

Canadian universities advancing the Sustainable Development Goals





Introduction

In 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), a roadmap to action to eradicate poverty and inequality, and to preserve the planet for generations to come. At the heart of the 2030 Agenda are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 indivisible goals with 169 targets and more than 230 indicators, providing a shared framework to work towards a more just, sustainable and inclusive world. The Global Goals embody key economic, social and environmental challenges faced by our world and demand a transformation of the financial, economic and political systems that govern our societies today to guarantee the human rights of all. They require immense political will and ambitious action by all stakeholders. Thus, the SGD framework creates an ideal environment for action and collaboration.

In 2020, Universities Canada embarked on a pan-Canadian initiative focused on increasing exposure for SDG initiatives on Canadian campuses and connecting stakeholders through cross-university and university-community partnerships that bridge efforts across sectors in support of the 2030 Agenda. Supported by the federal government's SDG funding program, this initiative explores how Canadian universities are advancing the United Nations SDGs through diverse activities and institutional commitments.

Universities and other higher education institutions have a critical role in helping society achieve the SDGs through research, teaching and learning, campus operations, and leadership. Several of the 17 SDGs explicitly recognize education and research, and universities have a direct role in addressing them. SDG 4 is dedicated to quality education. However, universities can contribute to the SDGs more broadly by supporting the advancement of all the goals as well as the implementation of the SDG framework itself. From university leaders to faculty members, to students — everyone's unique contribution to this process is crucial for the success of Agenda 2030. Engaging with the SDGs will also greatly benefit universities by helping them demonstrate their social impact, capture demand for SDG-related education, build new partnerships, access new funding streams, and define a university that is socially aware and accountable.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development has been defined in many ways.

The most frequently cited definition comes from the [Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future](#):

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Along these lines, sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and the planet. For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three interconnected elements: economic vitality, social equity and environmental protection.





Sustainable development on campuses

All universities have a role in championing sustainable development and each of them has responded to the sustainability challenge in a variety of ways.

Over the past 30 years, there has been a proliferation of declarations aimed at furthering sustainability in higher education. Many universities started by signing the [Talloires Declaration](#) of 1990 — a 10-point action plan for incorporating sustainability into higher education. In the late 1990s, universities started adopting sustainable development policies and later opened offices dedicated to sustainable development. More than 70 Canadian universities have some form of sustainability office or structure dedicated to advancing sustainable development.

At first, sustainability offices focused primarily on the greening of operations and facilities as well as informal educational initiatives on campuses. More recently, these offices have assumed a more academic and strategic role in ensuring an institution-wide approach to sustainable development. Furthermore, sustainability governing documents such as campus-wide sustainability policies, climate action plans or sustainable development strategies, have been important drivers of sustainability practices on campus.

Additionally, there have been significant efforts to benchmark Canadian universities in terms of their commitment to — and performance on — sustainability, notably with the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's [Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System](#) (STARS) that was launched in 2010. For many universities, sustainability is now deeply embedded in their institution and campus culture.

A snapshot of Canadian universities' initiatives

From November 2020 to February 2021, Universities Canada mapped out the ongoing SDG-related initiatives at its member institutions. Through interviews with more than 45 employees from over 20 institutions, thorough analysis of all university websites, reviews of sustainability strategies, academic plans and strategic plans, dozens of initiatives were compiled.

The objectives of the mapping were to:

- Better understand the way universities are engaging with the SDGs and Agenda 2030;
- Collect SDG success stories;
- Share promising practices; and
- Gain an understanding of the challenges and barriers that exist for universities.

Universities Canada recognizes that, given the broad definition of sustainable development and the size of universities, it is impossible to capture all SDG activities, partnerships and commitments on campuses across Canada. Thus, this report only provides a sample of SDG-related activities, in a variety of areas.



Institutional commitments

Making a public commitment to the SDGs at the highest institutional level can help encourage more comprehensive strategic processes and support across the university, as well as provide greater visibility to the existing SDG efforts on campus. Our research indicates that, as of the beginning of 2021, more than a third of member institutions include the SDGs in one of their main strategies. Most often, the SDGs are used as a framework or mentioned in a section of an institution's sustainability strategy. Certain universities also include the SDGs in their strategic plans and/or academic plans. Likewise, several universities have interactive websites or web pages centered around the 17 SDGs. We have also heard of several upcoming plans and strategies that will highlight the SDGs in the next year. It is important to note that most, if not all, institutions have faculty members, researchers and/or students conducting research on the SDGs or using the SDGs in their work and publications.

- In February 2021, McMaster University launched a new website, [Brighter World](#), to highlight their contributions to the 17 SDGs.
- In October 2020, the University of Calgary released its 2020 [Institutional Sustainability Report](#) through the form of an interactive website to showcase its positive impact through the lens of the SDGs.
- The [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: A Snapshot of UBC Operations report](#) from 2020 highlights one project or program relating to an operational aspect of each SDG at The University of British Columbia.
- The University of Toronto's [2020 conceptual report](#) presents key facts and figures about the institution's impact upon and progress towards the United Nations SDGs.



Kwantlen Polytechnic University, sustainable agriculture dome





Institutional commitments to carbon neutrality and responsible investment are important to advancing the SDGs. Most universities have committed to becoming climate neutral sometime before 2050, with a handful of universities already having achieved carbon neutrality in the last decade. Universities can achieve carbon neutrality by significantly reducing their greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible, and by purchasing carbon credits that support emissions reductions beyond the campus to address the remaining greenhouse gas emissions.

Many universities across the country have drafted and implemented responsible investing frameworks to advance environmental, social and governance goals. This work is guided by the United Nations-backed [Principles on Responsible Investment](#), of which over a dozen of our members are signatories. Likewise, in 2020, 15 Canadian universities signed a landmark charter that aims to tackle climate change through a commitment to responsible investing practices. The “[Investing to Address Climate Change](#)” charter calls on universities to, among other things: incorporate environmental, social and governance factors into investment practices; regularly measure the carbon footprints of investment portfolios and set meaningful targets to reduce them over time; and engage with companies to encourage them to reduce emissions. As of 2021, some of Universities Canada’s member institutions also participated in the new [University Network for Investor Engagement](#) to further their commitment to responsible investment.

Wilfrid Laurier University

The [Laurier Energy Efficiency Program](#) is a comprehensive, multi-phase initiative to increase the energy efficiency of Laurier’s buildings. This project aims to transform the university’s campuses into a leading example of sustainable energy management through renewable technology and smart-grid applications, with the installation of rooftop solar panels, battery storage and a fully functioning microgrid. Laurier also has a [partnership](#) with an energy service company, whereby the institution pays for the project out of the energy savings it provides.

40%
of Canadian universities have
participated in the Sustainability
Tracking Assessment
and Rating System (STARS)
since 2010



Teaching and learning

Universities are well-positioned to play a significant role in advancing the SDGs due to the way they help shape future leaders. Providing students with the knowledge, skills and motivation to understand and address the SDGs is one of universities' main roles. To advance the SDGs, universities must provide accessible, affordable and inclusive education to all, as well as empower and mobilize young people. Students can be engaged in the 2030 Agenda in various ways, for example:

1. Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Kwantlen Polytechnic University is committed to supporting social justice through the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Open Pedagogy Fellowship](#) in which faculty can work across institutions to maximize global impact. With its conceptual framework based on the SDGs, this fellowship provides faculty with an opportunity to work with their colleagues and students to impact change through open pedagogy and community engagement. Each fellowship team designs renewable assignments and deploys them in their classes. A student showcase takes place after the course to share the SDG projects with the broader community.

2. University of Toronto

The [Reach Alliance](#) began in 2015 at the University of Toronto as the Reach Project, a student-led, faculty-driven, multi-disciplinary research initiative dedicated to investigating the pathways to success for innovative development programs that are reaching the world's most marginalized populations. The mission of this initiative is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach. The Reach Alliance is housed at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy and will now scale the Reach Project methodology to six other universities by 2022.

3. Mount Royal University

Mount Royal University offers a novel credited course, [Humanly Information Design](#), in their Bachelor of Communication - Information Design. For the past three years, the senior Information Design students used a system thinking approach to examine the United Nations SDGs. The SDGs enabled students to address some of the most important challenges that we are facing as a society. Students looked at the local manifestation of these problems in order to develop a deep understanding of the complex and overlapping systems from which they originate. Conducting analysis from primary research and subject-matter experts, students deliver insight into these elaborate systems, showcasing their ability to identify and interpret complex information.



Research

Universities Canada acknowledges the pivotal role research plays in advancing Agenda 2030. The research community provides the necessary knowledge, solutions, pathways and innovations to underpin and support the implementation of the SDGs. As stated in the federal government's recent SDG strategy, *Moving forward together: Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy*, "Universities can support research in areas that help identify gaps in Canada's efforts to meet the SDGs or improve the understanding of the social, economic and environmental needs of under-represented populations who are at risk of being left behind." Here are a few examples of how institutions are advancing the SDGs through research:

1. University of Manitoba

The [University of Manitoba](#) is a member institution of the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) and was named a UNAI Hub for its work and research related to Sustainable Development Goal 6, clean water and sanitation, in 2018. The Hub has been conducting interdisciplinary research on water systems to help build sustainable, resilient communities in Manitoba and across Canada, including research with Indigenous communities, management of water quantity and quality issues, and the impact of climate change on our water systems. The University of Manitoba was also [one of the first](#) universities to create a [report](#) that documents their contributions to each of the 17 SDGs.

2. Dalhousie University

Dalhousie University's Strategic Direction for [Research and Innovation](#), entitled *Impact Together*, references the SDGs throughout. Each of the university's five identified signature [research clusters](#): 1. Sustainable Ocean, 2. Healthy People, Healthy Communities, Healthy Populations, 3. Clean Tech, Energy, the Environment, 4. Culture, Society, Community Development, 5. Food Security and two cross-cutting themes (Big Data and Innovation & Entrepreneurship) are linked to specific SDGs and grounded in the UN's Agenda 2030.

3. Concordia University

Concordia University's research strengths align well with SDG 11, sustainable cities & communities. Here are two initiatives, mentioned in the [2020 SDGs Preliminary Report](#), that are advancing SDG 11 through research:

- The [Institute for Urban Futures](#) is a research and research-creation centre embedded within the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University. The institute's goal is to make space for critical and creative inquiry about the contemporary urban condition. The institute's projects connect students, faculty and researchers with a diversity of urban actors, urban histories, current urban developments, debates and community, social, art and design practices regarding the future of cities.
- The university's newly launched [Next-Generation Cities Institute](#) leverages the combined strength of its cities' research capacity to enhance collaboration, communication, education and interaction within the community. The institute brings together more than 200 researchers from a range of disciplines to engage in an inclusive and universal approach to sustainable urban development. The institute is home to the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Smart, Sustainable and Resilient Cities and Communities.



Student involvement

Students are often at the forefront of grassroots sustainability initiatives and movements. Youth are essential agents of change in fostering collaboration with communities, cities and municipalities to further implement the 2030 Agenda locally. We have seen students from various Canadian universities lead SDG activities and events to raise awareness. Here are a few examples of how students are mobilizing to advance the SDGs on their campuses:

- The [Sustainability Ambassadors](#) organize [SDG Week](#) at The University of British Columbia to increase awareness of and engagement with the Goals from diverse perspectives.
- [SDSN Youth](#) educates young people about the SDGs and provides opportunities for them to pioneer innovative solutions to address the world's biggest challenges. SDSN Youth aims to create platforms for young people to connect, collaborate and integrate their ideas and perspectives into national and regional pathways for the implementation of the SDGs.
- The Université Laval's [Alliance étudiante en développement durable](#) (the Student Alliance on Sustainable Development) is a collaboration between students, associations and the administration which aims to educate the university community about the SDGs. Longer term, the Alliance strives to develop a collective brainstorming on sustainable development in order to improve quality of life on campus.
- The [Sustainable Development Goals Alliance](#) (SDGA) is a student-run, community-centered organization at the University of Calgary. Founded in 2017, the SDGA works closely with students, clubs and faculty to provide programs, events, and support for the campus community to raise awareness and action for the 17 SDGs.



University of British Columbia, Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre, student conducting research





International recognition

When discussing SDGs with staff at various institutions, the topic of rankings and ratings was recurrent. Sustainability rankings such as *Times Higher Education's Impact Rankings* are seen as important and prestigious. In 2020, 19 of Universities Canada's members participated to the ranking by providing data on how they are advancing the SDGs, and most scored quite well. Since the 2019 launch, The Impact Rankings seem to have contributed to the notable increase in interest of Canadian universities in the SDGs. AASHE's *Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System* (STARS), by far the most common sustainability rating in Canadian higher education, has now aligned its methodology with the United Nations' SDGs. As of the beginning of 2021, 28 member institutions had a STARS rating, with an additional 10 institutions having participated in the rating process since its inception. These rankings and ratings have encouraged universities to track and monitor their contributions to the 17 SDGs in order to improve their sustainability performance.

The *Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Canada* is hosted by the University of Waterloo and is part of the *global SDSN* movement that aims to build a network of universities, colleges, research centres and knowledge institutions to promote practical solutions for sustainable development. SDSN Canada's mission is to mobilize Canadian scientific and technological expertise to facilitate learning and accelerate problem solving for the UN's Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. There are currently 27 member institutions that are part of this network, and Universities Canada joined as well.

The *University Global Coalition* consists of a collaborative platform of globally engaged universities and higher education associations working in partnership with the UN and other stakeholders to create a more sustainable future for all and advance the 17 SDGs collectively. Eight members of Universities Canada are signatories to this coalition.

38%
of Canadian universities
include the SDGs in one of
their main strategies



Challenges

Through their current actions, universities are fundamental contributors to Agenda 2030. However, for the SDGs to be successful at a national and global scale, universities need to champion sustainable development and show leadership in implementing the SDGs. Each university may approach the SDGs in its own way, but most of them face similar challenges.

One of the most common challenges raised during our discussions concerns communication: sustainability is understood differently across institutions and communicating the role of universities in working towards Agenda 2030 has been challenging for some. Capacity is another important challenge, since several participants are citing lack of funding and lack of time as the main barriers hindering their work on the SDGs. Another issue identified by participants is the difficulty of localizing the SDGs and applying the SDG framework to a smaller, local scale.

There is a need for improved collaboration and interdisciplinary work, as silos hinder collaboration across disciplines. Measuring impact in higher education adds a layer of complexity to this undertaking. Furthermore, lack of leadership can limit or impede an institution's ability to introduce and implement new SDG activities across the university.

The harmonization of the SDGs and initiatives surrounding truth and reconciliation presents a challenge for institutions. Many participants mention that there is no specific SDG regarding Indigenous rights and reconciliation, but that this issue should be prioritized to the same level as the existing SDGs and treated with urgency. Consequently, universities should implement the 2030 Agenda with full respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples by protecting and promoting these rights, as reflected in the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

Conclusion

We recognize that there is no singular way for universities to engage with the SDGs. How universities choose to act will depend on their size, context, location, research or educational strengths, funding availability, values, priorities, and the needs of the communities they serve. Universities Canada thanks all participants for sharing their insightful comments, perspectives and experiences on the SDGs with us. Through this initiative, we have witnessed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for the SDGs from various university employees and faculty members. Our research has shown that universities are deeply committed to the ideas that the SDGs stand for and are prepared to take action to advance Agenda 2030. Over the coming months, Universities Canada will continue working with its member institutions to advance this initiative to support the implementation of the SDGs in the higher education sector.

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