War period, modernising agricultural production first became a dominant development objective, based on the belief that it would not only reduce hunger among smallholders, but would reduce hunger among urban (un)employed, landless labourers by contributing to economic growth, household incomes and purchasing power. It has increasingly become apparent, however, that this approach is far from sufficient to seriously help, and that hunger remains a major unresolved problem. It is largely in response to the persistence of hunger, and growing recognition that unsustainable economic growth generates as well as inadequate solutions, that the concept of 'sustainable development' arose in the post-war period.

In the context, sustainable development had a strong focus on high income economic prioritising 'food self' to low income countries suffering from famine. While engaging, this too has been increasingly critiqued as insufficient and in line with the core values of famine. Rather, the environmental costs of modernising agricultural production have also become increasingly apparent. It was in response to these issues that the concept of sustainable development arose in the 1980s, outlined in the Brundtland Report of 1984. Since then, sustainable development has become a mainstream paradigm in many sectors. In parallel, sustainable development has continued to a special mechanism for trying to maintain the gap between rich and poor, such as through the 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aimed to reduce extreme poverty. These efforts to make economic development more sustainable and to reduce extreme poverty through special economic measures have both proven largely unsuccessful. Agriculture and the broader food system has become more resource-intensive and polluting than ever, and in the midst of reducing food production, as estimated half of the world's population continues to suffer from malnutrition. The upshot is that a more systemic, transformational change is needed. It is for this reason that the UN launched a new agenda in 2015: Transforming Our World in 2019 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

**Food in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

The 2030 Agenda is based on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) designed to link disparate efforts and actions, including poverty reduction, into a framework of generally sustainable development. Defining sustainable development as the inclusive attainment of economic, development, social, cultural, and environmental sustainability, the new agenda adds vital considerations such as economic equality.




With the support of the European Union

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**THE CONVERSATION**

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**Business as usual? The Sustainable Development Goals apply to Australian cities too**

September 19, 2018 6:24am AEST

Australia is a long way from achieving responsible consumption and production – SDG 12 – and China exposed the reliance on shifting the problem elsewhere when it stopped accepting waste for recycling. [Go to article](#)

**We are still settling Australian cities on unceded Aboriginal lands. With the global agreement on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, development has finally come home to the developed world. Yet in Australia we still often proceed as if development goals are about foreign aid, somehow separate from our own development activities and civic responsibilities.**

The Senate inquiry into the SDGs, for example, has been referred to the Department of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Three of the seven terms of reference relate to Australia's Official Development Assistance program.

Reports that trade with Europe might be in jeopardy because of Australia's failure to act responsibly on climate change – a commitment enshrined not just in the Paris Agreement but also in SDG 13: Climate Action – illustrate the naivety of thinking this country can carry on as usual while others tackle sustainable development.

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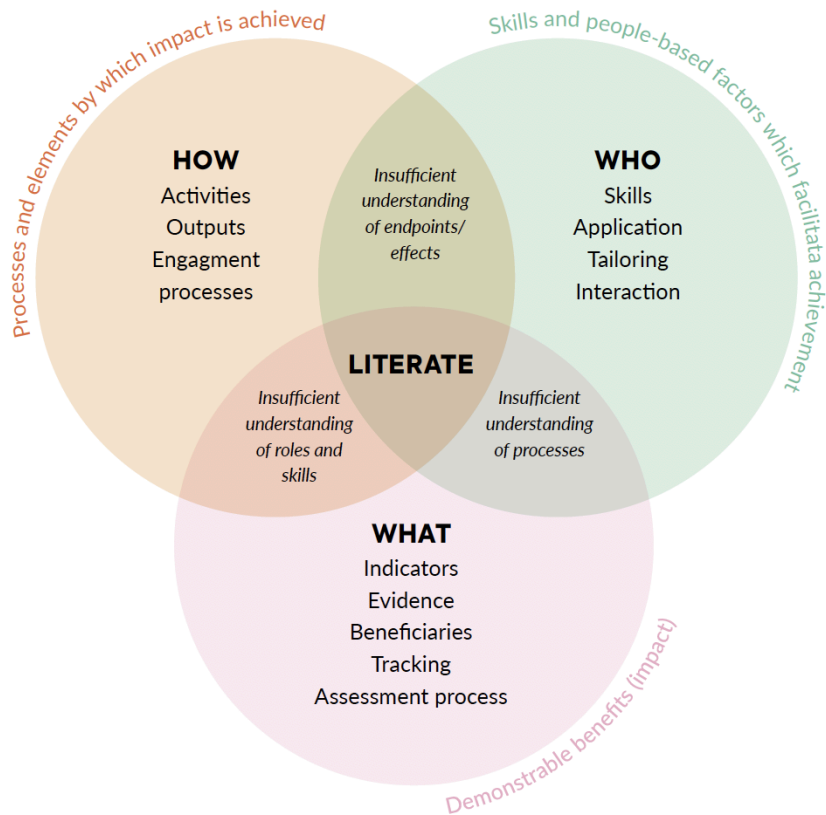


Figure 2: Building Research Impact Culture and Literacy (Bayley and Phipps, 2019)



# '3RD GENERATION' RESEARCH IMPACT

PURPOSEFUL, CONNECTED, ADAPTIVE

**This involves researchers asking critical questions such as:**

Why are we aiming for these impacts from this research?

What is the value of this research relative to other research?

What do we need to do more of, or less of, differently?

How can we create positive impacts across and between the research work we and our institutions do?

What type of world are we helping generate through our research, individually and collectively?

What impact does research have on us as researchers and research managers and what do we have to do to adapt to our rapidly changing context?



# Convergent barriers?

Barriers to a 3rd Gen RI culture?	Barriers to bold & deep SDG work?
Narrow thinking	Indicator-itis
Strategic conservatism	CSR framing of SDGs
Competitive individualism	SDG opportunism



# Changing from the inside out

- Now more than ever it is clear we cannot neglect our global context and connections.
- The SDG agenda is not perfect, but it is radical relative to a lot of what universities currently do.
- Universities and the world of research are necessarily at the heart of SDG action – both as actors and targets for action. The SDGs require change from the inside out.
- HDRs and ECRs stand to benefit from the transformational agenda that is the SDGs – and are needed to push loudly for it.

