

Case Study

SDGs in the Bachelor of Design

There is a range of frameworks that can be used to explore sustainability in teaching and learning. The strengths of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) are that they incorporate a strong social equity element and are endorsed by 193 nations. While not perfect, the SDGs are the current global articulation of a shared understanding, an ‘emergent literacy’ of what sustainable development is, with targets and indicators providing guidance on how it can be achieved. The value of using the SDGs in curriculum includes: providing students with a contemporary lens with which to critique disciplines’ impacts on and potential to contribute to sustainability; building graduates’ awareness of the interconnection between people and environment; and building a sense of global citizenship. These factors all increase graduates’ employability and sustainability self-efficacy, giving students the confidence to make a meaningful contribution to sustainability in their careers.

Sustainability has been a mainstay of teaching in the [Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning \(ABP\)](#) for decades. The relatively recent development of the Bachelor of Design (B Des) provides a renewed opportunity to develop emerging professionals’ understanding of and expertise in sustainability as defined by the SDGs. The [Connected Cities Lab](#) looked at the current level of integration of the SDGs in the five undergraduate B Des majors delivered by the Faculty of Architecture – Building and Planning: Architecture; Construction; Landscape Architecture; Property and Urban Planning – using interviews with pathway coordinators and a survey of all 50 core subjects.

Results showed that, while the goals of the disciplines align with the SDGs, sustainability is covered extensively using other frameworks, with, understandably, *SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities* used most often. Most lecturers, but particularly pathway coordinators, see the value of deeper incorporation of SDGs into curricula as the ability to prepare students as global citizens and to work effectively internationally. Several ideas for ways that this might be achieved were gathered during the study. Using the SDGs to provide a global perspective on day-to-day and discipline-specific sustainability challenges that graduates will be expected to deal with is one. Exploring the ways that disciplines ought to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs is another. Aligning, comparing and contrasting the SDGs with discipline-specific theories and models is a third. One of the most challenging and rewarding will be to encourage students to use their newfound discipline-specific expertise to critique and to push past the shortcomings of the SDGs, and to contribute to evolving them into something even better. At the same time, issues that constrain deeper incorporation include a busy curriculum, some lecturers’ unfamiliarity with the SDGs – and on a few occasions – scepticism that using the SDGs, as compared to other sustainability frameworks, would add value.



Image

ABP students in the NExT Lab (top) and Baldwin Spencer Makerspace (bottom).

The work provides a valuable baseline understanding of the extent to which sustainability is currently integrated and consistent with the work of the Sustainability Fellows. It has also led to a number of recommendations that could be implemented in the future. One of these is to work with the Program Director of the B Des to develop a position statement that articulates an appropriate level of SDG integration into the B Des curriculum. Another is to develop ‘SDG Basics’ professional development material for B Des program and subject coordinators, covering the SDGs’ history, intent, strengths and limitations. A third is to develop and promote case studies of the ways the SDGs have been integrated into built environment curricula both at the University of Melbourne and other tertiary institutions. Finally, identifying subjects with content and coordinators that would be open to constructively aligning the SDGs into learning outcomes, teaching, and assessment would also be valuable.

