

The contribution of the Australian University Sector to Australia's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Statement towards Australia's Voluntary National Review, March 2018.

Introduction

The Australian Government will be presenting its first National Voluntary Review (VNR) on national progress towards the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs to the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2018. The VNR will report, among other things, on how all sectors in Australia are contributing to the implementation of the SDGs, both domestically and internationally.

The Australian university sector plays a critical role in the implementation of *all* of the SDGs. The aim of this statement is to provide an overview summary of how the sector is already engaging with and contributing to SDG implementation in Australia, to supplement the Government's formal VNR consultations and case study submission processes. It also discusses opportunities for the sector to increase its contribution to national and international implementation of the SDGs.

The statement has been prepared by the Australia/Pacific Regional Network of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), which aims to mobilise universities and knowledge institutions in the region to play a leading role in the implementation of the SDGs. It draws on a number of recent activities the network has undertaken in collaboration with its members and other key stakeholders, including:

- A university sector VNR consultation workshop hosted by SDSN Australia/Pacific on 13 December 2017 in Melbourne, with participants from universities, university-related networks and associations, the Learned Academies, and relevant Australian Government departments.
- *Getting started with the SDGs in universities*, a 2017 guide prepared by SDSN Australia/Pacific in collaboration with the Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS), the global SDSN, and Australian and New Zealand universities.
- Additional input and case studies provided by Australian universities as part of VNR consultations.

How the Australian university sector contributes to the SDGs

Universities provide a significant contribution to the SDGs through their core “business as usual” activities.

As prominent, leading, and often very large institutions with a broad remit around the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities have a natural alignment with the aims of the SDGs and unique capabilities to contribute to their implementation.

As such the Australian university sector has already been making significant contributions to the implementation of all the SDGs through education, research, operations, and community leadership. These contributions have been both through “business as usual” core activities and through organisational leadership initiatives in areas such as environmental sustainability, social inclusion and social justice, which are core to the SDGs.

Examples of key university core contributions to the SDGs	
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing quality education, vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities across all subjects, which are the core of SDG 4 (Education), but are also enablers of all the other SDGs. • Providing courses and vocational training in areas directly relating to the implementation of each and every one of the SDGs, including health, education, water management, sustainable energy, climate change, urban planning, conservation, international relations, etc., etc. • Engaging students in the implementation of social justice, environmental sustainability, and responsible management principles as part of regular coursework, as well as through co-curricular activities, and developing innovative teaching methodologies to support this. • Running extensive inclusion programs to support the participation of students regardless of gender, sexual identity, race, age, culture, ethnicity, religion, disability, economic status or location.
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • Establishing innovation hubs on SDG-related topics.
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating social justice, inclusion and environmental sustainability into top level university strategies – including ESG statements, mission statements and sustainability and inclusion strategies – and reporting on their progress in these areas. • Implementing extensive corporate social responsibility initiatives across all areas of university operations, including resource efficiency and emissions reduction on campuses (e.g. net zero emissions initiatives), sustainable procurement, sustainable investment, staff wellbeing and inclusion, etc. • Establishing “living labs” initiatives to test out cutting edge solutions in SDG-related areas within their campuses.
Community Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness and fostering public debate around critical and complex issues related to the SDGs • Developing partnerships with other sectors for applied projects on SDG-related topics.

Universities are showing commitment to the SDGs and have been going “beyond business as usual” to support them.

The Australian university sector has been strongly supportive of the SDGs. The Vice Chancellors of nine Australian universities have signed the SDSN Australia/Pacific-led *University Commitment to the SDGs*, which affirms the university’s intention to support and promote the SDGs through their research, education and operations, as well as to report on activities in support of the goals. The Commitment is referenced in many of these universities’ strategic and planning documents.

Furthermore, the sector has been actively embracing the SDGs as an opportunity to strengthen its contribution to global wellbeing. This “beyond business as usual” action has already significantly increased awareness, understanding and action on the SDGs by students, staff and the broader community in Australia.

Examples of how the Australian university sector has been going “beyond business as usual” to support the SDGs

Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating the SDGs into courses, and running courses focussed specifically on understanding and addressing the SDGs • Using the SDGs as the framework for student activities, such assignments, leadership programs, hackathons, and entrepreneurship challenges • Running student summits and forums on the SDGs • Providing executive education on the SDGs • Mapping curriculum and subject offerings against the SDGs and using those to identify gaps in offerings
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping research capacities against the SDGs • Referencing SDGs in publications and grant applications as a language/communications tool • Developing research projects specifically to address SDG challenges • Undertaking research and developing guidance on the best way to implement the SDGs, such as on how to address interlinkages between the SDGs, policy coherence, and pathways to achieving the SDGs
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating new roles to coordinate SDG action across the university • Using the SDG language in strategies, plans and reports • Reporting against the SDGs in university reports
Community Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing multi-sectoral partnerships and activities to support the implementation of the SDGs in Australia, including the Australian SDGs Summits. • Running initiatives for student to become ambassadors for the SDGs in their communities • Running sector conferences devoted to action on the SDGs • Preparing guidance for the sector on how to engage with the SDGs and sharing examples of best action

There are significant opportunities for the sector to scale up its own contribution to the SDGs to support other sectors in their implementation efforts.

There is considerable scope for universities to enhance their existing contributions to the SDGs through education, research, operations and leadership, as well as to contribute to national implementation of the SDGs in new ways.

Universities can contribute through:

- Preparation of the current and next generation of leaders across all sectors with the skills and knowledge to support SDG implementation. With education being one of Australia’s largest exports, ensuring all students are “SDG-ready” could translate to a huge positive impact on SDG implementation in the Asia/Pacific and beyond through our education system.
- Development of processes, tools and practical resources for SDG implementation and for monitoring/assessing progress in the SDGs.
- Development of the knowledge, solutions and innovations that are needed to address SDG challenges
- Mainstreaming the conversation of sustainable development in the society through awareness raising and citizen engagement

- Fostering cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary collaboration through new forums

To enable universities to take up these important activities, greater and more targeted support will be needed from university leadership and funding bodies. Improved national coordination around the SDGs will also be beneficial, and the university sector must be part of any national cross-sectoral SDG platform.

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This statement is not necessarily endorsed by participating individuals or their organisations.

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