



Green Gown Awards  
Australasia

Student Engagement

2020 Case Study



## Students Doing Good: The Sustainable Development Goals Challenge

The Sustainability Challenge was designed to raise SDG awareness/literacy among students; to start conversations about activating, engaging with and enabling the SDGs on campus; and to identify key focus areas for operationalising and integrating the SDGs into the University's core business as we enter the UN's 'Decade of Action'.

A working group, comprised of senior academics, operational staff and student representatives, selected 6 SDGs as Challenge themes:

**SDG 5:** Gender Equality

**SDG 6:** Clean Water and Sanitation

**SDG 7:** Affordable and Clean Energy

**SDG 12:** Responsible Consumption and Production

**SDG 13:** Climate Action

**SDG 15:** Life on Land

These were selected due to their relationship with Murdoch's Research Areas of Strength, our participation in the Athena SWAN programme, and relevance to known problematic operational areas.

An introductory session was held a few days before the Challenge weekend. Participants learnt the relevance of the SDGs to Murdoch University as well as their careers, the basics

of giving a pitch, and were introduced to the Challenges' team of volunteer mentors, industry sponsors and facilitators. Students chose which SDG they wanted to work with and were introduced to that SDG's problem statement. Teams of three were formed, and all enjoyed a networking evening with their collaborators. Fifteen students participated in the two-day Challenge.

**Day 1** delivered workshops in design thinking and behaviour change, followed by an extended period for teams to ideate around their problem statements and innovate their solutions.

Mentors with extensive industry experience in areas such as cleaner production, recycling and waste management, biodiversity protection, and green supply chains were available for the duration, so teams could bounce ideas around with them.

**Day 2** consisted of a workshop on social marketing for sustainability and a review of the judging criteria and polishing their presentations. Teams then had 10 minutes to pitch their solution to the judging panel, followed by 5 minutes of questions.

A total of five projects were presented and assessed; three are now being actively driven forward by the students. Students reported very favourably on the event and the opportunities for deeper engagement in sustainability, as well as the hands-on project leadership skills they're developing as they grow their ideas into actual projects. Benefits from implementing these projects for Murdoch University are detailed below, and include potential for carbon reduction, cleaner waste

and recycling streams, reduced operating costs and improved retention of domestic and international students.

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## Environmental & Social Benefits

The Challenge combined theory and practice, delivering applied results with benefits to participants and the wider university community. It contributed to community wellbeing by providing the opportunity for students to ideate and contribute to meaningful change through collaborative problem-solving and responding to the SDGs at Murdoch. Engagement with industry mentors and design thinking methodology helped students acquire skill sets beyond university learning, experienced cross-disciplinary exposure, developed their capabilities as problem-solvers and raised their understanding of the external world. In this sense, the event was also transformative, for it delivered student engagement as well as student ownership of solutions arising from the event.

### Operational Benefits

The Challenge closed the gap between students and the Property, Development and Commercial Services Office, who is facilitating implementation of the three projects arising from the Challenge. The top-down and bottom-up nature of the collaboration represents a first for this type and level of stakeholder engagement for MU. For example, the winning team, 'Close the Loop on FOGO', tackled SDG 12 with an innovative smart bin system which rewarded students for correctly disposing their rubbish and diverting food waste from landfill, significantly reducing CO2 emissions and promoting a transparent circular economy. The team is now working with the PDCSO and various academics to verify the feasibility of the initiative, develop the Business Case, and take it into the next stage of implementation.

### Educational Benefits

Students learned about issues and solutions to problems outside their study discipline, learnt and applied hard and soft skills in project management and budgeting, leadership, planning, teamwork, and creative and engaging presentation and influencing, and stepped 'behind the scenes' of campus operations to gain new perspective on the challenges of driving sustainable change in a large organization. They considered real-life opportunities, risks, constraints and benefits/disbenefits; this learning primes them for the agile thinking required in their professional lives and readied them to consider available resources and capabilities when addressing problems and finding solutions.

## Leadership & Engagement

The Sustainability Challenge embodied the saying ‘think globally and act locally.’ It was unique in the sense that it enabled students to create innovative and collaborative responses to wicked problems, and to define themselves as empowered change agents. The Challenge provided an opportunity to apply both disciplinary and trans-disciplinary knowledge and transferable skills in tackling the challenges of the SDGs. Though deep engagement with University operational and academic staff, industry mentors and design thinking experts, students developed their capabilities as problem-solvers and enhanced their understanding of the external world in the context of the SDGs.

## Wider Societal Impact

The UN SDG agenda covers a wide range of interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges and addressing them will require change in how societies and economies function and interact with our planet. The unique functions of universities in education, research, innovation and leadership are critical in overcoming these challenges and universities are the logical champions of sustainable development in their own sphere of influence to play a leading role in the integration of SDGs.

The Sustainability Challenge format can be adapted by other universities and indeed any educational institution, who want to engage students with the SDGs, providing “top-down’ leadership whilst facilitating ‘bottom-up’ grassroots engagement to achieve maximum understanding and buy-in. By expanding the 2020 event to include three other universities, Murdoch University is leading the sector in initiating and facilitating local, national and international responses to the SDGs.

Motivating students to engage with the SDGs, as well as sustainable practices more generally is key to mobilizing action on significant global issues. The event provided a safe space for students who had limited awareness of the SDGs to learn about sustainability from their peers and experienced industry representatives, in a fun and engaging manner. Our exit survey showed that 14 out of 15 participants felt more likely to participate in sustainability initiatives on campus and their personal/professional life. This feedback also indicated their participation gave them a voice for shaping their future as well as reinvesting in, and connecting to, the campus. When students feel valued, they form a strong connection to place, enhancing the likelihood they will continue/return for postgraduate study, become active Alumni members, and become engaged citizens. This sense of connectedness has added significance when considering the isolating impact of Covid-19.

## Top 3 Learnings

Improve range and depth of industry engagement, including sponsorship and mentoring, especially industry mentors available for ideation and problem-solving stages

Develop creative outreach tools specific to target audience, using student influencers/ champions, extensive social media outreach, etc. for promotion and ‘buzz’ around engagement

Timing is everything- schedule the event during quieter times of the academic year and embed the SDGs into students’ lives months ahead of it