



17 Zoom Rooms @ UofT

Summary report

SDGs @ U of T Virtual Events

December 4 and 11, 2020

On December 4 and 11, 2020, the University of Toronto hosted two events to catalyze deepened faculty and graduate student engagement in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Both had as their goal to foster a multidisciplinary, energizing, discussion of the [United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), and how the university community should contribute to advancing the SDGs by identifying high- impact actions that can be taken over the coming 12-18 months.

Co-sponsored by the Offices of the Vice President International and of the Vice President Research and Innovation, the events were developed with expert input from an Advisory Committee (see Appendix 3).

The December 4th “17 (Zoom) Rooms” event was modelled on a format developed by the Brookings Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation to stimulate innovative forms of collective action aimed at advancing the SDGs. As [Brookings](#) notes on their website: “As a unique format for bringing diverse constituencies together around a common premise, 17 Rooms encourages participants to identify priorities within their own realm of SDG focus while also learning about priorities in other SDG domains.”

The December 11th event, co-designed by the President’s Advisory Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability (CECCS) and the Advisory Committee, built on the output from the first day, and was designed around six cross-cutting themes, drawing on the a framework developed by [Sachs et al., 2019](#), which provides a way to cluster the SDGs in a meaningful and practical manner for operationalization. The six clusters were:

1. Education, Gender & Inequality
2. Health, Wellbeing & Demography
3. Energy Decarbonization & Sustainable Industry
4. Sustainable Food, Land, Water & Oceans
5. Sustainable Cities & Communities
6. Digital Revolution for Sustainable Development

The focus of the discussions on Dec 11 were, as with the first day, to generate proposals for multi- / inter-disciplinary research projects, community engagement activities to advance the transformations, and/or courses on how these transformations can be internalized at U of T.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Overview of 17 Rooms @ UofT event, December 4

The first event was attended by 113 faculty and graduate students from 27 different disciplines. It began with a welcome and opened with remarks from President Meric Gertler, who highlighted the importance of sustainable development considerations, which have been incorporated into a vast array of university projects. These initiatives range from the creation of a Presidential Advisor and Committee on climate change and sustainability to the complex urban challenges examined by U of T's School of Cities to the equity and inclusion work with Indigenous communities and campus revitalization efforts.

The opening panel featured Professor Angela Owusu-Ansah, Provost of Ashesi University; John McArthur, Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution; and Queen's University Professor Margaret Biggs, who is also the former president of the Canadian International Development Agency. The panel highlighted key themes regarding the role that higher education institutions can play in relation to SDGs in Canada and Globally. As hubs of intergenerational collaboration universities can work with the next generation to address SDGs. And since Canada is not on pace to meet its SDG targets, universities can contribute to progress on these by sharing relevant research and outreach with politicians and communities, to both

think globally and act locally. By modelling the SDGs, through student funding, training, and research, universities can not only contribute to meeting SDG targets, but also contribute to reconciliation and other institutional equity goals.

Following the plenary panel and discussion, fourteen “rooms” (several rooms were combined due to, hence the smaller number) discussed many similar ideas on research, teaching, and partnerships. Cutting across all three of those areas was a desire to engage students and youth, as well as local, national, and global communities in the design and implementation of any research, teaching, or partnerships through avenues like community-engaged research or learning or participatory-action research. Intersectionality, decolonization, and equity-focused approaches were also consistently raised in relation to research, teaching, and partnerships.

Overview of Cross-Cutting Themes session, December 11

The second event was attended by 112 faculty and graduate students. Professor John Robinson opened the session with a recap of the first session held on Dec. 4.

Professor Robinson then announced the objectives of the cross-cutting theme session: Build upon the outputs of the Dec. 4 session, and review ways to merge and further develop proposals for one or more of the six Transformations, if they make sense, or create new interdisciplinary proposals. If the 17 SDGs represent a vertical approach to setting goals and measuring performance, the cross-cutting themes or clustering of SDGs by theme would be a horizontal approach to bringing out synergies among the SDGs. The Sachs’ paper on the Six Transformations or clusters tag each Transformation with multiple SDGs, some with all 17 SDGs. However, for this session, each Transformation table had only 4 or 5 associated SDGs because there was a need to avoid having some Transformation tables being extremely large and others very small.

The session proceeded to hold two collaborative breakouts, first one titled “Six Transformations to Achieve the SDGs @UofT Research” and the second one similarly structured but focused on SDGs @UofT Teaching. At the closing plenary, each faculty moderator for each of the six Transformation tables gave a brief presentation of the discussion outcomes. Professor Joe Wong, Vice President, International closed the two-day event with forward-looking remarks on building on our existing research initiatives, forming new interdisciplinary and global partnerships, and producing a map for advancing the UN SDGs at U of T.

Key ideas

From Dec. 4 Session

The fourteen groups in the first session and the six groups in the second session differed in approach and substance during their break out discussions, ranging from a focus on pedagogy and research methodology in some, on specific courses and research projects in others, and a discussion of opportunities and resources in most.

For many participants, the 17 Rooms held on December 4 was an awakening to the 17 SDGs and to the opportunities to work with colleagues from many parts of the university. A sense of community was driven by a spirit of collaboration and shared purpose across goals, with a shared sense of the need for urgent change and transformation.

Key themes and ideas from Dec 4 on which there was convergence are listed below:

Teaching:

A major recurring theme was around creating and adapting courses and other learning experiences related to sustainability. Some of the proposed courses include capstone projects, potentially with community-review processes in the course or an emphasis on case studies. Further, rather than developing new courses on SDGs, many participants pointed out the benefits of integrating SDGs into existing courses and introducing PhD cross-supervision to encourage a multidisciplinary approach to the SDG framework. Outside of the classroom, an SDG co-curricular program or an SDG hack-a-thon could provide students with unique opportunities to gain experience in the field of sustainability. Overall, employing a multidisciplinary approach to teaching was highly emphasized, along with creating opportunities for experiential learning both in program development and through funding.

Methods:

Prioritizing experiential learning, such as work-integrated programs or internships, was a key theme carried throughout the session. Additional ideas brought forward include engaging students in the development of their courses and team-teaching to bring multidisciplinary perspectives to SDGs.

Resources:

Resources that could contribute to the aforementioned goals include general tools such as the SDG competency or global competency framework, and systems such as teaching teams to contribute to interdisciplinarity. Further, experts in the field could be better utilized in residence and to support professional development.

Research:

Interdisciplinary Actions:

As interdisciplinarity was a prominent theme throughout this event, as well as in the field of sustainability, it is important to pursue this goal through connecting various fields of study to the SDG framework. Further, discussion was held regarding establishing a problem database that connects to faculty, librarians, trainees, and staff profiles to make it easier to form interdisciplinary teams.

Methods:

Potential methods to be applied to research include community based participatory research, intersectional approaches, and digital storytelling for knowledge mobilization. In this process, it is also important to reconsider who constitutes a research team in order to allow for the inclusions of non-academic stakeholders.

Resources:

Resources to be employed or developed include tools such as an open-access e-portal or database where faculty, student and staff can find one another and encourage groups/teams to form. Additionally, it could be useful to factor SDGs into faculty assessments for promotions as well as increase professional development for faculty and trainees. This professional development could cover topics including knowledge mobilization /translation and connecting research to monitoring and evaluating SDGs.

Partnerships:

Important partnerships to consider fall into four broad categories: (i) intra-university partnerships such as the Robert Gillepsie Academic Skills Centre at UTM, Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation at UTSG, Centre for Teaching & Learning at UTSC; Student Affairs, and OISE; (ii) other universities who are orienting their strategy and international engagement around SDGs, such as Ashesi University in Ghana; (iii) public or private NGOs such as the WHO, UNDP/UN Agencies, school boards, and municipal governments; and (iv) networks, groups, and associations such as the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

Other areas for action:

Other identified areas for potential action include providing funding opportunities to students from lower income backgrounds, ensuring all students have the opportunity to enter entrepreneurship courses, interweaving students' learning outcomes with making communities better, and implementing practices of gender equity at all levels.

From Dec. 11 Session

Key themes and ideas from December 11 on which there was convergence are as follows:

Teaching:

Interdisciplinary Actions:

A key theme on teaching from the cross-cutting theme session focused on expanding collaborative specializations and building opportunities to co-teach between disciplines. As a proactive and very intentional effort to integrate concepts across programs and curricula, there is an opportunity to build an interdisciplinary teaching program. There were discussions on the development of a university-wide course on SDGs at the undergraduate level that cuts across all three campuses of the university, as well as an approach to embed it within each division. This would support the goal of ensuring widespread faculty and student awareness on the SDGs.

With any teaching, it is crucial that there is a strong emphasis on student engagement. Key steps in achieving that engagement include exploring the co-curricular space at the university and pushing for more opportunities for SDG engagement. In doing this, there are also opportunities to increase experiential learning and a deeper engagement with the broader community.

Methods:

Support for more experiential learning and large-scale, cross-disciplinary projects was heard repeatedly. Offering a first-year course, as well as a translational course for each discipline, on the SDGs would help students engage with the material, as well as support first-year students as they make decisions regarding their degree.

Resources:

Resources mentioned at the event include MITACS, SSHRC Healthy Cities, Queen Elizabeth Scholars funding, Learning & Education Advancement Fund (LEAF) to support funding, and the Centre for Community Partnerships (CCP) at U of T to provide expertise.

Research:

Interdisciplinary Actions:

Some key actions related to research that came out of the session include building cross-departmental alliances to construct interdisciplinary, holistic research. This could be supported

through a “matchmaking” application program that introduces students and faculty to other researchers. Nevertheless, as research that is too wide-ranging can be counterproductive, it is also important to focus on actionable and target-based research as well. Further, teaching research tools, analytics, and ethics to all students would support the development of research standards that intertwine ethics and sustainability. This education for students would be best paired with opportunities for experiential learning in the local community. Finally, more focus should be given to ethnographic and field studies for greater attention to diversity and equity.

Methods:

The discussions varied from broader ideas such as developing community relationships to specific methods such as developing funds for interdisciplinary research, for assistant professors to mentor graduate students, and for community partners. This could be supported through creating a unified data-portal for research, grants and opportunities.

To better facilitate the sharing of information and interdisciplinary research ventures, an inventory of existing multi-sectoral research on SDGs is needed, as well as a matching tool to link researchers in different disciplines.

Resources:

The identified resources fall under two broad categories: resources for expertise and resources for funding. Examples of resources for expertise include Academic Alliances, School of Cities, and City of Toronto partners. Examples of resources for funding are Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Seed funding for interdisciplinary research, and Community Foundations Canada.

At a higher level, both sessions highlighted the following recurring themes:

Partnerships:

A common theme carried throughout the event was prioritizing partnerships within UofT, within Canada, and internationally to work towards the co-production of knowledge. One useful step in furthering these partnerships is creating funds for work on interdisciplinary projects as well as any work done with community partners. Further, within UofT, there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on the importance of generating full-university interest in SDGs to develop a synergistic top-down and bottom-up governance approach. In doing so, co-curricular activities and opportunities for student partnerships can be expanded to further drive student engagement.

Conclusion

Overall, there were several recurring themes between the two events, most notably, calls for greater interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in both teaching and research. This can be encouraged through offering seed funding for collaborative teaching and research methods, as another major theme was removing barriers through funding. This can include funding as incentive for sustainability related projects or funding for lower income students to provide greater academic opportunities.

Prioritizing experiential learning was also repeatedly discussed throughout the events, through co-curricular opportunities or joint projects with the community. The latter would also further the goal of better integrating U of T with the wider community through engaging with community partners, as well as global academic partners. In doing this, the university will be better able to prioritise working with students and the community in the co-production of knowledge, rather than for students and communities. Consequently, there will be a useful shift in focus from the work that is produced to the approach UofT takes in producing this work. Building transdisciplinary partnerships between academic and non-academic partners in the community was a key theme, recurring throughout the event.

Some immediate next steps were developed following the December events.

Connaught Global Challenge Research Impact Program

A first tangible outcome was to include a focus on the SDGs in the Connaught Global Challenge Research Impact Program funding competition, jointly offered by the University's Research and Innovation Office and by the International Office, which was launched soon after the SDG@UofT events took place. Several SDG specific calls for proposals in partnership with other universities have also been issued by the Office of the Vice President International in 2021, with several more planned.

CECCS

The [Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability](#) (CECCS) led by Professor John Robinson, and Ron Saporta, the Chief Operating Officer of U of T, is mandated to advance coordination of the University's contributions and objectives on climate change and sustainability pertaining to research and innovation, academic programs, community engagement, and sustainability initiatives related to our operations. .SDGs is one of the Committee's cross-cutting themes as they continue to integrate the SDG framework into teaching and learning, research, operations, and engagement and partnerships at the University.

A broader engagement strategy with staff across the university has also been discussed, and will be a focus for 2022.

SDGs ISI

A sustained focus on the SDGs and a commitment to contributing to progress on the SDGs which was a clear message resulting from the SDGs @ UofT December 4 and 11 event. With strong support from University leadership, including Deans as well as the Office of the Vice President International and of Research and Innovation, there was agreement to launch an SDG focused International Strategic Initiative. Co-Chaired by Professor Erica di Ruggiero from DLSPH and Professor Marc Cadotte from UTSC, a Steering Committee of faculty members and a Student Committee have been jointly tasked with scoping this initiative over the coming year, starting in September 2021.

Appendices

Appendix 1: SDG @ U of T Agenda - December 4



17 Zoom Rooms @ UofT

December 4, 2020
1:00pm – 4:00pm EST

About the Session

Universities are said to have two roles: one is to serve the existing society, and the other is to challenge society to shape a better future. The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underline a set of challenges paramount for universities to address.

We welcome you to join a virtual collaboration session to **identify opportunities that will advance the SDGs @ UofT through our academic work: teaching and research.**

Timing	Item	Location
1:00pm – 4:00pm	Session Welcome <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opening Remarks & Session Orientation 	Zoom Video Conferencing
	SDGs @ UofT Panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderated discussion with our colleagues Angela Owusu-Ansah, John McArthur, and Margaret Biggs. 	
	Collaboration Breakout 1 – SDGs @ UofT Research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated Group Discussion 	
	Plenary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual Gallery Walk Research opportunities and ideas 	
	Collaboration Breakout 2 – SDGs @ UofT Teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated Group Discussion 	
	Plenary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual Gallery Walk Teaching opportunities and ideas 	
	Session Close <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary Insights & Closing Remarks 	

Appendix 2: SDG @ U of T Agenda - December 11



Cross-Cutting SDG Themes Session @ UofT

December 11, 2020
1:00pm – 3:00pm EST

About the Session

Based on the [‘Six Transformations’ cross-cutting SDG framework \(Sachs et al., 2019\)](#), which provides a way to cluster the SDGs in a meaningful and practical manner for operationalization, the session activities are designed to generate proposals for multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary research projects and courses on how these Transformations can be internalized at U of T, with linkage to local or international partnerships.

Timing	Item	Location
1:00pm – 3:00pm	Session Welcome Recap of Dec. 4 Session Session Objectives	Zoom Video Conferencing
	Collaboration Breakout 3 – Six Transformations to Achieve the SDGs @ UofT Research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated Group Discussion 	
	Collaboration Breakout 4 – Six Transformations to Achieve the SDGs @ UofT Teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated Group Discussion 	
	Plenary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing of ideas by each Table 	
	Session Close <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary Insights & Closing Remarks 	

Teaching

- Build opportunities to co-author and co-teach with cross-disciplinary streams
- Examples of collaborative teaching include Dalla Lana, Munk, and Engineering
- Promote flexibility at departments around workload and joint workforce
- Expand Collaborative Specializations
- Co-curricular space is suitable to provide collaborative SDG engagement for undergraduates – push University to create more opportunities
- Build an interdisciplinary teaching program around the entire “chain” approach e.g. the food chain, poverty (economics, sociology, policy, associated health challenges). Some examples of existing – Munk course on Covid19, collaboration between Rotman, Political Science, Engineering, and Global health for collaborative specialization in Global Health
- Proactively and very intentionally integrate concepts across programs and curriculums
- Promote capstone projects including humanities
- Encourage graduate students from very different disciplines to take these multidisciplinary capstones (e.g. Urban Pilot Lab – School of Cities)
- A university-wide course on SDGs at the undergraduate level - devise platform that cuts across the university across three campuses
- Scale / replicate successful interdisciplinary models (e.g. Trinity, UTM at graduate, School of the Environment, Engineering, Daniels) and expand to do interdisciplinary work across divisions
- A student-focused sustainability conference that has students sharing their learning & research on sustainability across faculties & programs

Methods

- Encourage experiential learning with international course module – make funding more widely available for experiential learning
- Cross-disciplinary, vertical systems approach with high schools and elementary
- International collaboration & creativity in entrepreneurship – becoming aware of other institutions: global-cross-disciplinary teaching internationally
- Faculty meetings are an opportunity to educate and sensitize faculty to SDGs
- Create a well-funded institute for cross-cutting transdisciplinary research
- Promote large scale projects that can involve students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds
- Repository of internal specialists to support SDG integration into education
- Selection/design of a platform for online video seminars, both internal and public
- A first-year course to provide students with a high-level framework they can use to support their decision making with courses, majors/minors, certificates, career, and other personal ventures

- A “translational” course for each discipline, or as necessary, that would summarize the unique fundamentals of their field so that non-specialists can better engage with the material.

Research

- Build cross-departmental alliances to construct interdisciplinary research
- Experiential learning in the local community – they are eager contributors to the education system
- Teach research tools, analytics, and ethics, to all students to support interdisciplinary future - e.g. Data Science Institute will teach interdisciplinary courses on data science
- Need to invest into “physical spaces” (on the model of the School of the Environment or the School of Cities for example) dedicated to transdisciplinary research on sustainability and decarbonization, hubs or network of networks.
- Support / join Communities of Practice to connect academics and non-academics
- Catalyze evidence based knowledge around SDG-led transformations (e.g. “Cochrane Review” in health)

Methods

- Develop seed funding for interdisciplinary research
- Build genuine community relationships outside of the classroom
- Focus on training and supporting early career professionals
- Funding for assistant professors to mentor grad students
- Coordinate data access/other costs across multiple research projects with similar themes for economies of scale
- Research office could help partner academics focused on similar SDGs for grant opportunities
- Inventory of existing multi-sectoral research on SDGs is needed
- Matching tool to link researchers in different disciplines is needed
- Creating funds for community partners
- Value interdisciplinary work in tenure and promotion criteria
- Publish nascent work -find ways to connect with faculty already working in that area

Appendix 4: SDG @ U of T Advisory Committee (*titles to be added*)

Ayako Ariga, Secretariat & Project Manager, Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability

Professor Margaret Biggs, Matthews Fellow in Global Public Policy School of Policy Studies, Queen’s University; visiting Fellow at the Munk School in 2019-20. Former President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) from 2008-2013

Professor Shauna Brail, Associate Professor at the Institute for Management & Innovation, University of Toronto Mississauga

Gwen Burrows, Executive Director, International in the Office of the Vice President International

Professor Erica Di Ruggiero, Associate Professor in the Division of Social and Behaviour Health Science, and in the Institute of Health Policy Management and Evaluation in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Director of the Centre for Global Health

Professor Vivek Goel, (former) Vice President Research and Innovation

Helen Lathiotakis, Executive Director, Research and Strategic Initiatives, Office of the Vice President Research and Innovation

Professor Anita McGahan, University Professor, Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, and a Professor of Strategic Management at the Rotman School of Management

Simon Pratt, Director, Research Strategy and Excellence, Office of the Vice President Research and Innovation

Elisabeth Rees-Johnstone, Executive Director, Continuing and Professional Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies of Education (OISE)

Professor John Robinson, Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, and the School of the Environment, at the University of Toronto and Presidential Advisor on the Environment, Climate Change and Sustainability

Professor Joseph Wong, Vice President International and Professor of Political Science, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy