



TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS TRANSFORMATION PLATFORM AT RMIT

—
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AN ENABLING CAPABILITY
PLATFORM CONCEPT NOTE
LAUREN RICKARDS AND WENDY STEELE

 **RMIT**
UNIVERSITY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What would it take for RMIT University to be a world-leading university in Sustainable Development Goals innovation?

Momentum is rapidly growing around Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, otherwise known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Laid out by the United Nations with the endorsement of all 193 of the nations it represents, this transformational vision takes a systemic view of the problems and solutions facing the world. Integrating environmental sustainability, social justice and prosperity to an unprecedented degree, it presents a road map of concerted action, focused on the coming decade. It makes clear that society is at a key decision point on multiple intersecting challenges, including climate change. How we collectively respond has far-reaching ramifications.

In response, external and internal stakeholders of RMIT University are beginning to strongly commit to implementing the SDG agenda for change. The question is: how is RMIT University going to engage as an institution? The University was an early signatory to the SDGs, has a critical mass of researchers and educators with internationally recognised capabilities and standing in numerous relevant areas, and a legally mandated institutional commitment to work in pursuit of the latter. It also has an energetic Sustainable Development Senior Advisor who is leading a range of work on the SDGs. The question now is what the next phase of RMIT engagement looks like. Will the institution commit as a whole and if so, how?

The aim of this Concept Note is to provoke focused discussion about RMIT's next phase of SDG engagement. Informed by a wide scan of the situation, the document presents four possible options for RMIT University's SDG engagement, outlines why the University should take the option of **Deep and Bold Engagement** seriously, and offers practical suggestions for taking this forward through an *RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform*.



In some circles, RMIT university is recognised for its cutting-edge work on sustainability and equity problems, its wide-ranging connections with industry, its strategic commitment to gender equity and environmental justice, and its visionary re-shaping of Indigenous research and education through the world-leading initiative that is *Bundji Girri* (Wiradjeri for ‘shared futures’). Some of this work underpins the recent high ranking of the university in the new Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings, a league table based on the SDGs. Yet, explicit SDG initiatives at the university remain relatively isolated and largely obscured. This relative silence on the SDGs belies the fact that numerous stakeholders – from businesses to students, policy makers to communities, RMIT University staff to non-government organisations – are committing to the SDG agenda and calling out for guidance, leadership and training on the SDGs, reflecting the current deficit of academic-based, real-world approaches that catalyse positive SDG action across sectors. RMIT University has the opportunity and capacity to build on what it has started and move into a leading position on SDG innovation across its four primary functions of research, education, external leadership, and operations and governance.

An SDG Transformation Platform would harness RMIT University’s latent potential to become a world-leader in addressing the SDGs and progressing the 2030 Agenda. Through the Platform, RMIT University could deliver and demonstrate its commitment to transformative, ethical SDGs innovation (which is responsible, inclusive, disruptive and engaging) across sectors and scales. The Platform could foster the innovative cross-scale, cross-sectoral linkages, creativity and experimentation needed to successfully pursue *genuine* sustainable development. With a strong virtual and physical presence in Melbourne, Barcelona and Vietnam, the Platform could lead critical thinking and action on the SDGs, co-developing advice and advocacy. The vision – *When you think of SDG innovation and transformation, you think RMIT University.*

To enable this vision to be realised, institutional commitment and leadership is needed to bring the different arms of the university together and embed the SDGs in all of its structures, practices and strategies from the ground up and top down. The SDG Transformation Platform would serve as the portal through which this transformative change is enabled.

This Concept Note makes the case for RMIT University to embrace a deep commitment to the SDGs combined with a bold innovation culture. This will lead to *transformational* change in and through the organisation, if operationalised effectively. It represents the *scaling up* of an SDG-orientation from a niche consideration into a mainstay of the workings of the organisation, evident in all levels of governance. The SDGs would become an ethos embedded in everything RMIT University does, including leadership, strategies, partnerships, culture and branding. In this way, RMIT University would consolidate and enable its desire to create better, inclusive futures and ensure the world recognises and benefits from its transformative approach.

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01 PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1 What is the problem?

Under the leadership of the United Nations, the global community – including governments, businesses and others in Australia – has committed to pursuing 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) over the next 15 years (e.g. eradicating poverty, tackling climate change, creating safe, resilient and sustainable cities). These goals are unprecedented in their focus and intent. As the Declaration in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states:

Despite the huge amount of work now going into implementing the SDG agenda, vast knowledge gaps remain internationally around the SDGs in terms of what they are, how to plan and implement them, how to monitor and evaluate progress, and how to develop the skills and capabilities needed across governments, businesses and non-government organisations/civil society. The transformative change demanded by the SDGs requires innovative new knowledge, approaches and partnerships that take into account new, more distributed ways of connecting and creating change. It requires applied, creative engagement by universities such as RMIT University.

Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda. We are setting out together on the path towards sustainable development, devoting ourselves collectively to the pursuit of global development and of “win-win” cooperation which can bring huge gains to all countries and all parts of the world.¹

1.2 How will RMIT University respond to the Sustainable Development Goals?

RMIT University cannot ignore the world's turn to the SDGs or the consequent need for leadership, institutional commitment, innovation and interdisciplinarity. Indeed, some members of the university are already engaged with UN SDG initiatives, reflecting existing strong links with the United Nations (including RMIT leadership in UN organisations²), the international character of much of the university's research, teaching and external engagement, and its work across the Colleges on sustainability, development and social justice. RMIT University was an early signatory to the SDGs and in 2018 appointed a Senior Advisor on Sustainable Development. Among other activities, they are currently:

- Mapping RMIT's existing research activities against the SDGs
- Synthesising RMIT's SDG related work for TIMES HE Index and other outputs
- Developing some SDG-specific curricula, student opportunities and a SDG webpage
- Exploring the potential to integrate SDGs into research funding criteria and reporting

The question now is how to leverage this work. How serious and innovative does RMIT University as a whole want to be with the SDG agenda? Is it, for example, satisfied with the SDG agenda being a research topic that a handful of researchers work on, a contextual factor discussed in some classes, a matter for the Sustainability Committee to work on, or one of many tick boxes it reports against, akin to the SEO codes? Or does it want to move to the lead, alongside key partners such as Melbourne Water and KPMG, and make the SDG agenda a strategic whole-of-institution priority, an opportunity for transformative SDG innovation within and far beyond the institution? RMIT University has the capacity to be at the forefront of SDG innovation (as detailed in Section 6 below). The question therefore is twofold: *will* RMIT put this latent capacity into a strategic SDG vision and mobilise a bold course of action? And if so, *how*?

02 THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 The need to reverse current trajectories

Evidence is mounting that the world's current trajectory is unsustainable – socially, environmentally and economically. No longer can the costs and risks of existing ways of doing things be 'externalised' as irrelevant, insignificant, accidental or acceptable. Socioeconomic inequities, pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change are among the Earth-destabilising, life-endangering, reprehensible problems that are getting worse, not better. It is increasingly clear that these outcomes are not unexpected side-effects of existing development processes but are their highly predictable and logical consequences. To not only ameliorate or neutralise but actually reverse these trajectories – and to create not just a tolerable, but a vibrant future – transformational, fundamental change is needed. This is especially the case in Australia, which is one of few countries in which performance against the SDGs is going backwards, not forwards.³

2.2 The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

In recognition of this urgent situation, the United Nations launched a transformative new agenda in 2015 to focus, deepen and revitalise global sustainable development. This agenda underlines the fact that every nation, community, organisation and individual is inescapably part of the sustainable development challenge, whether they realise it or not, because they are part of – and are thus an influence on and are influenced by – global environmental, social and economic systems.

The SDG 2030 Agenda is a 'universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity'.⁴ Consisting of 17 interconnected goals (Figure 1, Appendix 1), the SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals but extend attention to all nations and emergent key issues, including climate change, sustainable consumption, peace and justice, and economic inequality.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Figure 1. The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a radical plan for humanity and a new way of ‘doing’ development, including in those countries typically thought of as ‘developed’.⁵ While some deny that more sustainable development is needed, at least in wealthy nations like Australia, and resist any sort of major shift from current trajectories, the SDG agenda recognises that interventions

in one area will affect outcomes in others and must be considered as part of a global systems framework. Sustainable development is relevant to all nations because none exist in a vacuum and all face internal inequities and sustainable development challenges, including Australia, where complacency has contributed to worsening not improving performance on key parameters.

5. www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/sustainable-development-goals/the-2030-agenda-in-action--what-does-it-mean-.html

The 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development *Our Common Future* set the framework for the 2015–2030 SDG agenda, outlining a vision of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The SDG agenda builds on this vision by better acknowledging the critical, complex, global and shared character of sustainable development. The General Assembly ‘reaffirms’ in the SDG Declaration that ‘planet Earth and its ecosystems are our common home.’⁶ Griggs et al. argue in the journal *Nature* that the SDG agenda moves towards recognising sustainable development as development that ‘meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth’s life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depends.’⁷ To this end, the SDG agenda more explicitly addresses oceans, ecosystems, energy, climate change, and sustainable consumption and production. It also emphasises that these are inseparable from the equally important issues of inequalities, decent jobs, urbanisation, industrialisation, peace and justice.

It is widely recognised that the SDG agenda is not perfect. Sustained work is required to address its gaps (e.g. indigenous sovereignty) and risks (e.g. atomisation and bureaucratisation of the goals; its reduction to a mere series of targets, indicators and reporting tasks; and self-serving engagement designed to enhance and protect brands, not induce necessary change). Despite these limitations, the SDG agenda holds incredible transformative potential. It invites critical engagement from all who are motivated by its overarching goal of creating a better future. It brings together issues usually discussed in vacuums, actors usually separated by silos, and the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainability that are usually pursued in isolation. How to implement this shared, integrated, critical SDG agenda is now a collective challenge.

2.3 Engaging others on the SDG agenda

Because of the bold, transformative ambition of the SDG agenda and the need for global-local action that ‘leaves no one behind’, all stakeholders (i.e. governments, civil society, the private sector, and others key players such as universities) are expected to contribute. The focus is on working through multi-stakeholder partnerships and the principle of subsidiarity (devolving action to the local scale). Emerging efforts to implement the SDG agenda include capacity building, financing, the generation of new technologies and data, institutional buy-in and governance innovations.

As discussed further below, the UN is especially targeting universities as key players in the SDG agenda. This is because of their dual role:

1. As important *catalysts and enablers* of others’ critical engagement with and progress on the SDGs, including the UN, helping these others to co-produce appropriate innovations, develop crucial new capabilities and mindsets (including in the younger generation), forge important linkages, and experiment with a society-wide transition towards genuinely sustainable development; and
2. As organisations, notably businesses, that like all others are challenged by the SDG agenda (and by others’ responses to it) to *change internally* in order to better contribute to genuine sustainable development.

We turn now to consider how RMIT University might respond to the SDG agenda, using the heuristic tool of scenario planning.

6. www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf

7. Griggs, D., M. Stafford-Smith, O. Gaffney, J. Rockstrom, M. C. Ohman, P. Shyamsundar, W. Steffen, G. Glaser, N. Kanie and I. Noble (2013). Policy: Sustainable development goals for people and planet. *Nature* 495(7441): 305–307.

03 USING STRATEGIC SCENARIOS

3.1 Thinking strategically about RMIT University's engagement with the SDGs

How RMIT University will respond to the SDG agenda is a strategic question. Even if it opts not to engage deeply and to remain relatively unchanged by the SDG agenda, this also needs to be recognised as an active and consequential decision. Strategic foresight methods are now used across the private and public sectors to help with such decisions. A particularly valuable tool is *scenario planning*, which is used in strategic planning to deal with the uncertainties that factors such as climate change introduce.⁸

As a methodology, scenario planning has the advantage of integrating information about emerging trends with open-minded, imaginative exploration of possibilities. It generates a set of evidence-based stories about the future to guide decision making, and to enhance interpretation and recognition of subsequent responses and outcomes.

To inform the scenario planning around RMIT University's strategic engagement with the SDGs, three approaches were used to explore the ways different groups understand and are responding to the SDG agenda; the challenges, risks and opportunities the agenda poses; examples of best-practice; and critical questions around the SDG agenda.

The *first* approach was a wide-ranging review of grey and academic literature with a particular focus on the range and type of approaches to the SDGs, and critiques of these.

The *second* approach was a series of semi-structured interviews and workshops to identify different interpretations of the SDGs, the potential for innovation, and the external and internal drivers for RMIT University's own SDG engagement. Figure 2 provides an illustration of the discussion at the main workshop at the RMIT University Engaging for Impact conference, held in February 2019.

The *third* approach was participant observation and engagement in cross-institutional stakeholder forums, which provided insights into diverse perspectives, emerging networks and priority setting at scale.

8. Rickards, L., R. Ison, H. Fünfgeld and J. Wiseman (2014). Opening and closing the future: climate change, adaptation, and scenario planning. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 32(4): 587–602.

INNOVATING WITH PURPOSE

to achieve THE SDGs



WHY ARE WE HERE?

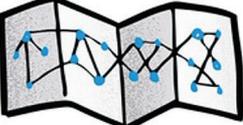
 Sustainable DEVELOPMENT to DATE has **FAILED**
... WE NEED **RADICAL** & **URGENT change**

 UNIVERSITIES HAVE NOT FULFILLED THEIR **POTENTIAL**

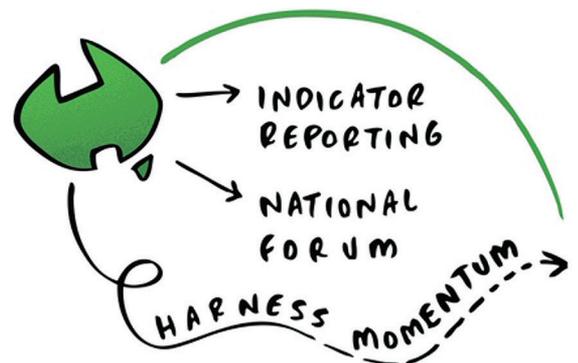
... THERE is NEED for **TRANSFORMATIVE UNI. ENGAGEMENT** to ADDRESS:

-  IMPLEMENTATION
-  INTEGRATION
-  INCLUSIVITY

 **193 COUNTRIES** TRANSFORMATIONAL ACTION PLAN
GLOBALLY AGREED TARGET

 - 17 GOALS, EACH w- 169 SPECIFIC GOALS, INEXTRICABLY CONNECTED

 THEY are for **EVERYONE**, & THEY **CANNOT** be **SILDED**



 **HOW CAN WE MAKE S.D. COME alive?**

USE SDGs as **FRAMEWORK** for REPORTING?

 SEGMENT - ATION of **TARGETS**



Figure 2. Illustration of the 'Innovating with purpose to achieve the SDGs' workshop at the RMIT University Engaging for Impact conference, February 2019.

In addressing the question of how RMIT University might respond to the SDG agenda, it became apparent that, as for the world as a whole, the two crucial factors are:

1. the depth and breadth of its institutional commitment
2. the boldness of its innovation culture.

Where RMIT University positions itself with regards to these two factors will determine its approach. Each can be mapped as an axis or continuum. Combining them into a two-by-two matrix yields four plausible scenarios that provide the basis for informed discussion about the strategic direction to be adopted: Tolerant, Disengaged, Paternalistic and Transformative.

2.3 Engaging others on the SDG agenda

Because of the bold, transformative ambition of the SDG agenda and the need for global-local action that 'leaves no one behind', all stakeholders (i.e. governments, civil society, the private sector, and others key players such as universities) are expected to contribute. The focus is on working through multi-stakeholder partnerships and the principle of subsidiarity (devolving action to the local scale). Emerging efforts to implement the SDG agenda include capacity building, financing, the generation of new technologies and data, institutional buy-in and governance innovations.

As discussed further below, the UN is especially targeting universities as key players in the SDG agenda. This is because of their dual role:

1. As important *catalysts and enablers* of others' critical engagement with and progress on the SDGs, including the UN, helping these others to co-produce appropriate innovations, develop crucial new capabilities and mindsets (including in the younger generation), forge important linkages, and experiment with a society-wide transition towards genuinely sustainable development; and
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3.2 Axis 1: Institutional commitment (Shallow to Deep)

Academic institutions and other organisations are regularly urged to get on board with various social change projects. They are therefore understandably wary of committing to a new change agenda without proper consideration. Change is not always positive and strategic consistency can be vital to enabling progress and fostering brand recognition.

For this reason, an organisation may be hesitant to commit strongly to the SDG agenda, preferring to wait and see what happens. Some may feel they are already committed to sustainable development and do not need to engage further. This would include some universities who have signed onto the SDG agreement and begun the process of mapping their existing work against the SDG agenda, but are yet to instigate new substantial initiatives or commit considerable energy or resources.

At one end of the institutional commitment spectrum is **Shallow Commitment** which takes the form of tolerance for or occasional endorsement of SDG-related initiatives. Efforts around the SDGs exist, but are largely the work of isolated individuals or groups. They are generally ad hoc, disconnected, invisible to most people and quickly forgotten. They include one-off events, single assessment tasks or courses, occasional publications and short-lived research, operational projects or webpages. The SDGs are treated as an interesting but specialist topic, with limited relevance to the functioning of the institution's core business. More specifically, the SDGs are misunderstood by many people as simply a traditional international development issue and thus of salience only to low income countries and development specialists.

At the other end of the spectrum is **Deep Commitment**. Here, SDG engagement is characterised by strong institutional leadership, strategic prioritisation, cultural commitment and brand transformation. The SDGs are recognised and represented as part of a new global agenda of inescapable relevance to Australia, universities and all professions. They are used as an integrative, long-term, systematic framework of engagement that encompasses all university functions, components and stakeholders. From the university's strategic plan to professional development and promotion of staff, from its resourcing of research to selection of industry partners, the SDGs are used as a cohering, focusing framework. The university commitment to the SDGs is visible internally and externally, with far-reaching institutional impacts.

3.3 Axis 2: Innovation culture (Conventional to Bold)

Universities may be deeply committed to SDG engagement across the institution, but still not do much differently, other than re-shape their existing processes and practices. Cutting across the question of commitment is the question of an organisation's innovation culture, which can be characterised by how routine or imaginative it is.

Routine innovation can involve the prolific production of innovation products, developed in a conventional way. One of the ironies of innovation is that as a concept it is far from novel. Indeed, it is now mainstream, often forced and largely habitual, driven by an apparent need to produce new products for the market. 'Innovative innovation' moves beyond this robotic approach. Situated at the other end of the innovation culture spectrum is a bolder, more radical approach to innovation that nurtures creative shifts and scales them out to generate uptake and progressively alter, not reinforce, the existing institutional environment. This approach involves innovating not just with products, but with ways of doing things, including innovation itself.

Two factors are driving this new, more critical approach to innovation. One is the 'impact agenda' in contemporary academia, which refers to the broad push from government, industry and academic leaders for universities – particularly researchers – to more explicitly, directly and effectively connect their work to meet social needs. Associated with a 'new social contract' for academia, this attempted repositioning of universities particularly involves a shift from top-down, linear, knowledge-centric models of innovation to more systemic, inclusive, action-oriented ways of doing innovation.⁹

The second factor is the growing realisation that the conventional approach to innovation is a source of problems as much as solutions. As an engine of consumption, conventional innovation processes underlie many environmental harms and social injustices. An ethics-based approach to innovation is courageous, imaginative and intelligent enough to not just change product specifications, but also systems, goals and paradigms – including the innovation culture itself – so that societal needs and goals are more effectively met.

Universities are being called upon to confront the effectiveness and ethics of their innovation strategies and practices. This growing interest in real-world ethical innovation is not about adding ethics into otherwise neutral innovation processes and outcomes; it is about recognising that all such processes and outcomes have impacts and thus an ethical character. The challenge is to bring to the fore this ethical dimension and to confront it head on in order to better align activities with a *desired* ethical framework, such as the SDGs. As the World Economic Forum's recent white paper on *Values, Ethics and Innovation – Rethinking Technological Development in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* indicates, more and more organisations are realising that neglecting the ethical dimension of what they do is not sustainable in the long term.¹⁰ Ethical innovation can be summed up as responsible (anticipatory and precautionary), inclusive (collaborative, systemic), disruptive (bold, impactful), and engaged (democratic, debatable) (see Box 1).

Box 1. Ethical innovation

The idea of 'ethical innovation' has multiple roots. We highlight four here, which we call the RIDE framework because it is about being Responsible, Inclusive, Disruptive and Engaged.

The first is the need to make research and innovation more **responsible** (anticipatory and precautionary). Responsible innovation balances a desire to be impactful with awareness that potential impacts may be not simply negligibly positive, but actually negative. Responsible innovation moves beyond a zero-sum game to bring in the different types of impact – both predictable and possible – including those generated by the innovation process as much as its final products. The extent to which a given innovation trajectory is desirable relative to alternatives can then be assessed and resources allocated ethically and intelligently. The SDGs offer an evaluative framework for such decision making.

The European Commission's Responsible Research and Innovation also points to the need for innovation to be **inclusive** (collaborative and systemic). Stakeholders potentially affected by the innovation (e.g. 'end users', or those geographically proximate to its sites of manufacture, storage or application) are to be identified and included, requiring a systemic understanding of an innovation's position, role and effects within the world. The stakeholders of an innovation (including research funders, policy makers and manufacturers) are now understood as integral, not external, to all stages of innovation generation. The generation process is iterative, systemic and geographically embedded in complex ways. Within an innovation system or ecosystem, the role of universities is not privileged or even guaranteed: innovation processes are no longer presumed to be linear or limited to formal research, universities are no longer presumed to be the origin of innovations. Ethical innovation requires humility, real-world value, collaborative relationships, shared endeavour,

and the capacity to identify and redress exclusions; that is, it requires universities to participate in positively impactful coproduction.

The co-production paradigm of innovation generation, which is increasingly disrupting the old reductionist paradigm of top-down, linear knowledge production is an example of **disruptive** (bold and impactful) innovation. Inspired by systems thinking, disruptive innovation recognises that some changes are more effectual than others. Changes to *how* and *why* things are done – more than *what* is done – can have especially far-reaching outcomes of the sort that the university research impact agenda is encouraging.¹¹ The SDGs call attention to many environmental, social and economic sources of volatility. *Positive* disruptive change may be an important route to the sort of creative, timely and cost-efficient innovation needed to address them.

At the same time, rapid disruptive innovation is inherently risky. Social contestation about what is appropriate – an indicator of the post-normal science era – has driven the rise of **engaged** (democratic and debatable) innovation. Engagement here is passionate, meaningful public debate and dialogue about the ethics of existing and potential innovation trajectories. It calls for innovation to be understood as a democratic issue and approached as a serious learning journey that is reflexive and transparent about the uncertainties, risks and stakes involved in what innovation is or is not pursued. It is committed to tackling the hard questions that the SDG agenda poses (e.g. about inequalities in who bears the risk of innovation processes). By taking and advocating for a democratic approach to innovation, one that is critically and publicly engaged, universities can better fulfil their mandate of intellectual leadership and work towards better values alignment with their stakeholders.

11. See donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/

3.4 Four scenarios of possible RMIT University SDG engagement

A key *certainty* about the future is that RMIT University will need to more directly address the SDGs. The two axes of commitment and innovation (also shown in Figure 3) represent two key uncertainties or questions: How deeply will it commit to the SDGs? How bold is its innovation culture? Four possible pathways or scenarios are shown in Figure 3. While these are clearly simplifications, each provides a heuristic tool for thinking through options for the university and their implications.

How bold is its innovation culture? Four possible pathways or scenarios are shown in Figure 3. While these are clearly simplifications, each provides a heuristic tool for thinking through options for the university and their implications.

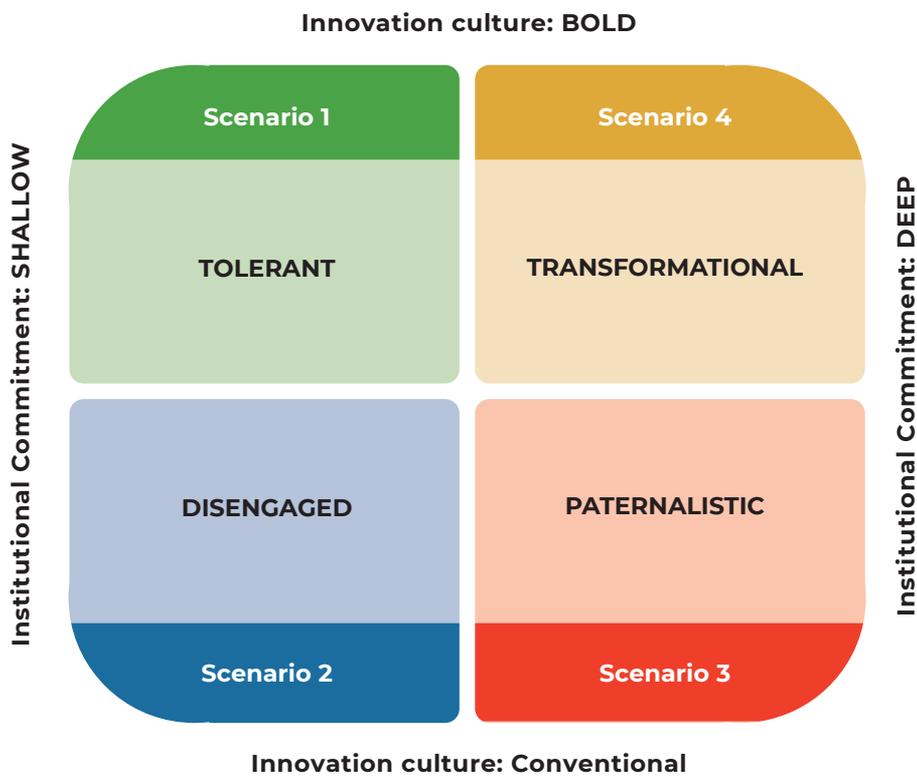


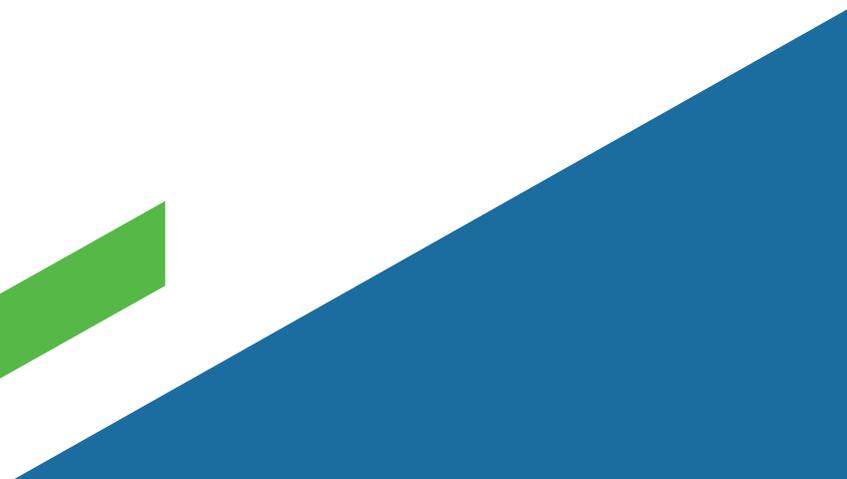
Figure 3. Four possible scenarios for RMIT SDG engagement

Here each scenario is described briefly and an indication given of where RMIT University is currently positioned and where it might position itself, given its shifting context, existing strengths and latent potential.

Scenario 1. Tolerant: shallow commitment and a bold innovation culture

The tolerance pathway frames the SDGs as a specialist topic that some staff, students and partners are interested in, and are in fact doing creative and important things with. At the institutional level, the SDGs are resourced in a minor way, but are not recognised as a major societal challenge or guiding parameter, or as relevant to the institution as a whole. Instead, the university abides some staff and students working in the area, reports diligently on the SDGs, and cherry picks opportunities from the SDG agenda in keeping with its largely agnostic, opportunistic attitude to topic areas. Those actively working on the SDGs are largely left to their own devices, perhaps developing niches of radical innovation (e.g. bold experiments with partners in government, business and community), but in a generally isolated manner that is despite not because of what the rest of the university is doing.

Aspects of this scenario resonate with RMIT University's current position. There are numerous individuals undertaking SDG-explicit and SDG-implicit initiatives. The university has made a notable commitment in signing on to the SDG agenda and establishing the Sustainable Development Senior Advisor role, but is otherwise relatively perfunctory in its commitment and primarily interested in the SDGs for their 'bonus value'. RMIT University is likely to move further into this space if it frames the SDG agenda as a bit of fun and colour, and leaves SDG action to isolated voluntary initiatives.



Scenario 2. Disengaged: shallow commitment and a conventional innovation culture

The disengaged scenario is where the university's existing work on the SDGs actually stagnates and fades over time, withering away to become just one of a number of reporting requirements and past enthusiasms. Some SDG work continues in the university, but it is largely ad hoc and driven by external requirements such as demands from funding bodies, industry partners and university ranking processes. Meanwhile, the university innovation culture is focused ever more narrowly on accelerating and refining existing product development processes and serving certain market players, while remaining disengaged from most of society and the processes' wider ramifications. Individuals striving to do things differently are implicitly discouraged and will likely move on to other more open-minded institutions.

A critical reading of RMIT University's current efforts on the SDGs suggests that the risk of this scenario eventuating is not insignificant. The university will move closer to this outcome if existing leadership support and resourcing is removed (e.g. contract completion for the Sustainable Development Senior Advisor without renewal or resources) and if the SDG agenda is misrepresented as only of interest to poor countries and bleeding hearts.

Scenario 3. Paternalistic: deep commitment and a conventional innovation culture

The paternalistic scenario combines a conventional innovation culture with a deep commitment to the SDG agenda. RMIT University works to embed the SDG agenda as a strategic priority from the top down across its four core functions of research, education, governance and operations, and external leadership. It takes the SDG agenda seriously as a moral obligation and/or as a pressure that the institution is compelled to adapt to even if it is not convinced of the importance of revitalising sustainable development per se. As with the associated impact agenda, the university directs staff and students to engage with the SDGs in their work through a variety of compulsory and voluntary mechanisms including, for example, awareness raising, the inclusion of the SDGs as a criteria in staff promotion processes, the resourcing of some SDG research initiatives, and the incorporation of the SDG agenda into the institution's strategic plan.

Despite these efforts, the University does not alter substantially. Rather, the SDG agenda is layered across the university as an additional consideration, leaving the consequent tensions for individuals to negotiate. The university does not alter its existing approaches to innovation, its foci, its partnerships or its image, and instead uses the SDG agenda as a way of updating, justifying and protecting what it already does. It defensively pursues SDG-flavoured business as usual, using the language (if not transformative practice) of the SDGs at multiple scales.

RMIT University could build the SDG agenda into its governance framework with the help of additional resourcing, strategic leadership and a concerted and co-ordinated effort. There are signs that this important mainstreaming may be emerging. However, there are also signs that the university is harnessed to a conventional innovation culture and that concerted effort will be needed to move it to a bolder, more imaginative and critical approach.

Scenario 4. Transformational: deep commitment and a bold innovation culture

The transformational scenario involves a deep, ethical commitment to rapidly transitioning the university into a better position to in turn help transition the world onto a more sustainable, socially just pathway. It commits to the principles and ethos of ethical innovation (Box 1) and works determinedly to scale bold, ethical innovations for sustainable development up and out, both across the University – from domain to domain, project to project, process to process, course to course – and across its stakeholder places, organisations and sectors.

RMIT University has precedence and capacity in such a transformational approach. Inspirational initiatives include the revolutionary re-framing of Indigenous research and engagement through *Bundy Girri* – a relationship with Indigenous sovereignty and a commitment to shared futures. This institutional commitment is deep, bold and pioneering, showcasing and sharing different epistemological understandings and pedagogical practices, underpinned by visionary leadership, resources and support. The SDG agenda with its ethical emphasis on rethinking the pathways and goals of sustainable development is at heart about ‘people in place’, and thus could work in a reciprocal relationship with the established *Bundy Girri* strategic agenda.

In this pathway, RMIT University is a leader in ethical SDG innovation. Aspects of the necessary innovation culture are already present at the university, but these need to be nurtured and matched by an institutional commitment to deep and bold engagement. For if not now, then when?

The next section provides more detail on how the SDG agenda is being taken up internationally and in Australia, as the underpinning rationale and logic for implementing an SDG Transformation Platform at RMIT University.



04 SDG ACTION AT SCALE

4.1 International action on the SDGs

The SDG agenda has become a powerful integrative framework at the international level.

To begin with, it has been mainstreamed across all UN agencies. For example, the SDG agenda is being pursued via the New Urban Agenda¹² led by UN Habitat, recognising the foundational importance of urbanisation issues to global outcomes. The UN Development Program (UNDP)'s 2018–2021 Strategic Plan similarly reinforces a strong commitment to working as a catalyst and facilitator for the SDG agenda in partnership with other UN initiatives,¹³ governments, civil society and the private sector. In particular, it supports:

- innovative platforms that strengthen collaboration between governments, civil society and the private sector
- multi-stakeholder partnerships at multiple levels, and mutual accountability for the SDGs in such partnerships
- national governments and partners working towards common results and indicators, and collectively report on them
- the engagement of citizens through volunteerism, empowerment, participation and other opportunities to effectively contribute to making systems more socially and environmentally sustainable.

Recognising that national governments need to determine their own national strategies and priorities, the UN seeks to 'help Governments promote "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" responses vital for transformational change'.¹⁴

In contrast to the dominant role governments had in pursuing the (unfulfilled) Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs are designed to be implemented through collaboration between the public, private, civic and academic sectors (Figure 4). To help generate action in these various arenas, the UN is pursuing a range of initiatives (Box 2). Although some of these efforts are about straightforward implementation, some illustrate that sustainable development and the SDG agenda *is itself* a topic of inquiry and improvement. The SDG approach is an institutional experiment that demands close analysis and guidance, as well as adherence.

Although the question of who does what remains an empirical one, it is clear that the private sector is a critical partner in sustainable development and many businesses now recognise this. A 2018 KPMG study, *How to Report on the SDGs*, found that only two years after the SDGs were launched, 40 per cent of the world's largest 250 businesses were discussing the SDGs in their corporate reports. Examples that illustrate the diverse roles business is playing are listed in Box 3.¹⁵



Figure 4. The four sectors or platforms that need to collaborate to implement the SDGs (Source: *Indonesia's SDGs Voluntary National Review 2017*, report to the UN High Level Political Forum).¹⁶

15. Consumer-facing and EU (rather than US)-based companies were especially likely to be engaged. The main SDG priorities were SDG 13 on Climate Action, SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing. See: assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/xx/pdf/2018/02/how-to-report-on-sdgs.pdf 16. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25469INDONESIA_VNR_PPT.pdf

Box 2. Examples of United Nations initiatives to implement the SDGs

To generate action on the SDGs in business, community and universities, the UN is producing a raft of information and guidance, offering financial incentives, localising and linking SDG initiatives, and using its authority to coordinate formal agreements, commitments and networks. Examples include building the SDGs into education initiatives, such as the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (established by a task force of 60 deans from leading international business), and producing a range of related education resources.¹⁷ Another example is the UNDP's recent effort to respond to criticisms about the neglect of LGBTI groups within the formal SDG agenda by providing a new set of indicators around LGBTI exclusion to mainstream LGBTI across the goals and especially contribute to SDG 10 on Reducing Inequalities.¹⁸

The UN is also working to fill gaps in the collection and analysis of the data

needed to monitor and evaluate progress on the SDGs, and to build capacity. For example, the UN Global Geospatial Information Management agency and others are working with the World Bank and data science experts to harness big data to the SDGs, and enhance its use through initiatives such as a 'federated system' of open SDG Data Hub and the Big Data & Sustainable Development Open Learning Hub.¹⁹ The UN and partners are also investing heavily in identifying innovative approaches to financing SDG action, including a pilot crowdfunding platform.²⁰

Of particular relevance to universities, the UNDP has recently partnered with the new UK Research and Innovation to fund a large study: 'How science, research and innovation can best contribute to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals for developing countries'.²¹ The 2030 Agenda also places 'emphasis on skills for work and entrepreneurship', and the UN is exploring how to transform the technical and vocational education and training sector 'to maximize its potential to contribute to not only the achievement of SDG 4 [Quality Education] and SDG 8 [Decent Work and Economic Growth], but in a broader way, to all SDGs in the context of promoting sustainable economies and societies'.²²

Box 3. The role of business in implementing the SDG agenda

The 2016 *Global Sustainable Development Report*²³ suggests that the role of business in implementing the SDG agenda includes:

Partnering with Governments and others on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal-related policies and programmes

Providing a significant source of investment (especially domestic investment) for the Goals

Adopting business practices that move communities towards inclusive sustainable development

Providing role models, leadership and insights for other organisations and the public around SDG engagement

Partnering with universities and others to develop appropriate innovations, including technologies, noting that - as the 2016 *Global Sustainable Development Report* notes - technology is 'double edged sword' and can cause environmental and social justice problems.

Non-government organisations, networks and social movements are also clearly essential in implementing the SDG agenda. NGOs are mobilising to address the SDGs in various ways, including communicating the SDGs to a broad audience, holding governments and industry to account, and implementing grassroots projects.²⁴ The International Institute for Sustainable Development, for instance, is an independent think tank that provides basic information and sophisticated analysis of sustainable development initiatives through its website, events and dedicated SDG Knowledge Hub.²⁵ Networks advancing the SDGs include the Commonwealth (thecommonwealth.org) – a voluntary association of 53 sovereign states and more than 80 societies, institutions, associations, organisations and charities – which has shaped its latest strategic plan around the '5Ps of the SDGs': Partnerships, Peace, People, Planet and Prosperity.²⁶ Australia is a member of the Commonwealth network, notably the Commonwealth of Learning²⁷, and is involved in uneven ways with various other international and domestic SDG-based initiatives.

17. www.unprme.org/index.php 18. www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/lgbti-index.html 19. www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/big-data-sustainable-development/index.html www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/04/27/using-big-data-to-achieve-the-sdgs; sdg.iisd.org/news/un-launches-initiatives-to-unleash-big-data-for-sustainable-development/ 20. www.businessgreen.com/bg/news/3071556/un-should-think-like-indiegogo-to-meet-sdgs; sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/sdg-knowledge-weekly-finance-and-crowdfunding-for-the-sdgs/; www.sei.org/about-sei/press-room/press-releases/new-tool-to-help-align-strategic-decisions-with-the-2030-agenda/ 21. The work is part of UKRI's strategic refocus on global challenges, which is centred on 12 new interdisciplinary, international Global Research Hubs designed to put 'UK research at the heart of efforts to tackle the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals' www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/; www.ukri.org/news/new-global-research-hubs-to-tackle-complex-development-challenges/ To date, the hubs include two Australian universities: University of Sydney and University of Queensland. 22. unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=Adoption%20of%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals 23. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10789Chapter3_GSDR2016.pdf 24. www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/study/ngo-mobilisation-around-sdgs 25. www.iisd.org/about/about-iisd <http://sdg.iisd.org> 26. thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CommonwealthSecretariatStrategic_Plan_17_21.pdf 27. <https://www.col.org>

4.2 Australian action on the SDGs

4.2.1 Government engagement

In Australia the public, private, community and academic sectors are engaging with the SDG agenda. Under the SDG framework, every nation is expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving the 17 Goals through sustainable development policies, plans and programs up to 2030. Individual nations such as Australia have the responsibility for implementation, follow-up review, and reporting at the national, regional and global levels on progress made in implementing the SDGs and the associated targets.

In 2017, the Australian Government initiated the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Senate Inquiry*²⁸ to understand what is being done and what could be done by different groups in Australia on the SDGs. Attracting 169 submissions, the Inquiry presented 18 recommendations (Appendix 2).²⁹ It particularly recommends that the Australian Government: develop an implementation plan with reportable national priorities with indicator-based assessments every 2 years; establish a national Sustainable Development

Goals secretariat; integrate the SDGs across all internal and external websites, strategies and policies; develop a communication strategy, and disseminate best practice examples and resources to the states and territories, private sector and civil society. To this end, each SDG has now been made the responsibility of lead and supporting Australian Government agencies. For example, working towards SDG 2 on 'Ending hunger, improving food security, and enhancing sustainable agriculture' is now a core responsibility for the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources.³⁰

In 2018, the Global SDG Index was released, revealing that Australia is one of the few countries that is actually moving *backwards* in its progress on the SDGs. The 2017 SDG Index and Dashboards scored Australia 75.9/100, placing it 26th out of all countries. In 2018, this dropped to 72.9/100, placing Australia 37th.³¹ The Australian National Sustainable Development Council – who developed the *Transforming Australia: SDG Progress Report* website³² – explains that a key reason for this fall is the nation's very poor rating for the closely related SDGs of 'Reducing Inequalities' (SDG 10) and 'Climate Action' (SDG 13) (Figure 5).

28. The report was focused on: the understanding and awareness of the SDGs across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community; the potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDGs; what governance structures and accountability measures are required at the national, state and local levels of government to ensure an integrated approach to implementing the SDGs that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes; how can performance against the SDGs be monitored and communicated in a way that engages government, businesses and the public, and allows effective review of Australia's performance by civil society; and examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDGs from which Australia could learn. [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/SDGs] 29. Coalition Senators in the Senate Inquiry Committee presented a dissenting report arguing that they disagreed with the need for formal action on the SDGs in Australia because Australia as 'the most free, democratic and prosperous nation in the world should be considered as the gold-standard in terms of all of the SDGs' and should focus on 'how we can better support lagging nations around the world to implement the SDGs'. They concluded that the inclusion of Australia as a target as well as vehicle for SDG action, notably around human rights abuses, indicates that the UN 'wants to be a left-wing think tank rather than a promoter of peace and good to the world'. See www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/SDGs/Report/d01 30. www.agriculture.gov.au/market-access-trade/2030-agenda-sustainable-dev-goals 31. theconversation.com/australia-falls-further-in-rankings-on-progress-towards-un-sustainable-development-goals-99737 32. https://www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com/ 33. https://www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com/wp-content/uploads/Australias-Dashboard_SDGs_310818.pdf 34. See https://dfat.gov.au/aid/topics/development-issues/2030-agenda/Documents/sdg-voluntary-national-review.pdf

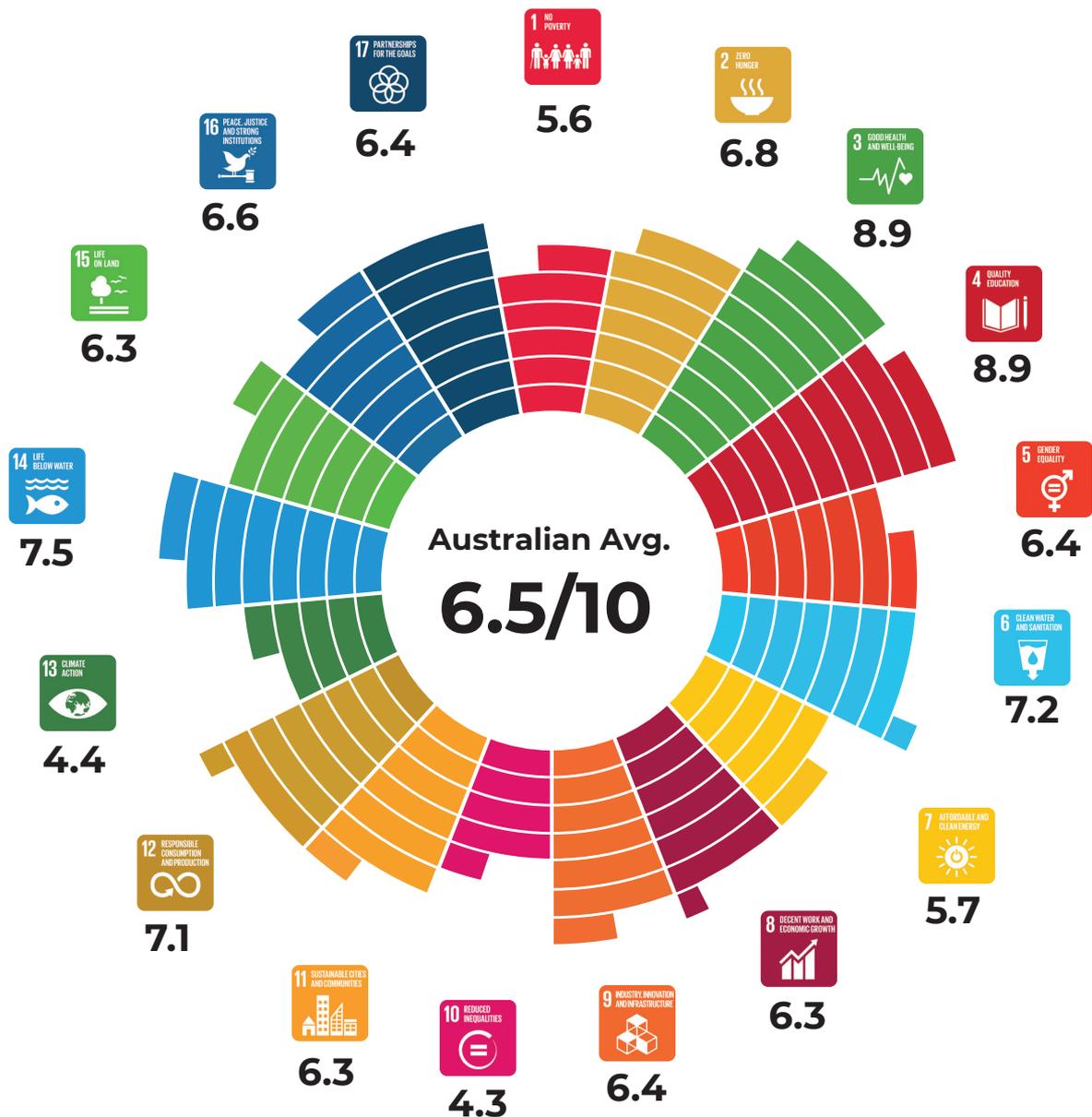


Figure 5. Australia’s SDG Indicator Scorecard (source: *Transforming Australia: SDG Progress Report* p. 2)³³ Each score is out of 10.

The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018 *Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*³⁴ argues that although not a lot of action on the SDGs is evident within the Australian Government to date, innovative partnerships are emerging and much planning is taking place. For example, the Australian Government supports the Australian branch of the Global Compact Network Australia (GCNA) (Box 4) to maintain a website showcasing the depth and breadth of engagement with the SDGs in Australia across government, business, civil society and academia.

Box 4. The United Nations Global Compact

UNGC is a corporate sustainability initiative and 'call to action for businesses, in conjunction with other organisations and sectors of society, to take bold, innovative action to achieve broader global and societal goals, including the UN SDGs'.³⁵ The Global Compact Network Australia [***currently housed at RMIT University**] brings together 115 multi-sector stakeholders to advance the implementation of the SDG framework in Australia. The GCNA website was a key initiative identified in the inaugural 2016 National SDG Summit and follow up Summit held in 2018. Key stakeholders included the Australian Council for International Development, Australian Council of Social Service, ANZ, Australia Post, Banksia Foundation, Brambles, City of Melbourne, the Australian Government departments of Environment and Energy, and Foreign Affairs and Trade, Lendlease, Qantas, Rio Tinto, Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Yarra Valley Water, Allens and Republic of Everyone.³⁶ In October 2018, the GCNA supported an industry-wide report on the SDGs by the Australian Mining Council called *Sustainability in Action: Australian Mining and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, which calls for mining companies to focus on creating 'Enduring Value'.³⁷ In its submission to the Senate SDG Inquiry, GCNA outlined 'a pivotal shift' as organisations move beyond applying the SDG framework for retrospective mapping to using them '...as a strategic enabler; embedding the goals into their strategies, driving and shaping current and future purpose and action'.³⁸

Another public sector organisation focused on the SDGs is the CSIRO, which explains on its website why and how it is engaging with the SDG agenda (emphasis added):

*As Australia's Innovation Catalyst, CSIRO turns excellent science into breakthrough solutions through deep collaborative partnerships. **Working with industry, government, the research sector and communities, we are committed to making progress on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)...***

It's clear that the global nature of the goals and the deep and profound urgency of their ambitions cannot be tackled alone, and much more needs to be done...

The Sustainable Development Goals call on every business, government and citizen to form partnerships for the future of our world. Collaborating with us is a powerful way to make progress on the goals most important to you, as well as creating opportunities to increase competitiveness, reduce risk, expand markets, and develop new industries.

We are Australia's national science agency, one of the most multi-disciplinary organisations in the world. We work to benefit our economy, environment and our community – this mission includes your business, your impact in the world, and your prosperity.³⁹

A growing number of state and local governments and other agencies are also committing to the SDGs. For example, the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning recognises the value and importance of the SDGs and is exploring ways of incorporating the SDGs into their work. The Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability's 2018 *State of the Environment Report* is newly structured around the SDGs.⁴⁰ In South Australia, SA Health is using the SDGs to complement its 'Health in All Policies' approach.⁴¹ In New South Wales the government has a requirement to consider and integrate the SDGs built in to the mandate of the Greater Sydney Commission.⁴²

Australian cities have also risen to the SDG challenge. The City of Newcastle outlined its actions in its submissions to the Senate Inquiry. The City of Melbourne was an early adopter of the SDG framework, mapping each of its strategies and plans to assess delivery and interconnectedness, as well as identify gaps and opportunities. It deployed the SDGs both as a checklist, and to enable visioning, improve coordination of priorities, provide a common language for the community, and offer a future benchmarking opportunity.⁴³ Through involvement in transnational networks such as the C40 network and 100 Resilient Cities alliance, Melbourne and other Australian cities are further working collaboratively on SDG challenges. For example, the City of Sydney has signed up to the C40 Network's Advancing Towards Zero Waste Declaration and Net Zero Carbon Buildings Declaration.⁴⁴

39. www.csiro.au/en/Research/Major-initiatives/UN-Sustainable-Development-Goals/A-systemic-SDG-approach 40. <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/articles/victoria-leads-way-adopting-un-sdgs-environmental-reporting> 41. sdgs.org.au/project/south-australias-health-in-all-policies-initiative/ 42. www.sgsep.com.au/publications/how-can-sustainable-development-goals-contribute-greater-sydney 43. See www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/sitecollectiondocuments/sustainable-development-goals.pdf 44. sdg.iisd.org/news/23-cities-and-regions-commit-to-pathway-towards-zero-waste/ <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/19-mayors-commit-to-net-zero-carbon-buildings-by-2030/>

4.2.2 NGO and private sector action

An increasing number of non-government organisations (e.g. Australian Council of Social Service, Brotherhood of St Lawrence) are starting to actively engage with the SDGs. So too are national bodies such as the *Green Building Council of Australia*, which is working to support the National Sustainable Development Council national reporting, arguing that this is ‘exactly this type of ongoing collaboration that will be essential to our success in delivering the SDGs for all’.⁴⁵

As the GCNA initiative indicates, perhaps the main site for SDG action is the private sector (Box 5). The way businesses engage with and report on the SDGs is deepening and maturing. In a 2018 SDG guide for businesses, KPMG emphasised the importance of a company – particularly the CEO – building and communicating a *genuine* understanding of SDGs and of how the company is engaging with them.⁴⁶ They note that the challenge is to move past superficial, unbalanced, self-congratulatory SDG reporting – which highlights a company’s positive impacts and remains silent about negative ones – to instead adopt a more credible, useful position that clearly articulates ‘how the company is both *contributing to global problems*, as well as helping to solve them’ (italics added). Associated with this challenge is the need and difficulty of attracting private sector action on problems to which the sector contributes but from which it habitually externalises the costs, such that the pursuit of solutions does not seem to offer direct benefit to them. As RMIT University’s Horne and Nolan (2018) note, this is a conundrum that faces the UN Habitat’s New Urban Agenda.⁴⁷

Box 5. Further evidence of Australian private sector engagement with the SDG agenda

In 2016, more than 30 chief executives from top Australian companies – ranging from Australia Post to Yarra Valley Water – signed a public statement of support for the Goals, saying: ‘...the SDGs provide points of focus around which we can innovate and collaborate in the search for solutions to critical global and local sustainability challenges, while at the same time positioning competitively for the future’. In 2018, the Australian Institute of Company Directors prompted directors to ask themselves whether they are ‘across the UN General Assembly’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals’. They noted that in Australia business more than government is leading the SDG agenda, with many businesses consequently beginning to rethink their corporate strategy and ‘business as usual’.⁴⁸ Motivating business engagement with the SDG agenda is:

- compliance with new corporate reporting standards
- desire to access credit and awareness of the new market opportunities it presents
- desire to attract and retain talent
- desire to improve the organisation’s reputation and/or reduce the risk of losing its social licence to operate.

Contributing to this interest is a ‘public trust crisis’ in many businesses, most recently banks. The broader finance sector is increasingly reorienting towards not only responsible investing but investing that helps achieve positive SDG outcomes.

As ex-Chair of the GCNA, Catherine Hunter, puts it, ‘What we’re seeing now is that businesses can spend a lot of money on amazing sustainability initiatives and programs, but *it’s how a business makes its money that’s fundamentally in question*’ (italics added).⁴⁹ It is a point as relevant to universities as it is to any other type of business.

Patchy private sector engagement is one of many large gaps that remain in addressing and achieving the SDGs in Australia in order to meet the 2030 targets. This points to one of numerous roles that universities are being called on to play.

48. aicd.companydirectors.com.au/membership/company-director-magazine/2018-back-editions/july/sustainable-business-goals 49. aicd.companydirectors.com.au/membership/company-director-magazine/2018-back-editions/july/sustainable-business-goals

05 THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

5.1 The United Nations focus on universities

Universities are recognised by the United Nations as institutions vital to achieving the SDGs. Universities are especially valued by the UN not only as businesses, but as incubators of new ideas, solutions and skills, and as crucial intermediaries between other sectors and different aspects of society, including younger generations.

United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) is a network that brings together higher education institutions and associations – students, academics, scientists, researchers, think tanks – to share ideas, research and resources to further the Sustainable Development Goals:

Whether through research projects, innovative curriculum or campus activities, the global academic community has summoned its creativity and energy to devising practical ways in which the 2030 Agenda can be fulfilled in a manner that is inclusive, sustained and worthy of the Organization which gave it shape.⁵⁰

The four primary functions of universities have been outlined in a report by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Australia/Pacific in collaboration with the Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS), entitled *Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities*. The report highlights the important role universities have in implementing the SDGs through the four functions of teaching, research, operations and leadership (see Figure 6).

Given the size of the task of achieving the SDGs, and the critical role universities have in supporting and delivering on them, there is an urgent need for the sector to accelerate action on the SDGs.⁵¹

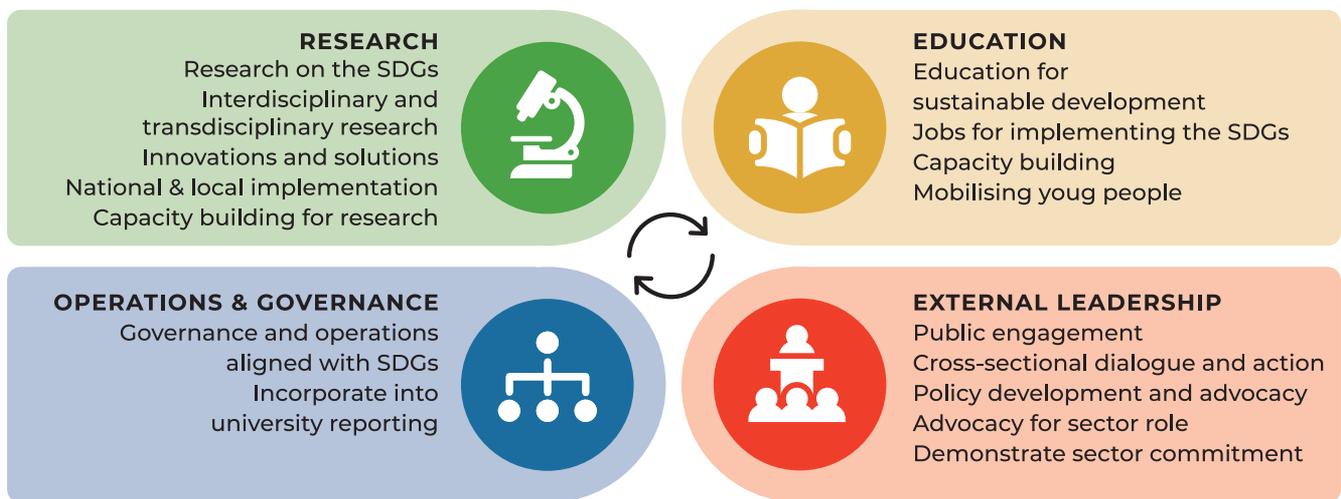


Figure 6: An overview of the four functional areas through which universities need to engage with the SDGs.⁵²

The SDGs provide a framework and opportunity for a systemic whole-of-university approach. The SDSN report outlines three key stages for deepening university engagement with the SDGs.

1. The first stage is *Recognition*: identifying and acknowledging what a university is already doing to contribute to the SDGs.
2. The second stage is *Opportunistic alignment*: different areas across the university finding opportunities to use the SDGs to frame or drive activities and programs.
3. Finally, the third stage is *Organising principle*: the ongoing and far reaching engagement with the SDGs becoming part of business-as-usual for the university, integrating the SDG framework into all relevant university governance structures and frameworks.

To this end the SDSN recommends five steps for getting started with the SDGs including mapping, capacity-building, identifying priorities, integrating, implementing and embedding and monitoring, evaluating and communicating (see Figure 7).



52. Ibid, p. 12.

Figure 7:

These different framings of the SDGs point to the different levels or types of transformation that are involved, beginning with the practical (the resourcing and operationalisation of SDG efforts), moving through to the political (addressing the structural and strategic implications, beyond SDG work as an add-on component of the university), through to the personal (addressing the ethical and cultural aspects of the change required).

In each of the four main functional areas of universities, there are significant shifts taking place, pointing collectively to a broad wave of change in universities' operating environment towards SDG engagement (Figure 6). A further broad push for universities to engage in multiple ways with the SDGs is their adoption as an overarching framework by the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. Encompassing more than just research, it evaluates universities' SDG achievements against three criteria:

1. Research: to what extent is the university creating knowledge to address the world's problems?

2. Stewardship: to what extent is the university managing resources and teaching well, and enacting the 'good' university?

3. Outreach: to what extent is the university directly acting in society to help meet the SDGs?

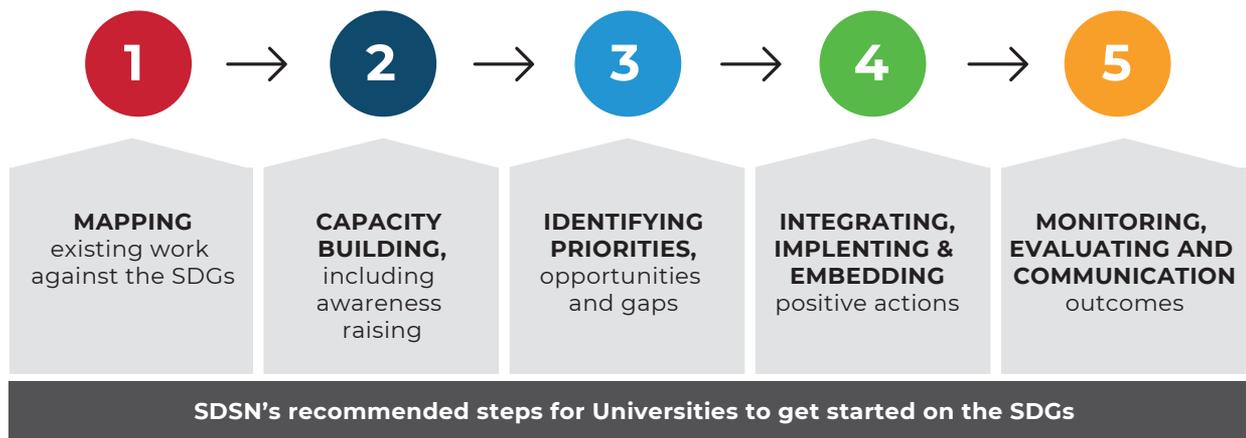


Figure 7: Five steps for university engagement on the SDGs (source:SDSN).⁵³

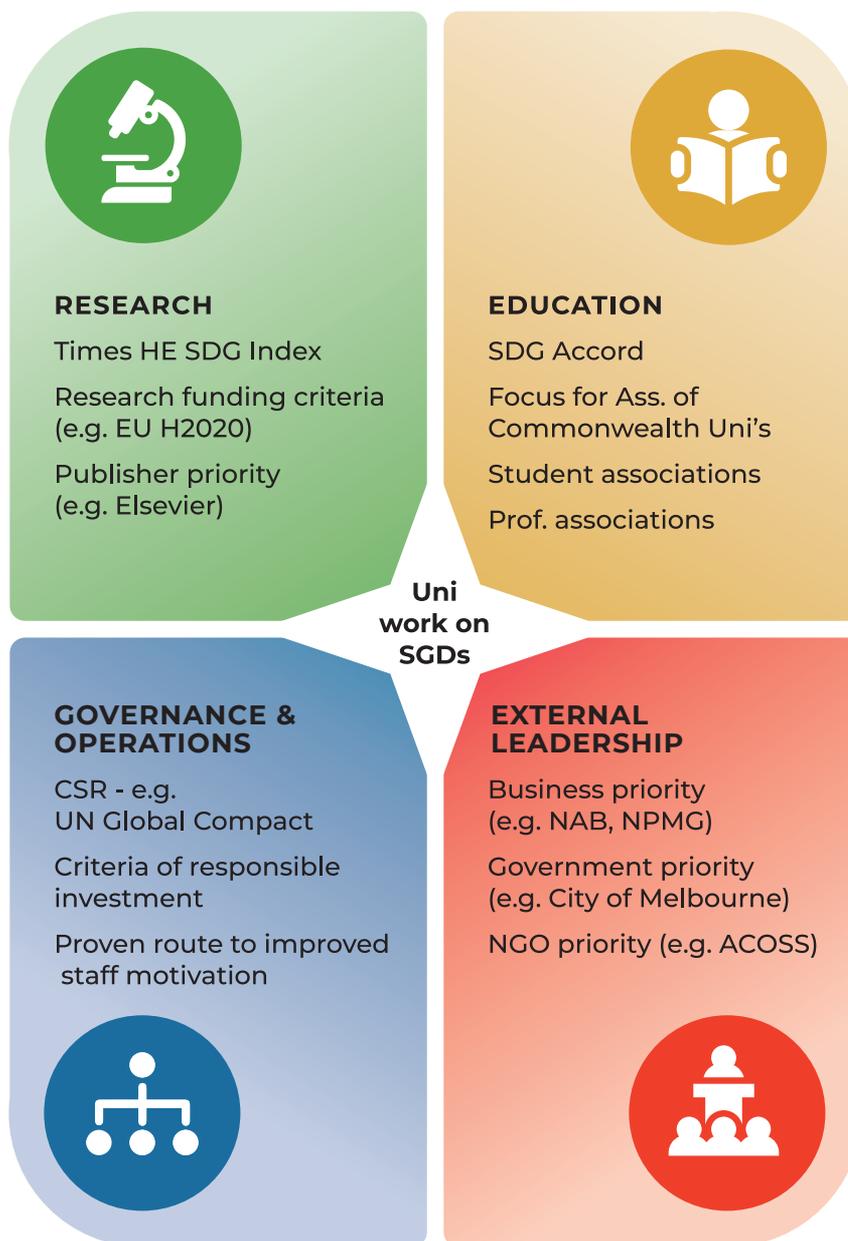


Figure 8. Multidimensional drivers pushing universities to engage with the SDG agenda.

We turn now to look in more detail at drivers for SDG engagement in each of the four functional areas illustrated in Figure 6. These drivers are summarised in Figure 8.

5.2 Diverse drivers for SDG engagement in Universities

In the research arena, SDG-related topic areas are a growing focus because of the intense practical and intellectual challenges posed by genuine sustainable development. In Australia many universities are helping the nation meet its voluntary national commitment to the SDGs because many are:

Undertaking research in the physical sciences, social sciences, biomedical sciences, engineering, business, management and the humanities, to help society understand and develop solutions to the SDGs. This research ranges from basic research on understanding the world to highly applied research aiming directly to address sustainable development challenges. Most universities also host research institutes or centres focussed on SDG-related topics. One mapping of university-wide research indicated that around half the active researchers had worked recently on an SDG-related area.⁵⁴

Beyond this existing thematic resonance with the SDGs, the research arena is beginning to focus and accelerate action on the SDGs by addressing them explicitly.

A key driver is that funding bodies are starting to shape their research agendas and requirements around the SDGs. For instance, from 2020 the European Commission's €80 billion Horizon 2020 program will require researchers to demonstrate how their project contributes specifically to the SDG agenda. The UK Global Challenges Fund is increasingly focused on the SDGs.⁵⁵ With Australia following Europe and the UK on the impact agenda, it is likely that the SDGs will feature in future national science and research priorities, particularly if there is a change of government nationally. Already in Australia the philanthropic research funder The Ian Potter Foundation is 'encourag[ing] grantees to learn more about the SDG goals' and is using the SDGs to help assess grant outcomes.⁵⁶

Diverse academic and professional groups are also increasingly engaged with the SDGs as a research agenda (Box 6).

54. ap-unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/University-VNR-Statement_Final.pdf (p. 2). 55. See for example the current £2 billion pound call for research into the role of education in the SDG agenda: esrc.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/ukri-gcrf-education-as-a-driver-of-sustainable-development/ 56. www.ianpotter.org.au/knowledge-centre/sustainable-development-goals/ 57. theconversation.com/how-scientists-can-help-make-the-sustainable-development-goals-a-reality-81488 58. council.science/publications/a-guide-to-sdg-interactions-from-science-to-implementation 59. Submission from Australian Academy of Science and Future Earth to the 2018 Australian Government Senate Inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/SDGs/Submissions 60. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10789Chapter3_GSDR2016.pdf 61. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10789Chapter3_GSDR2016.pdf 62. How new technology and innovations are reshaping engineering; Engineering for humanity: responsive design for greater liveability; Fostering diversity and inclusion; Preparing the next generation of engineers; Engineering leadership, governance and influence; Our changing climate: mitigation, resilience and adaptation. See www.wec2019.org.au/welcome/ 63. Brolan, C. E., N. Hall, S. Creamer, I. Johnston and J. A. Dantas (2019). Health's role in achieving Australia's Sustainable Development Goal commitments. *Medical Journal of Australia* **210**(5): 1. 64. See for example sdg.iisd.org/news/initiatives-push-for-sustainable-fashion/ 65. www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2018/12/milestone-fashion-industry-charter-for-climate-action-launched/ 66. betterwork.org/blog/portfolio/a-focus-on-the-sustainable-development-goals/ 67. onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/drev.12102 68. oslomanifesto.org

Box 6. How different disciplines and professions are engaging with the SDGs

Illustrating one of the many roles scientists can play,⁵⁷ the International Science Council has called for sustained scientific effort to assess the interlinkages between the SDGs, synergies and trade-offs between them and emergent outcomes from actions, in order to help inform decision making.⁵⁸ *A Guide to SDG Interactions: from Science to Implementation* analyses the especially central character that some SDGs have, such as SDG 7 'Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all'. Like the Australian Academy of Science, and Future Earth, it emphasises that science and technology are core to the SDGs in direct and indirect ways.⁵⁹ Forty-eight out of 169 of the UN's SDG targets relate explicitly to improving technology performance, improving technology access, or developing better innovation systems to enhance innovation development.⁶⁰ In a survey of international scientists, many reported that the SDGs underline the need for careful research around emerging technologies, notably bio-tech, nano-tech, digital tech, neuro-tech and green tech (circular economy, energy, transport, water, built environment, food and agriculture).⁶¹

The engineering field is also engaging; for example, the 2019 World Engineering Convention (to be held in Melbourne) is focused on the SDG agenda. With the overarching theme of 'Engineering a Sustainable World: the next 100 years', it is focused on six topics at the intersection of the SDGs and engineering.⁶²

The health field is also strongly engaged, reflecting the fact that not only is one SDG focused on Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), but good health is an enabling condition and outcome of all of the SDGs particularly when the social determinants of health are recognised.⁶³

The fashion industry is also engaging with the SDGs, notably SDG 5 on Gender Equality, SDG 8 on Decent Work, SDG 13 on Climate Action and SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production.⁶⁴ In December 2018, 43 leading organisations in the fashion industry committed to implementing or supporting the Fashion Climate Charter, which includes a pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent by 2030.⁶⁵ The Better Work program – run by the UN's International Labour Organization and the World Bank's International Finance Organisation – is using the SDGs to focus its efforts to improve working conditions in the apparel industry.⁶⁶

Design, architecture and urban planning are among other fields taking on the SDG challenge, both through academic research and professional associations, including a focus on SDG 9 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. These fields are being harnessed to the SDG agenda as a major source of and object for change. The Oslo Manifesto, for example, frames the SDGs as 'a design brief for the 21st century'. The outcome of a collaboration between 'a roomful of designers, R&D managers, and leaders in sustainability, sports, and fashion from around the world',⁶⁷ it has galvanised 285 organisations, governments and individuals to sign up to a new 'movement of designers, architects and creative professionals' dedicated to embracing 'the SDGs as design standards for a new sustainable world'.⁶⁸

In chemistry, the 2019 Green Chemistry Institute has an SDG stream, as well as a focus on the circular economy idea, which is a key interdisciplinary model of much relevance to the SDG agenda. Interdisciplinary collaboration in general is increasingly recognised as essential for SDG research.

Besides the Times Higher Education Rankings, within **the education arena** a range of SDG-based academic networks and initiatives are emerging. Demand for new knowledge and skills for both staff and students requires *innovative and values-based teaching and learning* responses. Many professionals with professional development requirements are experiencing the SDG agenda; for example, engineers accredited with Engineers Australia need to complete a certain number of hours of professional development, such as attendance at the World Engineering Convention (which Engineers Australia is co-hosting) mentioned above. Similarly, the accounting profession is being urged to skill up to help others understand and address the SDGs. Accountant businesses are being called on by the Association of Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand to recognise that the SDG agenda is 'not a tick-the-box exercise', but requires them to align their strategy with the SDGs.⁶⁹ 'Don't just map your existing initiatives against them. Make it about your core business, not philanthropy'.⁷⁰

The UN Principles for Responsible Management Education,⁷¹ is part of the UN Global Compact, designed 'to transform management education, research and thought leadership globally by providing the Principles for Responsible Management Education framework, developing learning communities and promoting awareness about the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals'. It has 27 signatories in Australia alone, each of which reports annually on progress.

The UNESCO-UNEVOC initiative (International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training) is working to improve the quality and accessibility of vocational training and education and lifelong learning internationally. Positioned at the intersection of SDG 4 on Quality Education and SDG 8 on Decent Work, this initiative is embedding the SDG agenda, leading to efforts to 'green' vocational education and training institutions to improve their direct contribution to the SDGs and provide a more rounded education for their students.⁷² Australia (through RMIT University) is also working on the SDGs through its membership of the Commonwealth of Learning and the International Council for Open and Distance Learning.

The global and applied character of the SDGs aligns with university strategies based on international engagement and multicultural student bodies. Student-driven initiatives are thus an important part of SDG engagement (Box 7).

Box 7. Student-driven SDG engagement

Student exchange programs such as Project Everest now focus their internships to low income countries on community-based projects designed to help address particular SDGs.

The holistic nature of such student experiences illustrates how universities can offer education beyond formal curriculum to experiential and voluntary learning opportunities. In any location, student engagement with extra-curricular activities such as sport and clubs, the university campus and facilities, and outreach events, conferences and research, are all opportunities for potential SDG engagement, especially as they are recognised as important in engaging students with sustainable development.⁷¹ The Kazan Action Plan, for instance, views the 2030 Agenda through sport and emphasises the way all aspects of life are relevant to the SDGs.⁷⁴ Although often dismissed as secondary to the 'real' purpose of a university education, such extra-curricular elements of students' university experience is often where they most powerfully encounter the institution's values and ethos. It is also where they can find and follow their passion. Student unions are among the signatories of the SDG Accord – 'the university and college sectors' collective response to the global goals'.⁷⁵

PhD and Masters students are among the individuals taking up opportunities such as participating in Unleash - a global innovation lab that meets annually to hack solutions to the SDGs. Research students are also able to participate in the range of SDG-based events and initiatives run by the UN Association of Australia events.

This idea of making the SDGs core business in universities encompasses the **external engagement arena** or 'outreach' function of universities; it is in the external sphere that action on the SDGs has been especially pronounced. The public, private and community sectors are increasingly engaged on the SDGs and are looking to universities for the necessary skills development and innovation processes. Conversations with actors in these sectors indicates that they particularly want to work with universities that have a demonstrable shared commitment to and deep expertise in the SDGs and can work together to genuinely rethink how to operate.

If universities take up this leadership role, they will need to keep up with what others are already doing. For instance, for those seeking to work with the Australian Government (e.g. to offer policy advice), it is important to understand the government's commitment to not just the SDGs in general, but to specific initiatives, such as its 2016–2020 partnership with UN Women to work towards SDG 5 on Gender Equality in the Asia-Pacific region.⁷⁶ It is also pertinent to understand that Australia now ranks 39th in the world in the gender pay gap (according to a 2018 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report, a fall from 23rd in 2010), whereas some countries in the Asia-Pacific already perform much better (e.g. Laos PDR, ranked 26th) and are rapidly improving, not worsening – so gender equality is far more than a problem that Australia needs to help others to solve.⁷⁷ Within Australia, the education sector is among those with a widening gender pay gap,⁷⁸ which brings us to the final topic: the internal university **governance and operations arena**.

73. Lipscombe, B. P. (2008). Exploring the role of the extra-curricular sphere in higher education for sustainable development in the United Kingdom. *Environmental Education Research* 14(4): 455–468. 74. thecommonwealth.org/media/news/global-agencies-join-measure-sports-contribution-sdgs 75. www.sdgaccord.org

As mentioned above, universities are not just *enablers of change* in the SDG agenda, but also *targets of change*. Whether conceived as public or private sector, universities are large organisations/institutions with a wide range of internal functions and responsibilities with far-reaching implications for all three areas of the SDG agenda: environmental sustainability, social justice and governance. For universities to perform their unique function as enablers of change, they need to simultaneously embrace their role as targets for change and ensure they are role modelling the approaches and positive outcomes (e.g. reducing poverty and inequality (SDGs 1 and 8), working through effective partnerships and improving policy coherence for sustainable development *SDG 17)) that they want to engender in others.

Universities as businesses or organisations have physical assets, staff, investments, procurements and other functions that all have implications for sustainable development, both on campus and beyond. It is for this reason that many universities in Australia are signatories of the UN Global Compact and SDG Accord (Appendix 3). Indeed, some universities are primarily approaching the SDG agenda as a campus sustainability matter, leading to initiatives such as FutureProof at the University of Kent where staff and students are using the SDGs to engage each department on improving their direct sustainability outcomes.⁷⁹ One of the challenges posed by the SDGs is to genuinely embed typical sustainability initiatives into organisations. A 2018 survey of 250 global businesses found that sustainability teams still generally operate in isolation from investor relations, human relations and marketing, despite investors, customers and employees all being recognised as 'key drivers of sustainability'.⁸⁰ Understanding how an organisation is affecting the world negatively and positively is a large and complex research challenge – one that universities can help industry with, but also need to adopt in relation to their own activities.⁸¹

5.3 Examples of other universities' SDG engagement

Globally, a range of university or research institute initiatives and networks are emerging, which promote themselves as centres of SDG-relevant expertise. Our analysis indicates that they tend to have three main features:

- *partnerships*: they are focused on the transformative potential of diverse actors coming together to focus on problem-solving
- *implementation*: they promote action in response to SDG challenges and targets
- *co-location*: they are often the conduit for joint industry and/or government initiatives.

These institutes often form part of a single institution; for example, the Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI) at Monash University or Pathways to Sustainability at Utrecht University. They may be UN-affiliated hubs or networks, such as Western Sydney University (Australia) UN Hub for SDG 10 Reduced inequalities. Two main types of platforms have emerged: those focused on building momentum around solutions with a variety of experts and innovators; and research-led and/or focused hubs that produce research and work at the research–impact interface.

Amongst the research-led or focused hubs, there are diverse approaches that emphasise the role of 'knowledge' to different extents. Many of these research hubs or institutions position themselves as responding to a particular problem with existing approaches to the SDGs and identify their institute as able to assist with responding to this knowledge gap. For instance, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) in Japan focuses specifically on addressing the SDG implementation gap and role of government to take action.

Many of the hubs promote interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary solutions, but often from a particular theoretical and/or methodological lens. For example:

- the Pathways to Sustainability and Transformation to Sustainability/Steps Centre focuses on transitions theory and practices
- the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis focuses on quantitative systems analysis and the need for data
- MSDI takes a behaviour change approach to problem framing and change.

There are scalar dimensions to these hubs. In the context of global goals, many emphasise local and/or regional knowledge that is scalable⁸². As discussed further below, localisation of the 2030 Agenda is a key part of the SDG logic.⁸³ A number of local hubs or institutions focus on the 2030 Agenda to promote place-based expertise and knowledge (e.g. the South African SDG Hub and the SDG Network Scotland), although localisation does not necessarily mean bottom-up approaches are being pursued. Some hubs are also UN endorsed (e.g. UN-named hubs such as Western Sydney University's hub for Goal 10 reduce inequalities) or UN-affiliated (e.g. the Geneva 2030 Ecosystem Lab).

These hubs are experiments in *transformation*. Three main elements to transformation can be identified: 1) significant change and progress from current actions; 2) change in the direction of greater sustainability in general; and 3) full or extensive achievement of the SDGs. Overall, *transformation* is intended to be ambitious, challenging, and leapfrogging rather than cautious, easy and incremental.⁸⁴ Against this ideal, the Transformation, Innovation and Policy Consortium (TIPC) and Future Earth critique the dominant institutional logic of the SDG targets as too mechanistic and call

80. www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/state-of-sustainable-business-2018-bsr-globescan 81. www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/state-of-sustainable-business-2018-bsr-globescan 82. See for example <http://futureearth.org/future-earth-sustainable-development-goals> 83. e.g. UCLG 2014; Messias, Vollmer, and Sindico 2018; Graute 2016; Klopp and Petretta 2017. 84. Elder and King 2018, 7–8. 85. Schot et al. 2018

for a new institutional logic of *transformation* bridge across the goals and frame social and environmental drivers and outcomes as targets for innovation.⁸⁵ This approach is grounded in research into sustainability transitions and niche innovations, and aligns with other hubs or institutes that push for significant, disruptive ‘social, ecological or technological innovations’ to ‘fundamentally change the systems that created the problem in the first place’.⁸⁶

Within the Australian context, Monash University is a university leader in the SDGs. Like RMIT University, Monash was an early signatory to the SDG agenda. It has since established the Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI), and outlined a vision that seeks to lead in addressing the SDG challenge:

Through teaching, our universities equip the next generation of leaders and innovators with the knowledge and skills to address sustainable development challenges. Through research and technical expertise, universities are at the forefront of developing practical solutions to the social, economic and environmental challenges of the SDGs.⁸⁷

Monash University’s engagement is championed (both inside and outside the university) by its Chair, Professor John Thwaites, who sits on many UN and national SDG-related networks. Despite the high profile of the MSDI, however there are as of yet few signs of the university embedding the SDGs in its resourcing, governance, operations and industry/community engagement. Mention of sustainable development or the SDGs is absent from the university’s strategic planning documents (e.g. *Monash University: the Next Ten Years*,⁸⁸ *Focus Monash*),⁸⁹ suggesting that sustainable development is still interpreted as primarily something the university helps others with, rather than needs to practice itself.

86. Future Earth 2018, paras. 1–2. For further info on the TIPC and insights into another institutional examples see Appendix 4.

87. www.monash.edu/news/articles/monash-signs-landmark-agreement-on-sustainable-development-goals 88. Monash University: The next ten years: www.monash.edu.au/assets/pdf/about/who/the-next-ten-years.pdf 89. www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/169744/strategic-plan-print-version.pdf?utm_medium=button&utm_source=webpage&utm_campaign=strategicplan

06 RMIT AND THE SDGS

6.1 Embracing the SDG agenda at RMIT University

As an integrative and transformational agenda, the SDG agenda demands approaches that work across boundaries; that connect existing efforts on one issue with existing efforts on another issue to identify synergies and tensions. It operates at the nexus of issues such as water, food, carbon, climate and health, at the nexus of disciplines and at the nexus of academia and the rest of society. For this reason, the SDG agenda is not just one among many topic areas within a university, it is a framework and context that demands a new way of working.

RMIT University has not yet engaged substantially and explicitly with the SDG agenda at the institutional level. In terms of the SDSN's three levels of engagement outlined above (Section 5.1) it is working on Recognition and Opportunistic Alignment only; it is yet to embed the SDGs as an Organising Principle. As such, the university faces the risk of becoming out of step with academic and social trajectories. If it leverages its existing momentum soon and steps up to a new level of commitment, it will still have the opportunity to catch up and to become a critical leader on SDG innovation in Australia and the world, while addressing many of its own internal challenges in the process.

There are many reasons why it is difficult to dismiss the SDG agenda as just another social change or special interest project, or as a rebranding of existing efforts. This is especially so for universities.

There is no 'right' way for a university to engage with the SDGs. How universities choose to act will depend on their size, context, research or educational strengths, funding availability, values, priorities and the needs of the communities they serve.⁹⁰

90. ap-unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/University-SDG-Guide_web.pdf, p.4.

First, the SDG agenda is less an internal, voluntary choice than a need to adapt to the shift in the socio-political landscape in the current climate of growth-led change.

Second, the SDG agenda builds on and gives new meaning and intensity to existing drivers for change. The university sector is under growing pressure to prove its utility and value to society. The SDG agenda pushes in the same direction, but with more positive purpose than simply justifying financial investment in universities. It pushes for innovation, but not just in a hurried or solely economic sense – it extends, challenges and revitalises the very idea of innovation in the process and takes it to a more transformational level.

Third, the SDG agenda is more than social change or environmental change. It is about reflecting critically on the role and purpose of universities. Every element of a university is part of the SDG agenda whether recognised as such or not, because every element contributes to sustainable development problems – and possibly solutions – that the SDG agenda brings into focus.

There are both push and pull factors leading RMIT University towards deeper engagement with the SDG agenda. Helping pull the institution into greater alignment with the SDG agenda are a diverse ad hoc array of SDG-related initiatives, as well as the university's serious latent potential to engage with the SDGs in a more focused and effective manner. At the same time, widespread efforts across society to implement the SDG agenda are generating a growing need and demand for the sort of insightful, applied and impactful research, innovation, teaching and training that RMIT University specialises in.

On the push side are external and internal challenges. The university's operating environment is changing in response to the SDG agenda, which is raising expectations among funders, regulators, partners, staff, students and other stakeholders that the university will continue to be active. For example, universities are now evaluated according to the following sorts of questions (see Section 5.1 above):

- **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 acting directly in society to help meet the SDGs?

If RMIT University ignores this changing landscape and adapts only grudgingly, it will undermine its future value and do a disservice to those it works for and with, including both those already working hard to progress the SDG agenda and those who are yet to engage but inevitably need to.

It is for these reasons that we advocate for RMIT University to follow the pathway of Strong Commitment and Bold Innovation. Given this, what is needed in practice? We suggest that the university develops, resources and implements:

A transformation platform – grounded in an adaptive and ethical learning approach, designed to be reflective and experimental, mobilising and engaging key stakeholders from across the university community, including external stakeholders, and applying critical attention to its broader internal and external systems.

The following section outlines a strategic direction for addressing the SDGs at RMIT University by creating an **SDG Transformation Platform**.

6.2 The RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform (Phase 1 2020–2030)

We speak out on issues of importance to our community and our world. We respect the rights of others and our obligations to the health of the planet (RMIT University Strategic Plan).

6.2.1 Overview

The vision:

The establishment of the *RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform* as a strategic incubator for policy, research and advocacy, education and training, and professional and community engagement, which generates positive transformational change towards the 2030 Agenda.

This initiative would strategically enhance RMIT University's renewed commitment to the SDG agenda in research, teaching and learning, external leadership and operations. It would provide a unique vehicle for establishing a clear SDG mandate for the university and bring together, enhance and cross-fertilise the impressive yet diverse and uncoordinated array of SDG-related activities currently at RMIT University.

It would respond to the UN's call for both 'innovative platforms that strengthen collaboration with governments as well as with civil society and the private sector' (see Section 4.1) and transformational change for genuine sustainable development.

The aim:

To develop RMIT into a recognised global leader in university-led SDG-oriented transformation, innovation and engagement.

Key objectives:

1. To embed the SDGs in RMIT University's strategic planning and practices at all levels of the University
2. To support and promote interdisciplinary research that explicitly recognises the SDGs and their transformative potential
3. To initiate and demonstrate pedagogical innovation around embracing and embedding the SDGs in teaching and learning
4. To implement transparent processes that identify, record, and critically reflect and act on the extent to which the university is enacting the 'good' university to help meet the SDGs in its operations, resources and practices.

Each of these key objectives works to support the overarching aim of the Platform.

6.2.2 Functions and form

The Platform would have five complementary multiple functions or foci:

1. **Facilitation** – enabling engagement and learning around the SDG agenda within and beyond RMIT University
2. **Experimentation** – using creative collaborations and initiatives, trialling new approaches and testing ideas
3. **Examination** – providing an observatory function, gathering intelligence about the external and internal landscapes of the university to inform adaptive management
4. **Evolution** – developing collaborative analysis and carefully planned steps to embed the SDGs in the institutional landscape of the university (e.g. via the strategic plan, policies, mission, and staff leadership and employment training)
5. **Capacitation** – building a wider range of capacity across the university and its networks around SDG-specific topics (including emerging lessons in other sectors and institutions) and generic topics (interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, innovation processes, ethical innovation, impact and theories of change).

The Platform is envisaged as a virtual entity supported by a small number of dedicated staff (including the Senior Advisor on Sustainable Development), an active and interactive website, numerous events, workshops, media and communications as needed, and critical, reflexive research and advice on the SDG context and university's approach and opportunities. This will help make RMIT University a leading global institution in SDG transformational innovation.

It could be established through an internal steering committee with members from key sectors at the university scale⁹¹ and core staff,⁹² plus one or two senior academic coordinators seconded to the role for an agreed period of time to focus specifically on establishing and growing the aims and activities of the Platform across the university. It would be valuable for the Platform to have an external reference group comprised of leading national and international stakeholders in SDG engagement from industry, government, not-for-profit and academia.

The RMIT SDG Transformation Platform would both *nurture niche initiatives* that build on, link and extend existing work and develop individuals' agency (the pink circle in Figure 9) and also *foster landscape change* in the institution by working with key leaders and decision makers to explore how to best embed the SDGs in the structures and processes within their area (the red circle in Figure 9) and creating synergies across these.

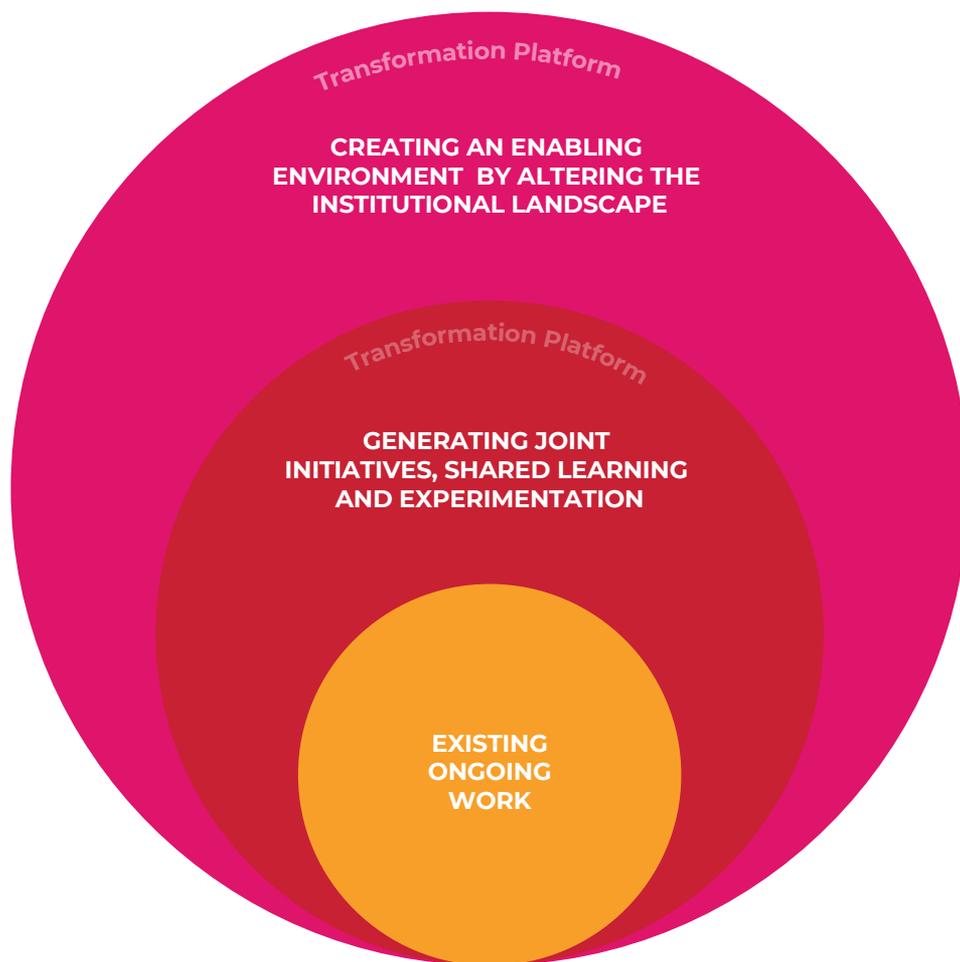


Figure 9. Schematic diagram of the levels of the transformation platform: nurturing new work (red) and generating change in the institutional landscape (pink).

92. For example, current RMIT-based UN affiliations with an SDG focus (e.g. Michael Nolan/UN Global Compact, Peter Kelly/ UNESCO-UNEVOC, Usha Iyer-Raniga/United Nations 10YFP), the EU SDG focus (Bruce Wilson and Emma Shortis), Barcelona and Vietnam campus representation, the Senior Advisor on Sustainable Development (Renzo Mori Jr).



6.2.3 Why a platform?

'Platforms' are now widely used in numerous organisational arenas – including at RMIT – as open, flexible, flat frameworks through which to organise and loosely coordinate interactions and progress shared endeavour. The platform format is complementary to other organising frames including, for example: institutes or departments (being more virtual and informal), hubs (being more open and agile); networks (being more purposeful); learning alliances (being more inclusive of outside perspectives); and websites (being more active and engaging). As indicated in Section 5.3 above, platforms are already being used in some settings to focus and enable shared work towards SDG solutions.

One of the best-known types of platforms are innovation platforms. These bring together different stakeholders to share perspectives and ideas, foster discussion and learning, identify solutions to common problems or work towards a shared vision. Participants may design and implement activities as a group or coordinate activities by individual members. Individual members can also innovate alone, spurred by the coordinated group activities. A platform approach is especially suited to *ethical* innovation (see Box 1) because it facilitates innovation that is responsible (drawing on many perspectives, providing a community of critical friends); inclusive (bringing together diverse people); disruptive (fostering many simultaneous and/or coordinated interventions); and engaged (infused with shared meaning and purpose).

The idea of a *transformation platform* encompasses innovation, but goes beyond a *single* innovation (or type of technology) of the sort that sits at the centre of most innovation platforms. It does so in two ways. First, it takes an *organisational* view because its focus is RMIT University. Organisational platforms are used to help realign organisations to their shifting environment, guiding the reorientation of multiple processes across an organisation.⁹³ Second, it takes a *transformational* approach because the SDG agenda is not just about a single shift in the university's environment or a single problem; it is instead about a *total* environmental shift and a web of problems that require a holistic, transformational response. This means bringing people together to progress a mission, jointly develop a suite of dynamic capabilities and begin an exploration journey, not simply collating work on a list of specific topics or developing a set of resources.

A transformational approach involves cultivating not only a larger social 'ecosystem' of relevant actors, innovations and interacting processes (as emphasised in the metaphors 'innovation ecosystem' or 'platform ecosystem').⁹⁴ but attending to the broader, neglected and dangerously malfunctioning context of the *real* ecosystems and social-ecological systems that the global SDG effort is stimulated by and of which RMIT University is a part. It is about enabling RMIT University to adapt to this 'context' by appreciating that it is not external.

From a practical point of view, an SDG Transformation Platform provides a vital focal point for the university's joint, multifaceted efforts to build next-generation SDG-focused strategies.

6.2.4 Benefits of the SDG Transformation Platform

The SDG Transformation Platform would benefit RMIT and the community in a number of compelling ways.

An RMIT University mandate

RMIT University has an established history and mandate around social justice and change, which aligns directly with the SDG transformative agenda. This idea is seeded in the current and next iteration of the university strategic plan, and in the strategic agenda of all university functions. These social justice roots could be reinvigorated and celebrated by linking directly to the 2030 Agenda and its call to invest our energies and resources in the generation of more equitable, sustainable and prosperous trajectories.

As an institution, we must remake ourselves in ways that are true to our founding purpose and embrace the disruptive changes taking place around us. Renewal means supporting our students, staff and partners to adapt to a changing economy and society so that RMIT contributes to sustainable prosperity and responds successfully to changing demands, funding pressures and global opportunities.

RMIT University Strategic Plan, Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor statement (p. 1)

The SDGs align strongly with RMIT University values (Appendix 5) and would help to reinforce and operationalise these across the university, enhancing staff and student pride in the institution.

RMIT's success in the TIMES Higher Education SDG ranking reflects the existing commitment of the university to the SDG Declaration and the hard work of the Sustainability Committee and Sustainable Development Senior Advisor. The university's especially strong performance on SDG 10 Reducing Inequalities (ranking 13th in the world) is particularly notable in the context of Australia's especially poor performance to date on the same goal (Section 4.2.1). The TIMES' recognition of the university's work on the SDGs has increased public awareness of RMIT's commitment to the Transformation 2030 agenda. A media statement about the result underlines that RMIT is 'committed to modelling institution-wide excellence to build a more sustainable future'. As Chair of the Sustainability Committee, Pro-Vice Chancellor Design and Social Context and Vice-President Professor Paul Gough, puts it:

The Sustainable Development Goals enable us to collectively drive change, channel effort and focus resources in order to construct a more sustainable planet. Our strong performance in this latest ranking is a testament to our continued focus on diversity, inclusion, community and the environment, with engagement across staff, students and the wider community. We acknowledge the enormous challenges the world faces to build a sustainable future and we believe RMIT plays an important role in both supporting and contributing to this. RMIT's commitment spans learning and teaching, governance and operations, research and leadership⁹⁵.

95. <https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2019/apr/the-impact-ranking>

Industry and community expectations

Our industry partners take the SDGs seriously. For example, Stockland is an ASX-listed property developer which has set targets against 10 of the 17 Goals. A number of industries have entered early partnerships with RMIT University, including Australia Post – a leader on the SDGs – which has partnered with the School of Media and Communication and the School of Design to explore new products and services. RMIT University Council has links with KPMG, with common interests in health, inclusion, libraries, finance, risk management and fair work. There is an opportunity for the university to join leading organisations in the fashion industry to become the first university to sign the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action.⁹⁶

RMIT University is an affiliate of Future Earth Australia, which is hosted by the Australian Academy of Science and is a partnership between Australian universities and research institutes and industry, government and civil society, 'with the goal of advancing sustainability and equality in Australia and the region.'⁹⁷ Future Earth Australia is led by Tayanah O'Donnell who is currently an Adjunct Professional Fellow with RMIT University's Centre for Urban Research.

Latent potential

RMIT University has already made a commitment to the SDGs, and is building momentum, but is yet to coordinate and deepen new SDG strategic reach and activities. The employment of a Senior Advisor on Sustainable Development in 2018 and the related website development is a promising first step but more could be positioned this work within a larger institution-wide effort.

Looking at the numerous external drivers for SDG engagement by universities (Figure 8), a striking number have specific and strong resonance at RMIT University, where there are strong convergent drivers for greater SDG engagement in the research, education, external leadership, and governance and operations arenas (Figure 10). This includes an arguably unparalleled level of prior involvement with both SDG-related partners and groups (from the UN to the private sector, from student initiatives to responsible investment initiatives), *plus* industries and organisations that are highly consequential for the success of the SDGs, but are yet to engage comprehensively with the SDG agenda. Thus there is a need and an opportunity for support that RMIT University can provide, perhaps in collaboration with existing partners which are SDG leaders.

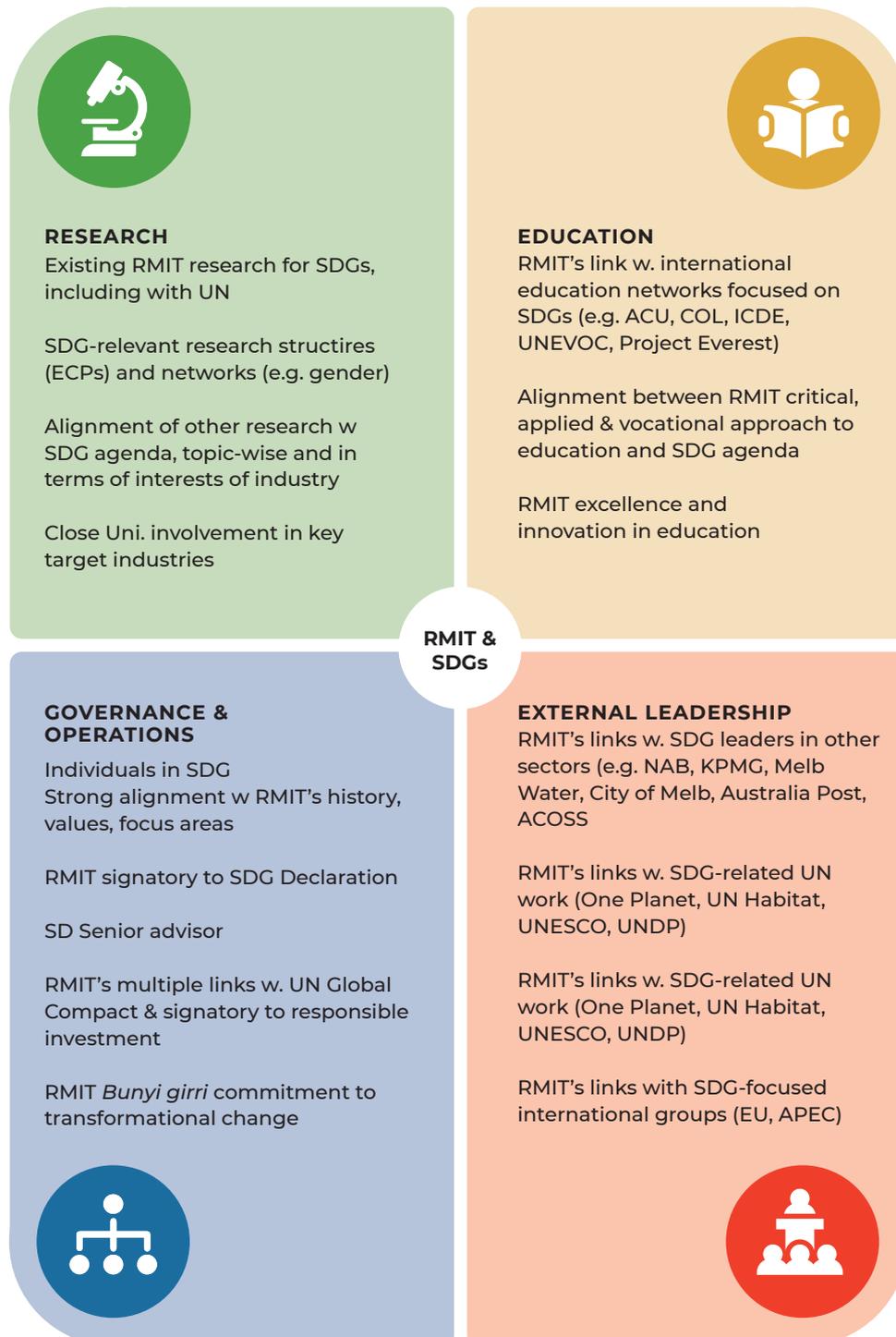


Figure 10. Summary of some of the main drivers impelling RMIT to engage more strongly with the SDGs.

In the research and engagement arena

The RMIT University Enabling Capability Platforms provide a formidable research impact, translation and engagement opportunity for addressing the SDGs. Although currently the ECPs are arguably under-utilised in promoting the global significance and SDG relevance of RMIT research, an initial high level mapping of ECP foci by SDGs points to the way RMIT research strengths already align with the SDGs thematically (Appendix 6). Key interdisciplinary research areas include those highlighted by the ECPs (urban futures, social change, global business and innovation, design and creative practice, information and systems engineering, advanced manufacturing and fabrication, advanced materials, and biomedical and health innovation) as well as many others such as climate change, disasters, renewable energy, justice, international development, trade and sustainability. A key opportunity going forward is for the ECPs to energetically help enhance the SDG impact of the university's research by not only helping to orient its research foci, but by emphasising the importance of ethical innovation and building capabilities in SDG impactful research, notably interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and impact planning and monitoring and evaluation.

RMIT University currently hosts internationally significant UN and EU initiatives with a strong SDG-embedded focus including: the EU Centre and the Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network, the UN Global Compact Cities Programme, and leaders of UNESCO-UNEVOC and UN One Planet Sustainable Buildings and Construction program which aims to 'support and mainstream sustainable building solutions' and provides a 'hub for SDG 12' on sustainable consumption and production.⁹⁸ The Australian

branch of the UN Global Compact, the Global Compact Network Australia (GCNA), is currently housed at RMIT University; it has been contracted by the Australian Government to develop a national SDG portal. In conjunction with RMIT University's suite of national and international industry partners, these significant initiatives are at present largely flying under the institutional radar; they could be better leveraged for their potential, both within and across university activities, and as celebrated examples of the university's external leadership in innovative cross-cutting research and engagement around the SDGs.

In the education arena

RMIT University has the capacity to build on its existing teaching and learning expertise in problem-based learning, systems thinking, critical thinking, and industry engagement through work placements to drive and lead on innovative SDG education practices and pedagogy. As an article in University World News recently put it:⁹⁹

Students need to be aware of the local, regional and global contexts in which they live and make decisions. Many of today's students do not grasp their role in and responsibility to the world and large numbers don't seem to care... critical-ethical analytical skills and systems-based approach ... are indispensable prerequisites to achieving this. By 'critical' we refer to the application of careful, exact evaluation and judgement. By 'ethical' we refer to a set of principles about the right way to behave. By 'systems' we refer to a group of interacting, interrelated or interdependent elements forming a complex whole. Accordingly, systems-thinking is based on the recognition of interconnectedness and systems processes.

institution. They go on to note that this approach needs to be a lifelong learning challenge and embodied by the university as an institution. This includes greater institutional recognition that professional work is not value free or neutral – from fashion and design, to architecture and engineering, social work and education – and students need to be taught about the ethical dimensions of their (inter)-disciplinary work and future vocational pathways.

In operations and governance

RMIT University takes strategic planning processes seriously and key ethical initiatives are evident in the strategic positioning and commitment of the university at all levels (e.g. Indigenous research and engagement, gender equity, belonging and inclusion). Via the work of its Sustainability Committee, RMIT University is working to reduce some of the University's environmental footprint, which includes its property management and procurement practices.

Operations and governance include the university's role as an investor and investment, directly and via staff superannuation. As the UN and other SDG based initiatives recognise, the financial reach of an institution like RMIT is an indirect but powerful way it influences the world. The university's existing commitment to Responsible Investment Principles¹⁰⁰, linked to its commitments to Corporate Social Responsibility via the UN Global Compact and UN Principles for Responsible Investment¹⁰¹, is another way the university is already linked to the SDGs and another element of its latent potential that could be leveraged.

Unifying agenda and organising principle

The SDGs provide a unifying framework and ethical organising principle for RMIT University's strategic activity and practices at all scales. This is a framework that aligns and supports international and national agendas across government, the private sector, non-government organisations and universities. While the SDG agenda is not perfect – particularly in the silences around indigenous sovereignty and the risks of atomisation and bureaucratisation of the goals – it is transformative in its ambition and capacity to directly address the silos and fragmentary response that undermine real progress around sustainable development. How to implement this shared, integrated SDG agenda is now the collective challenge. RMIT University is well placed to lead on SDG integration, innovation and implementation.

6.2.5 SDG Cross-cutting Opportunities

There are many opportunities for SDG innovation led through an RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform. Three examples of the kind of institutional collaboration and alignment that the Platform makes possible include: a unique place and space focus – through a 'local' SDG agenda; the role of cities as a cross-cutting SDG theme; and the relationship between the SDGs and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These are examples only and not indicative of the full spectrum of opportunities that a RMIT SDG University Transformation Platform would engage with and embrace.

100. <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-values/sustainability/responsible-investment-principles>

101. <https://www.unpri.org/sdgs>

Localising the SDGs

Internationally there is a growing push to 'localise' the SDGs – to operationalise them so that they address local agendas. Yet there is little sense of how to do this. It is a challenge that presents two particular opportunities for RMIT University.

First, RMIT University could follow other organisations in developing a set of targets and indicators for each SDG that are meaningful to the institution.¹⁰² This is not about handpicking easy options, but about thinking hard about the relevance, implications and challenge each SDG poses to the university. For example, as mentioned above in the research arena, it is clear that the SDGs resonate in particular ways with the priority areas and primary areas of application of the university's eight Enterprise Capability Platforms (Appendix 6); the ECPs as a whole cover all of the SDGs. Exploring how the SDGs resonate with the aims of different parts and members of the university could be a valuable collaborative exercise, in keeping with the 17 SDGs and the principles of ethical innovation.

The university could work with its internal and external stakeholders to discuss and design what meaningful university-specific responses to each SDG might look like. The result would be not only a fit-for-purpose SDG road map for the institution, but an improved enabling environment for subsequent action, thanks to the stronger awareness, knowledge and boundary-crossing relationships the process yields.

Second, to date no discussions of localising the SDGs considers the specificities of place and space comprehensively, which points to a serious gap in the implementation and inclusiveness of current SDG strategies. In particular, current localisation efforts overlook the crucial contextual question of traditional land ownership and traditional owners' intimate connection with the land.¹⁰³ There is an opportunity for RMIT University to take a lead in addressing this major gap by bringing together the SDG agenda and the existing world-leading *Bundy Girri* project (shared futures) – that is, the ambitious, university-wide change project to transform its cultural values in a way that enables staff and students to enter into a deeper relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The aim of *Bundy Girri* is 'to transform the cultural values of the University [...] [and] create an environment where all non-Indigenous staff and students, foreign and domestic, can understand their place in a shared journey of reconciliation'.¹⁰⁴ Through the RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform, the University could build on and strengthen this process of learning by combining it with an effort to think through what the SDGs (e.g. Life on the Land, Life Below Water, Good Health and Wellbeing) mean for the local traditional owners in Melbourne and beyond. In doing so, it would help generate genuinely innovative insights into what Indigenous-oriented localised SDG goals and targets might look like, and how these differ from and hold lessons for standard reporting tools and indicators. It would also significantly progress understanding of what the SDGs mean for Australia as a nation.

The role of cities

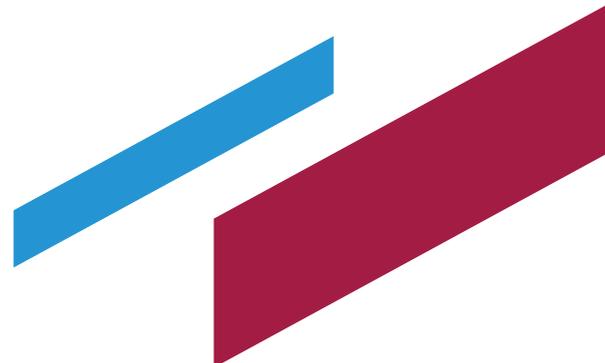
A related cross-cutting agenda is the role of cities in the SDG agenda. We live in the ‘urban age’, with more than half the world’s population now living in cities. The significance of urban communities is clearly recognised in the current RMIT University strategic plan.¹⁰⁵

RMIT University has an Enabling Capability Platform specifically focused on Urban Futures, which draws together cross-disciplinary research expertise that responds to the major challenges confronting cities locally and globally. Three key research themes of the ECP are: 1) Urban transformation – investigating how we achieve urban transformation that creates liveable and sustainable future cities, in response to rapid population growth and urbanisation; 2) Anticipating and shaping infrastructure requirements – determining how we can anticipate, shape, finance and ensure timely delivery of the social, digital, green and physical infrastructure required for rapidly changing new and established communities; and 3) Understanding and engaging communities – examining how communities, business and industry can be engaged to shape the transformations needed to ensure our future cities are healthy, liveable, sustainable, inclusive and equitable.

To facilitate impactful research on these themes, the Urban Futures ECP has established, among other things, research networks and initiatives such as *policy@rmit*, which is designed to enable co-designed interdisciplinary research that addresses the most urgent and complex policy problem of stakeholders to deliver the greatest level of research-policy translation and impact.

In addition to the concentrations of urban expertise in the Urban Futures ECP and Centre for Urban Research and School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, much of the research and teaching at the university is on urban-related questions: from social equity and justice, to design and architecture, to buildings and material, energy and security, education, business and marketing. The same is true of the SDGs: there is an SDG on cities, but the urban is also a cross-cutting theme. There is an opportunity to combine the SDG agenda and explicit urban focus to add a *vital qualitative and ethical angle*. What sort of cities do we want? How do we want to make and live in cities? What does this *mean* for different groups and possible futures?

The SDGs are already being taken up in some parts of the university to help organise, guide and motivate urban-oriented research (e.g. the Centre for Urban Research, the Social and Global Studies Centre, and the WETT Research Centre – Water: Effective Technologies and Tools). Yet each group is working independently and there is not yet a consistent organising framework or strategic agenda around SDG innovation to bring together and upscale these and other research and engagement initiatives. This is a role the RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform could play.



105. RMIT Strategic Plan, Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor statement (p. 1).

Implications for and of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

One of the major change processes affecting development pathways is the Fourth Industrial Revolution (or 4IR): the intersecting rise of ubiquitous, mobile supercomputing, intelligent machines, neuro, genetic and digital finance technologies, and related new business models, and their rapid diffusion around the world. Such changes promise substantial economic, social and environmental benefits. Yet, as previous industrial revolutions illustrate, they also threaten to be uneven, divisive and harmful unless enormous care is taken. There is thus a real need to bring together thinking about the 4IR and the 2030 Agenda. How can 4IR help progress the SDGs? What are the crucial conditions for this? In what ways does 4IR threaten the SDG agenda? How might it (already) exacerbate the socially and environmentally unsustainable trajectories such as over-consumption, climate change, poverty and social inequalities that the 2030 Agenda is trying to turn around?

Emerging commentary suggests that mutual benefits can be found. A new UN task force is examining how the digital revolution in financing might be shaped to minimise potential harms and contribute positively to the SDGs.¹⁰⁶ A 2018 Accenture white paper, for example, argues that 4IR can help the advanced manufacturing sector better contribute to the SDG agenda¹⁰⁷, while a 2019 World Economic Forum white paper argues that if labour and

education policy become 'much more human-centred' and company directors work to create 'long-term economic value and not just short-term financial returns', then 4IR could be 'harnessed to create more equitable economies'.¹⁰⁸

Being at the forefront of many of the technological frontiers of the 4IR, RMIT University is especially well placed to occupy the space at the intersection of the 4IR and the SDGs, and lead the far-sighted, considered conversation and action that is needed. Its involvement in the Asia-Pacific gives it a particularly intense view on the SDG-4IR relationship. (Un)sustainable development, industrial change and their side-effects are unfolding rapidly in the region.¹⁰⁹ RMIT University has the research relationships and structures in place (e.g. the APEC Centre and a \$4 million UN Habitat project on urbanisation in Melanesia) to deepen its examination of the SDG agenda, 4IR and their intersection in the region.¹¹⁰ RMIT University campuses in Vietnam also mean it has an opportunity and obligation to help Vietnam address the practical and policy challenges that intersecting environmental, industrial and social changes pose for the country and region, including the collision of new digital economies, migration, urbanisation and climate change (e.g. sea level rise, electricity disruptions).¹¹¹ To help address such challenges, the Vietnamese Government is focusing on increasing technical education as part of its response to the SDG agenda.¹¹²

106. www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/digital-finance-can-help-sustainable-development-goals/ 107. <https://www.weforum.org/whitepapers/shaping-the-sustainability-of-production-systems-fourth-industrial-revolution-technologies-for-competitiveness-and-sustainable-growth> 109. www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/sustainable-development/Asia-Pacific-Development-40.html; medium.com/@UNDPasiapac/making-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-count-for-sustainable-development-in-asia-and-the-pacific-22c351ddd4bf 110. The APEC Centre is beginning to look at the SDGs – see for example www.apec.org.au/apec-currents 111. data61.csiro.au/~media/D61/Files/FutureVietnameseDigitalEconomy-Accessible.html?la=en&hash=A6DA5ADE625B843751AA38D6B88D73FEAF3CC41A112. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/vietnam 108. www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Globalization_4.0_Call_for_Engagement.pdf

07 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the SDG agenda aims to ‘move us in the direction of being healthier, safer, more productive individuals, and in a manner that protects our resources and planet for future generations.’¹¹³ More than a list of problems or just an idea, it is increasingly a social force – an influential, galvanising driver of change across sectors.

RMIT University has the opportunity and capacity to move into a leading position on SDG innovation across its four primary functions of research, education, external leadership, and operations and governance. In some circles, RMIT University is recognised for its cutting-edge work on sustainability and equity problems, its wide-ranging connections with industry, its strategic commitment to gender equity, and its visionary re-shaping of Indigenous research and education through the world-leading initiative that is *Bundy Girri*.

This Enabling Capability Platform Concept Note makes the case for RMIT University to embrace a deep commitment to the SDGs, combined with a bold innovation culture. This would lead to *transformational* change in and through the organisation if operationalised effectively. It represents the *scaling up* of an idea – such as the SDG agenda – from a niche concept into the workings of an organisation,

up through all levels of governance. The SDGs would become embedded in everything RMIT University does, including leadership, strategies and culture. A clear and purposeful SDG framework for the whole university would develop and deepen the links between the university’s key functions – research, teaching and learning, governance and operations and external leadership – to engender transformative institutional practices and impact.

An *SDG Transformation Platform* could harness RMIT University’s latent potential to become an SDG world-leader. Through the Platform, the university could deliver and demonstrate its commitment to ethical SDG innovation across sectors and scale (responsible, inclusive, disruptive and engaging). The Platform could foster the innovative cross-scale, cross-sectoral linkages and experimentation needed to successfully pursue genuine sustainable development. With a strong virtual and physical presence in Melbourne, Barcelona and Vietnam, the Platform has the potential to lead critical thinking and action on the SDGs, co-developing advice and advocacy.

RMIT University has the capacity and mandate to lead in this area – the question is, will it?

We hope this Concept Note stimulates discussion and action on the next phase.

113. unimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MUN-Impact-Guide_v2.pdf



APPENDIX 1

OUTLINE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Source:

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

APPENDIX 2

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2018 AUSTRALIAN SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

7.12 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, publish a national Sustainable Development Goals implementation plan that includes national priorities and regular reports of Australia's performance against the goals.

7.16 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide an indicator-based assessment to parliament at least every two years that tracks Australia's performance against the Sustainable Development Goals.

7.19 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, establish an approach to preparing future voluntary national review/s that ensures data on Australia's performance against the goals is included.

7.22 The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a national Sustainable Development Goals secretariat to provide ongoing support to the interdepartmental committee, develop a national implementation plan and provide effective coordination of Australia's actions to implement and report on the SDG agenda. The location of the secretariat should be determined by government to ensure the best use of resources.

7.25 The committee recommends that Australian Government agencies integrate the Sustainable Development Goals across all internal and external websites, strategies and policies as they are updated.

7.27 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee and Department of Finance, develop a framework to ensure that agencies include the Sustainable Development Goals.

7.30 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, regularly share resources on international best practice across government to improve Australia's performance against the Sustainable Development Goals.

7.34 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, undertakes a literature review relating to the Sustainable Development Goals and updates the links to the information resources on the Australian website at least annually. Where gaps are identified, the committee recommends that the interdepartmental committee partners with stakeholders to develop and disseminate Australian information resources.

7.37 The committee recommends that the interdepartmental committee develop a Sustainable Development Goals communication strategy for the Australian Government after assessing the merits of a national awareness campaign compared to targeted communication campaigns for specific stakeholder groups.

7.40 The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to add the Sustainable Development Goals to Council of Australian Governments council agendas for regular discussion.

7.42 The committee recommends that the Australian Government seek, through the Council of Australian Governments process, to assess opportunities to include data from state, territory and local government levels on its reporting platform on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

7.44 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide information resources alongside the national implementation plan to support state, territory and local governments to create their own plans supporting the implementation of the SDGs in their jurisdictions.

7.48 The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a representative, multi-sectoral reference group to advise the interdepartmental committee on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals until 2030.

7.50 The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to support civil society engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, including by supporting events, summits and the development and dissemination of information resources.

7.54 The committee recommends that the Australian Government partners with private and tertiary sector stakeholders to develop and disseminate Australian guidance on reporting against the Sustainable Development Goals in order to ensure consistent and transparent reporting and minimise the reporting burden for businesses.

7.56 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, identify opportunities to assist small and medium enterprises to build capacity to access sustainable procurement and reporting systems.

7.58 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, assesses opportunities to encourage sustainable public procurement, impact investment and business practices that support the Sustainable Development Goals.

7.61 The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals throughout the international development program and prioritise the commitment to leave no one behind.

APPENDIX 3

THE SDG ACCORD



(www.sdgaccord.org)

The SDG Accord

Recognising that we are at different stages in our journey towards a sustainable future, with differing strategic priorities dependant on our strategic ambitions, areas of expertise and organisational culture

This Accord calls upon we, the world's universities and colleges

to embed the Sustainable Development Goals into our education, research, leadership, operations, administration and engagement activities.

We Accord Signatories recognise:

- The indivisible and interconnected nature of the universal set of Goals – People, Prosperity, Planet, Partnership, Peace
 - That, as educators, we have a responsibility to play a central and transformational role in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030
-

And we thereby assert:

That as leaders or individual practitioners, academics, students or researchers, we will:
Align all major efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals, targets and indicators, including through our education, research, leadership, operational and engagement activities;
Aim to involve members from all key stakeholder groups in this endeavour, including students, academics, professional staff, local communities and other external stakeholders;

- Collaborate across cities, regions, countries and continents with other signatory institutions as part of a collective international response;
- Using our own unique ways, inform, share our learning and account to both local and global communities our progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals;
- Annually report on 'how does my institution contribute to the Goals and what more can we do'.

APPENDIX 4

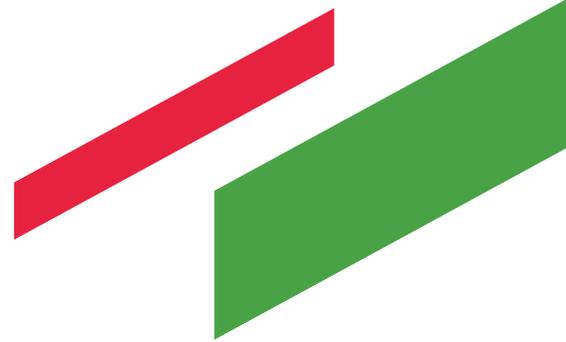
EXAMPLES OF UNIVERSITY-BASED SDG INSTITUTES/INITIATIVES

International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA)

The IIASA is an independent, international research institute with National Member Organizations in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The focus is on developing systems-based, integrated solutions and policy advice around the SDGs. *The World in 2050* (TWI2050) for example is an initiative to develop integrated pathways for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The premise is that despite the recognised importance of the SDGs there is no clear understanding of the cost of inaction and the inherently integrated nature of the goals. TWI2050 maps a business-as-usual pathway and compares this with the SDG pathway. The TWI2050 framework emphasises the need for integrated pathways, which harness the synergies and multiple benefits across SDGs, and approaches to governing this sustainability transformation.¹¹⁴

Transformation, Innovation and Policy Consortium (TIPC)

TIPC is coordinated by the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex (UK), with members from innovation ministries and funding agencies, including from Colombia, Finland, Mexico, Norway, South Africa and Sweden. Their new framing for science, technology and innovation policy addresses the SDGs and is underpinned by a commitment to a 'Transformative Innovation Policy'. The aim is 'to shape and deliver new methods and tools in a transdisciplinary way at the interface between the worlds of research, business, government, media and civil society, as active co-researchers and co-policy designers'.¹¹⁵ This is about building co-constituencies that can scale-up the implementation of new narratives, systems and frameworks.



APPENDIX 5

RMIT UNIVERSITY VALUES AND THEIR ALIGNMENT WITH THE SDGS

RMIT Values	Descriptor ¹¹⁶	Alignment with SDGs	Alignment with ethical innovation
Passion	'We take pride in RMIT and its achievements and we are deeply committed to extending and deepening RMIT's positive impact'.	The SDGs provide a focus for and a measure of positive impact. They demand a committed whole-of-institution approach.	Ethical innovation is engaged – it is passionate and meaningful
Impact	RMIT achieves impact through an applied, practice-based approach to <i>meeting contemporary needs</i> . We <i>shape the world for the better</i> through collaborative design, research, learning and problem-solving.	The SDGs provide a focus for and a measure of positive impact and what shaping the world for the better looks like. They require an applied, practice-based, collaborative problem-solving approach.	Ethical innovation is committed to being positively impactful, to being not just effective but disruptive in recognition of the need for urgent, systemic change.
Inclusion	RMIT creates <i>life-changing opportunities for all</i> , welcomes students and staff from diverse backgrounds, honours the identity and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, and is an accessible and open institution dedicated to <i>servicing the needs of the whole community</i> .	The SDGs are about the whole community and about changing everyone's lives for the better in light of looming threats, particularly those already disadvantaged by social inequalities, including lack of cultural or political recognition. The SDGs advocate for and require an inclusive approach to generating positive change, and an opportunity to learn from often marginalised voices.	Ethical innovation is inclusive in all aspects of the innovation cycle including anticipation of potential innovations' ripple effects in the world. It requires critical analysis of gaps in existing innovation ecosystems and efforts to include all key stakeholders.
Agility	We are <i>forward-looking, balanced and sustainable</i> in our approach to organisation and resourcing. We are able to adapt quickly and effectively to <i>new pressures and opportunities</i> .	The SDGs systematically document a wide range of crucial new pressures and opportunities that demand an anticipatory and genuinely sustainable approach. As a new high-level policy goal, they also represent a new pressure and opportunity for universities.	Ethical innovation is anticipatory and committed to deliberately and responsibly selecting pathways forward. It is also transparent about uncertainties about the future and balances a commitment to core principles such as sustainability with flexibility to adjust to emergent conditions and issues.
Courage	We are honest and fair in our conduct and relationships. We <i>embrace new thinking</i> and evidence, test it rigorously and apply it to our own learning. We are strongly committed to performance, accountability and value for money. We <i>speak out on issues of importance to our community and our world</i> . We <i>respect the rights of others and our obligations to the health of the planet</i> .	Fairness is a key value infusing the entire Transformation 2030 agenda. Being about global transformation, the agenda also explicitly calls for courage – to confront difficult problems, to speak out and resist easy ineffectual responses, and to work tirelessly towards solutions that really do respect the rights of all others on the planet.	This RMIT value is one of the clearest expressions of its commitment to an ethical engagement with the world and thus to an ethical innovation approach.
Imagination	We value innovation and creativity as essential qualities of our work and resources for the economy and society. We are committed to <i>developing, applying and sharing new ideas and perspectives</i> .	The Transformation 2030 agenda calls on people to reimagine what the world looks like and could be like. It is explicitly future oriented and rooted in a positive shared vision.	Ethical innovation requires that both negative and positive possibilities are imagined. It requires imaginative solutions and new ways of doing things that push against entrenched assumptions.



APPENDIX 6

ECP-SDG ALIGNMENT

ECP: Advanced Manufacturing and Fabrication
 Director: Ivan Cole

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Driving manufacturing excellence by transforming specialised materials into high performing products. <i>Example: Assisting the water industry by developing scaleable, viable ways of transforming biosolids into biochar</i>	Manufacturing across scale and function Advanced automation and sensor networks Developing Industry 4.0 in the Australian context	Defence and security innovation Medical technologies Food production and agribusiness Sustainability and environment



ECP: Advanced Materials
 Director: Rachel Caruso

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Creating materials to benefit industry, society and the environment <i>Example: Providing national leadership in bionic computing technology through the 'RMIT Brain Alliance'</i>	Materials for sustainable living Materials for extreme conditions Materials for devices Materials on the nanoscale	Aerospace innovation Clothing and textiles Electronics Food production Medical, health care and pharmaceutical Environment and sustainability



ECP: Biomedical and health innovation

Director: Magdalena Plebanski

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Addressing the global health challenge <i>Example: Delivering portable, low-cost, easy-to-use device to deliver therapy for Foetal Growth Restricted babies</i>	Ageing population Population growth and urbanisation Regional and global citizenship 4.0 Revolution and personalised medicine	Personalised or precision medicine Integrated healthcare Medical practice, diagnosis, monitoring and treatment Public health care, disease prevention and control Pharmaceutical and vaccine innovation Government and public policy Health sustaining living environments Remote monitoring



ECP: Information and Systems (Engineering)

Director: Mark Sanderson

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Understanding disruptive changes in technology, energy and security and creating system solutions <i>Example: Helping local governments shift to proactive building maintenance and renewal programs with intelligent building asset management and inspection system.</i>	Data, telecommunications, and sensors Automation and intelligence Energy production and transformation Cyber security	Data analytics, including using 'big data' to drive industrial efficiencies Energy supply and use Images and video innovation 5G systems and networks Autonomous and automated systems Cyber-physical systems and automation Cyber security



ECP: Design and Creative Practice
 Director: Larissa Hjorth

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Using design, creative practice and play to reimagine health, resilience and wellbeing and a world that has equality, biodiversity and sustainability at its core. <i>Example: Working to understand and improve how people experience formal healthcare settings through the Design for Wellbeing Network</i>	Resilience, health and care Playful and material encounters The social and sustainable Design and creative practice industries	Health and aged care Technology and digital innovation Urban, transport and social planning Arts and cultural heritage Media and communications



ECP: Social Change
 Director: Julian Thomas

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Making sense of human progress to enable governments, businesses and communities to respond in socially beneficial ways <i>Example: Developing innovative ways of increasing local communities' capacity to support and include people with disabilities</i>	Transformations in health and social policy and practice Transformations in mobility, migration and security Transformations in digital society and economy Transformations in work	Community and social services Small and large NGOs Health, disability and aged care services Local, state, federal and international government Justice and legal insurance Migration and settlement services Technology and telecommunication industries



ECP: Global Business Innovation
 Director: Anne-Laure Mention

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Leading and harnessing research-driven change to unlock the value and impact of innovation within Australia and worldwide <i>Example: Fostering debate through the 'Global Business Innovation Conversations' series in collaboration with College of Business</i>	Collaborative design approaches for innovation Organisational transformation and innovation capabilities enhancement Innovation performance and governance Innovation valuation and impact measurement	Entrepreneurial ecosystems Knowledge-intensive firms across manufacturing and services The tech-economy Research translation hubs Government bodies and agencies



ECP: Urban Futures
 Director: Billie Giles-Corti

DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY AREAS	APPLICATION AREAS
Helping cities cope with rapid population growth and urbanisation in more equitable, sustainable and accountable ways <i>Example: Collaboratively exploring how to best support evidence-informed decision-making in public policy through the Policy@RMIT initiative</i>	Urban transformation Understanding and engaging communities Anticipating and shaping infrastructure requirements Harnessing big data and technology Rethinking urban economics	Urban planning and design Housing Transport Economic development and employment Resources (water and energy) Urban greening Infrastructure (social, digital, water and physical) Urban governance Climate change mitigation and adaptation



CONTACT US

✉ LAUREN RICKARDS
Lauren.rickards@rmit.edu.au

✉ WENDY STEELE
Wendy.steele@rmit.edu.au

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