

Are the Sustainable Development Goals Transforming Universities?

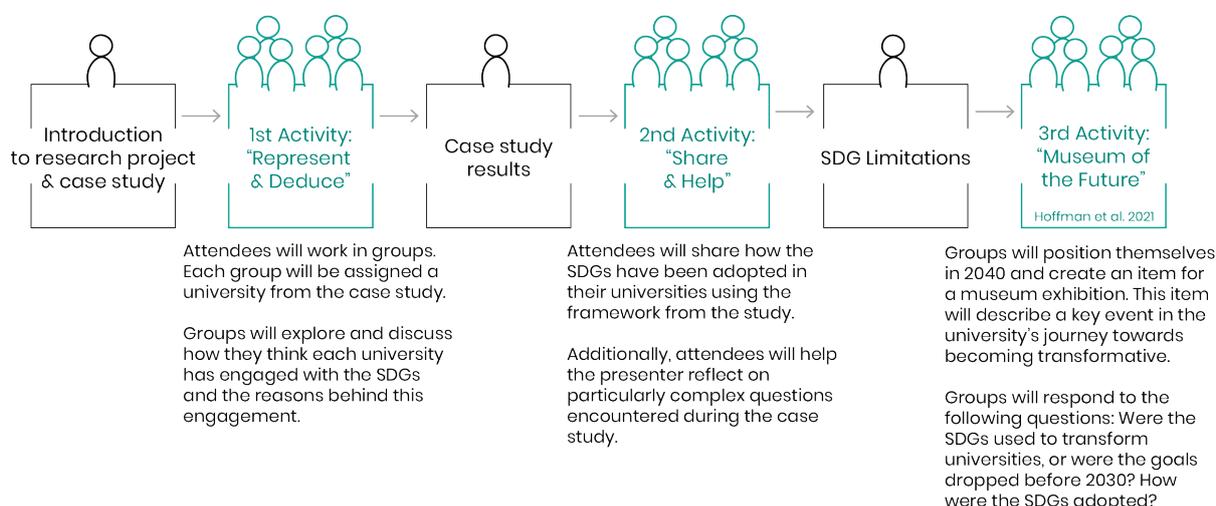
Universities play a critical role in creating just and sustainable futures and achieving the SDGs. Apart from their key role in contributing to the goals, it is argued that universities should also understand the SDGs as a governance framework enabling whole-institution transformations (Leal Filho et al. 2021). However, there are questions whether the SDGs are enabling these types of transformations within universities.

This study aims to understand the extent to which the SDGs influence change within universities. Specifically, it answers the questions: What type of steering effects are brought about by universities' engagement with the SDGs? What is the level of SDG-embeddedness in universities?

This research project answers those questions through a multiple-case study of four universities in Australia and Mexico. The study consists of semi-structured interviews (n= 60) in the four universities with different stakeholder groups. To analyse these interviews and a series of strategic documents, we are combining Ordóñez-Llanos and Raven's (forthcoming) SDG-steering effects framework with Sterling's (2013) levels of sustainability change. Whilst the first framework aims to identify discursive, institutional, relational, and resource effects of SDG engagement, the second framework distinguishes between accommodative, reformative, and transformative changes within universities.

The case study is in progress, with an estimated completion date of April 2022. Preliminary results of our case comparison reveal that discursive effects are the most common, hinting at transformative change – where universities are supposed to engage with the SDGs to question and rethink their paradigms and purposes deeply. However, institutional, relational, and resource effects that would support these more profound transformations are rare.

Finally, attendees will be involved throughout the presentation. They will be particularly active in three instances (see Figure). These activities are designed to distribute participation equally between the presenter and the attendees. Whilst one activity is designed to help the audience deeply engage in the case study, others are designed to help the presenter with their current research, tapping into the attendee's experience and expertise.



References

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