4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Moderation Team

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SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Event Description

On **June 21, 2021**, Queen's University hosted its first [17 Rooms](#) event, which brought together Queen's faculty, students, and staff to identify next steps for advancing the [UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)](#) at the university.

Participants were divided into 17 virtual rooms, one per SDG, and asked to identify actions **that Queen's University could take in the following 12 to 18 months to advance their specific goal.**

Rooms participants were also asked to identify:

- The most important issues related to their SDG that Queen's should address,
- Connections and common themes amongst these issues,
- How their SDG connects with reconciliation/conciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization,
- How their SDG connects with other SDGs.

Each room had two hours to brainstorm ideas before presenting their recommended actions to all participants. Following the event, each room's moderation team authored a summary report.

Room Participants

Aleksandra Bergier	Aria Goldin
Ben Bolden	Dennis Liao (Student Facilitator)
Amanda Bongers	Christian Lloyd
Rebecca Carnevale (Staff Facilitator)	Aida Mohammadi
Jennifer Davis	Lindsay Morcom (Moderator)
Koffi Felix Ekran	Mary Olmstead
Chandra Erickson	Matt Rahimian
Sandra den Otter	Dalena Vo
Sue Fostaty-Young	Lise Yeatman
Diana Gilchrist	

Proposed Actions

Room 4 brought together 19 individuals from across Queen's University to discuss approaches to addressing SDG 4. The group identified 3 areas for action.

Action 1: Explaining the Why

Description

Our group proposes to explain to students and educators at Queen's the importance and value of sustainable development and the SDGs.

In the short-term, this may be done through the revising of current curriculum to incorporate such concepts deliberately and specifically in the learning goals and content. Some existing courses may already include content related to these concepts; they should be identified, and the connection be made explicit to students between course content and the SDGs.

In the long-term, this may be done through the development of new courses that revolve entirely around the SDGs, which could potentially be mandatory for students. The university could also award SDG certificates or micro-credentials.

Educators should be made aware of the "why," so that they can more effectively incorporate SDG concepts when designing their lessons. This might be done through professional development and/or revising the faculty hiring process to incorporate understanding of SDGs as criteria for employment at Queen's. Faculty conducting research would also benefit from seeing their work placed in the greater context of contributing to the sustainable development of the world, as would staff engaging in advancement, operations, alumni, and community engagement.

Issue Summary

Currently many students and faculty do not understand the value and need for SDGs; by promoting the understanding of the SDGs widely, Queen's could foster more well-rounded students, faculty, and staff capable of, and willing to work towards, sustainable development to create positive change in the world.

Promoting the understanding of the "why" of SDGs will need to occur at both the faculty and student level. On the one hand, faculty that understand the "why" can better design their courses to promote understanding of the SDGs. Similarly, students can inform the faculty of what they value and what they would like to learn in courses.

Without an understanding of the purpose behind the SDGs it is difficult for the student body and faculty to engage in them in a meaningful way. Any mention of the SDGs without context or depth in the classroom or beyond becomes hollow and meaningless, quickly forgotten. Furthermore, without a sufficient understanding of the reasoning and purpose of the SDGs, students and faculty may view them as pointless distractions, instead of vital components of their work and learning.

Education on the benefits of the sustainability and equity principles promoted by the SDGs could also help win over those resistant to change.

Resources Required

- Funding to develop SDG courses for undergraduate and graduate students.

- Funding to develop and offer training for faculty and staff on the SDGs, which includes the "why."

- Resources for a campus-wide marketing campaign promoting the "why" of the SDGs.

Progress in 12 – 18 Months

- A review of all existing courses at Queen's, identifying those with existing connections with or content on SDG principles and revising them to make a more explicit connection.

- Begin working to develop SDG-specific courses.

- Develop and implement a campus-wide marketing campaign.

- Develop training for faculty and staff on the SDGs and how they relate to the work they are doing.

Action 2: Revising Assessment

Description

Our group proposes that the purpose of assessment be thoroughly reviewed.

Currently, **assessment reflects the ability of students to perform according to a limited number of assessment approaches** and methods of learning. Assessment has become a tool for creating academic hierarchies by comparing students against one another, which is highly problematic. We believe assessment

should reflect the students' ability to develop skills, approach problems creatively, and grow as individual learners. It should be reflective of diverse cultural ways of teaching and learning, and it should also encourage students to think critically and take academic risks, as this will inspire innovation, love of learning, and a more skilled and engaged student body.

This may entail a **revamping of university-wide grade reporting systems** and the hierarchies produced by these existing systems. The university could form committees and working groups to devise evidence-based approaches to education by which students can be assessed in a way that better reflects their growth while also encouraging diverse methods of assessment, with the "traditional" method of writing exams and papers not being the sole option.

This decolonized, whole-learner approach can be expanded to broaden assessment approaches to graduate work and research.

Issue Summary

Assessment at Queen's is currently inadequate at measuring student learning. It often does not encourage students to become well-rounded, holistic professionals. There is too great of an emphasis on attaining high grades, which often discourages risk taking and creativity, while encouraging dogmatic, unthinking memorization and conformity in tasks and opinions. Those with middling or low grades suffer from a grading system that may not accurately reflect their true learning while also discouraging them from expressing themselves or deviating from "traditional" or non-Western modes of learning. Even those with higher grades may suffer from mental health challenges due to the pressure of a comparative, hierarchical grading system. In all cases, students may become too risk averse to meaningfully tackle the global challenges indicated by the SDGs.

Current assessment undermines quality education as it fails to recognize the differences in learning styles and the different starting points that every student comes from. A student may learn a tremendous amount throughout a course and yet still have lower grades than someone who learned very little, because of differences in where the two students started.

Instead of narrow-minded individuals who are trained to conform to certain ways of teaching, learning, and expressing, Queen's should aim to produce holistic individuals who can produce positive change in the world by being willing to take risks and demonstrate the flexibility that is required in the "real world."

This issue is related to the proposed action of explaining the "why" of sustainable development to students. Assessment is a powerful incentive for students, often directing the learning that they choose to engage in. Assessment could be designed to promote and reward learning and understanding of the SDGs, such as by incorporating assessments designed to gauge student growth in their understanding of the SDGs.

More importantly, by assessing in a way that encourages creative thought, risk-taking, mental flexibility, and personal growth, we will be helping to develop a workforce that has the tools to take on the very significant challenges indicated by the SDGs.

In short, a new approach to assessment would facilitate hard skills development in terms of knowledge, understanding, and action regarding the SDGs, as well as the soft skills required to contribute to improvement on large global issues.

Resources Required

- Support for research on the ways of assessing that reflect cultural diversity, universal design, and development of soft skills such as creative thought, risk-taking, critical thinking, and flexibility.

- Dedicated staff and faculty time to engage in a university-wide review of assessment practices and to make recommendations on new ways of assessing.

- Resources and professional development for faculty to rethink their approaches to assessment and incorporate non-Western and decolonized assessment approaches into their teaching practice.

Progress in 12 – 18 Months

- Establish a working-group to carry out an environmental scan and set of initial recommendations.

- Research novel and intercultural assessment practices.

- Begin developing professional development opportunities on assessment.

Action 3: Promoting a Decolonized, Interdisciplinary Education

Description

Our group proposes the promotion of interdisciplinary education at Queen's to develop decolonized students who are holistic and better equipped for a world that demands interdisciplinary skills.

While there are practical reasons for limiting enrollment in certain courses to students of specific programs, efforts could be made to reduce these enrollment restrictions so that students are freer to explore their interests and be exposed to other disciplines.

In the long-term, **Queen's University could develop specific courses** that seek to include students from a diverse range of fields. The subject of these courses could potentially be the SDGs, which would relate to proposed action #1. Not only would this provide an opportunity to explain the "why" of the SDGs to our student population, it would also provide a common theme for students of diverse disciplines to relate to and engage with each other.

In terms of research, while we have seen an improvement in interdisciplinary research in recent years, we also recognize that the problem of academic silos persists; this is evident in the curriculum, pedagogy, composition, and even the architecture of the university. Therefore, Queen's must also examine ways to encourage interdisciplinary research that addresses the SDGs through a dedicated research fund open to all faculty. This includes facilitating interaction between researchers in various fields, as well as facilitating access to funding across the Tri-Council, within the university, and from other sources that is specifically aimed at supporting interdisciplinary research.

We also see the need for interdisciplinary, intercultural, decolonized teaching and research that engages place-based and land-based ways of knowing and learning. Indigenous knowledge cannot be adequately included without an understanding of connection to place and land; failing to acknowledge this contributes to pan-Indigenization and tokenization, and it also robs students and faculty of the important opportunity to create relationships to land, which is vital for truly understanding many of the SDGs.

Issue Summary

Dividing knowledge and education into rigid disciplines is a highly Westernized view of education. Quality, progressive education that meets the

demands of the SDGs will involve decolonizing education by encouraging students and faculty to understand and embrace the interconnectedness of the various disciplines beyond the currently narrow scope of their programs.

A decolonized education model goes beyond just intrasubject connectedness to also including knowledges from other cultures and contexts. Queen's currently employs a very western-centric model of education, which we need to recognize as only one of many models for quality education. Queen's needs to truly bring in alternative worldviews and resources from non-western cultures, including Indigenous cultures. To truly embrace the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), knowledges from other global and Indigenous cultures must be made a consistent and meaningful part of the curriculum here at Queen's. Often, non-western sources and viewpoints, including Indigenous ones, are mentioned for the sake of "checking off boxes" or as a novelty. In doing so we are also teaching a hidden curriculum to students, who may assume that non-western sources are less valuable, as we do not emphasize them. We see that decolonized education necessarily involves connection to place, and we believe that a holistic, decolonized model of education requires the integration of not only cross-curricular knowledge, but knowledge that is based in, and shared on, the land.

In the world beyond the classroom, our alumni will need to understand their colleagues educated in different disciplines and be able to work with them to address the objectives in the SDGs. They must also have the cultural competency to think beyond their own cultures' ways of knowing, understanding, doing, and honouring. Currently, our students and faculty have limited opportunities to develop interdisciplinary skills, being constantly confined to their own silos of education. There has been improvement here in recent years, such as the creation of the [Wicked Ideas Competition](#) and support for undertaking such as the [New Frontiers in Research Fund](#). By expanding these opportunities and striving to create new opportunities, we have tremendous potential to be a leader in interdisciplinary research and demonstrate the benefits that come from creative, multi-disciplinary problem-solving.

Resources Required

- Funding and support for an interdisciplinary teaching and research centre focused on achieving the SDGs which engages Queen's in local, regional, national and international projects;

- Additional funding and support for decolonizing education by meaningfully engaging anti-colonial and Indigenous knowledges, particularly land-based and place-based learning;

- Formal and informal opportunities for researchers in diverse faculties to come together to develop relationships and take on research challenges; and

- Increased support for interdisciplinary research through funding, such as expansion of the Wicked Ideas competition so more projects receive resources, and more encouragement of inter-disciplinary funding through the Tri-Councils and other funding agencies.

Progress in 12 – 18 Months

- Establish a pan-university working group with researchers, educators, staff, students, and community partners to develop the initial mission, vision and structure of an interdisciplinary teaching and research centre.

- Increase support and funding for work research and teaching on decolonizing education.

- Begin planning formal and informal opportunities to create interdisciplinary relationships.

- Increase support for land-based learning, including learning at Elbow Lake Environmental Education Centre (ELEEC) and outdoor learning on-campus.

- Expand interdisciplinary funding opportunities and initial engagement with Tri-Council and other funding bodies.

Additional Actions: Enhance Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Universal Design for Learning

Accessibility and inclusivity of education remains an issue for quality education at Queen's and a prerequisite for any of the proposed actions. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this.

On one hand, there is tremendous potential for technology to bridge accessibility gaps. Some students were unable to benefit from the preeminent pre-pandemic content delivery method of on-campus lectures and assessments. Technology has enabled us to meet the needs of students around the world, and to

meet the needs of students who struggle with in-person lectures for a variety of reasons, including visible and invisible disabilities, location, and family circumstances, to name a few.

At the same time, technology-enabled learning has also created barriers. With respect to decolonizing education, land- and placed-based knowledge is crucial to meaningfully, accurately, and authentically engaging Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies, many of which are extremely difficult to share online. Connection to land and place is also vital to fully understanding the SDGs, our responsibilities to the land on which we live, and sustainable futures more generally. Technology-enabled learning, while benefitting some learners and improving access for students with some disabilities, circumstances, and learning preferences, also presents obstacles for others. For example, students with certain disabilities struggle with online learning, and students living in poverty or in remote locations struggle with access to adequate internet connections and devices.

Accessibility also means making our campuses more inclusive. Exclusion still presents a serious issue at Queen's, through student, staff and faculty attitudes, a lack of welcoming spaces on campus, and a lack of diverse content and pedagogies in our courses. Work needs to be done to change exclusive attitudes in our current community while also providing students of all backgrounds safe spaces where they feel comfortable, and access to knowledge that is reflective of their own cultures' intellectual traditions and ways of teaching and learning. There also needs to be much work done to ensure students, staff, and faculty have a better understanding of disability, universal design for learning, and the impacts of class and poverty on access to quality education.