

Assessing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals at the University of Southern Queensland Library

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I. Introduction

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a shared blueprint for peace, prosperity, people and the planet.¹ It identifies 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to drive global action at the local level. While the SDGs are not legally binding, extensive global support and local appeal for action means they will be a major influencer on governments, businesses and organisations for the remainder of the decade.² The 2030 agenda remains relevant in the wake of the impact of COVID-19 as international and local communities face the challenge of recovering economically, socially and inclusively from the pandemic. This paper discusses one Australian university library's work in mapping engagement with the SDGs.

II. Background: The Sustainable Development Goals and assessment strategies

While the SDGs agenda and academic library assessment might be considered separate areas of interest and reporting, the continuing relevance and increasing prominence of the SDGs among funding bodies and stakeholders provides a driver for incorporating the SDGs into library assessment frameworks. The SDGs provide a framework for measuring social justice metrics within academic libraries, examining local activities through a global lens. The mission of university libraries, to support student learning and success, and excellence in research, has embedded within it a commitment to issues of equity, inclusion and social justice. Universities are critical players in the achievement of the SDGs through the provision of education, research and collaboration, and that the goals provide a framework through which universities can demonstrate their impact.³ Building capacity and ownership for the SDGs in a university requires support, collaboration and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including students and engagement teams, such as academic libraries, who can help develop, deliver and champion the SDGs.⁴ A reasonable share of the SDGs targets refers to the importance of information and, in doing so, underlines the importance of the services libraries provide.⁵ Academic libraries can play an essential role in addressing and advancing the UN 2030 global sustainability challenges as they strengthen the impact of education, research and disseminate knowledge to power the world.⁶ Support and advocacy for open access to information and research is one example of the role academic libraries can play in the successful attainment of the SDGs.⁷

The SDGs can be a valuable addition to the library assessment toolkit, used alone or in conjunction with other international, national, industry or organisation indicators to demonstrate value and impact of a library. To integrate sustainability into everyday library business, the SDGs provide a framework against which libraries can benchmark and identify opportunities and stretch targets. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, which contributed to the development of the goals, recommends a combination of metrics and narrative stories to report progress against the goals.⁸ The emphasis on narrative tools that value anecdotal evidence for impact assessment is a distinguishing feature of how researchers and libraries have endeavored to identify their contributions to the goals.⁹

Researchers and practitioners have proposed varying approaches to measuring work towards the SDGs at the national and organisational level. The variety of assessment processes is one reason that the goals are difficult to apply and report on in libraries in general, and in the academic library context in particular.¹⁰

Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia/Pacific suggest five steps to start and deepen universities' engagement with the SDGs which may also apply to academic libraries:

1. Mapping what they are already doing
2. Building internal capacity and ownership of the SDGs
3. Identifying priorities, opportunities and gaps
4. Integrating, implementing and embedding the SDGs within university strategies, policies and plans
5. Monitoring, evaluating and communicating their actions on the SDGs¹¹

While academic libraries and associations are beginning to map existing activities to the SDGs, there are currently no assessment frameworks developed for the academic library sector. In the public library sector, Ochôa and Pinto have developed a library assessment model for public libraries.¹² Their model suggests that information and data demonstrate a library's contribution to sustainable development when it is used:

- To determine achievement towards a goal,
- To show how initiatives align with a goal, or
- To understand the impact on stakeholders.

Evidence can be gathered and validated at five levels from description, positive alignment, demonstrated causation, confirmation by independent evaluation, and, at the highest level, recognition by national and international entities.¹³ While designed and tested with public libraries, this framework provides a model that could be adapted and applied in academic libraries.

The main types of approaches to mapping described in the literature are desktop assessment, self-identification and keyword searches.¹⁴ While information and data become evidence when used to demonstrate a library's contributions to sustainable development, causation may be difficult to prove when determining goal achievements, showing the alignment of initiatives or demonstrating the impact on stakeholders.¹⁵ As such, adopting a mapping approach, rather than a measurement or assessment process, to projects and activities is an easier first step to working with the SDGs in academic libraries.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals are measures that academic libraries can use to that can demonstrate impact within their communities. A limited number of frameworks to measure the application of the SDGs have been developed for universities and public libraries, with none yet developed specifically for academic libraries. By adapting or using elements from the frameworks from these related sectors, academic libraries may be able to incorporate the SDGs into their planning, assessment or performance measurement targets and reporting.

III. Case study

University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a multi-campus, regional university in southeast Queensland, Australia, with more than 27,000 undergraduate students. The profile of USQ students is largely mature-aged, studying online and part-time. USQ has a history of addressing equity as a provider of distance education for more than 40 years and as the largest provider of higher education into correctional centres in Australia, working with correctional institutions to provide online-like study experiences to students without requiring connection to the internet.¹⁶

USQ Library supports the learning and teaching and research outcomes of USQ students and staff. USQ Library provides access to information resources, digital fluency, and academic study skills across three campus libraries and via virtual channels. USQ Library was the first academic library in the southern hemisphere to join the Open Textbook Network, an alliance of higher education institutions working to improve access, affordability and academic success using open textbooks. In 2019, USQ Library staff stepped through an exercise to understand how our day-to-day work and annual planning targets mapped to the SDGs. The activity was undertaken as a proof of concept to determine if it was possible to map the library's activities to the SDGs to establish a baseline. Staff conducted desktop assessments and self-identification, gathering evidence through inference and observation to provide a clear description of library projects and activities, and their importance to the SDGs.¹⁷ The process was led by the Coordinator, Evidence-Based Practice, who facilitated conversations with the 12 members of the Library Leadership Team. The conversations helped to map existing business as usual activities, project outcomes and annual performance targets that related to the goals. Mapping was conducted at the macro-level, focusing on the 17 goals, not the 169 targets. The mapping work was peer reviewed and draft metrics were identified as possible sources of impact evidence. The activity began in April 2019, with a progress update circulated for feedback in June. Reporting concluded in December 2019.

IV. Findings

USQ Library staff found that existing services, collections, and projects correlated to eight of the 17 SDGs. Core business activities and annual stretch targets were mapped to these eight goals. The eight goals were:

- Goal 1: No Poverty
- Goal 3: Good health and wellbeing
- Goal 4: Quality Education
- Goal 5: Gender equality
- Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth
- Goal 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Goal 10: Reduced inequalities
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals

As an exercise, the high-level mapping activity and reporting was an educative and awareness raising opportunity, initially focused only on library staff. The activity introduced staff to the SDGs' relevance to the university and academic library contexts. The mapping exercise provided an opportunity to explore and understand how our day-to-day work and projects contribute to the SDGs. The activity was a practical application of evidence-based practice, whereby numerous staff could begin to measure and self- and peer-assess their work against an existing framework. The 2019 mapping exercise did not extend to gathering data against the metrics due to time constraints. The applicability of quantitative metrics is yet to be determined for the local USQ Library context.

The results of the mapping exercise were reported in formal and informal ways. A formal report was shared with the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) and the Vice-Chancellor's Executive leadership team. Consideration was also given to developing a meaningful way to share the results with the wider university community as well as other interested members of the library and higher education sectors. Staff experimented with Microsoft Sway as an online presentation tool. The tool encouraged staff to write short case studies that demonstrated the alignment of library activities with the SDGs. Figures 1 and 2 show excerpts from the Microsoft Sway report. This intentional, reflective practice approach applied the recommendations of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions by using narrative stories, to report on progress towards the goals, as well as quantitative metrics.¹⁸ By telling stories of projects and activities aligned with the SDGs, the informal Sway report served to communicate

the broad reach of USQ Library’s leadership and partnership across the university, connecting the SDGs to the student learning journey and the experiences of researchers.

Figure IV-1. Screenshot from Microsoft Sway report— Goal 3¹⁹

Ways in which USQ Library is contributing to good health and well-being



Figure IV-2. Screenshot from Microsoft Sway report— Goal 8²⁰

Ways in which USQ Library is contributing to decent work and economic growth



V. Discussion

The SDGs provide an opportunity for libraries to demonstrate their positive influence, value and impact on their communities. However, as Mori Jr, Fien and Horne argue, implementing and reporting on the goals should not be a checklist exercise.²¹ The effect of undertaking this first mapping exercise led to ongoing conversations and an annual review of USQ Library’s activities and goals that positions the SDGs as a key external driver for future stretch targets, policies and practices. In conducting the mapping

exercise, USQ Library teams and staff identified how they are working towards some of these wider community and global concerns. Staff and stakeholders have subsequently engaged in conversations about the challenges of sustainability. The formal and informal reporting strategies demonstrated that the SDGs can be used as an assessment framework to provide evidence of the ways in which libraries demonstrate positive impact. By considering and evaluating the library's business against the 17 goals, a shared commitment to sustainability has developed among the library's leaders and team members.

It can be challenging to map information about SDGs activities in libraries, particularly as many academic library services and projects straddle more than one goal.²² As a proof of concept exercise, USQ Library's results demonstrated that it is possible to map the library's core business, project outcomes and annual stretch performance targets to some of the 17 macro goals. Evaluating the impact or success of the library's activities against the goals proved more difficult. Possible indicators were identified for some of the goals, such as employment diversity indicators, open access research publications and attendance at learning and study support events. Identifying quantitative and qualitative evidence to support the mapping required more staff effort and time than was possible during the pilot period. It is yet to be proven whether the proposed indicators can provide value of the academic library's impact against the goals, and in doing so underline the importance of the services the library provides to the university community.

As well as increasing organizational awareness of the SDGs, the mapping exercise resonated personally with USQ Library staff members. Staff developed a general understanding of sustainable development and the SDGs, including how their profession, skills and knowledge can contribute to the goals. The mapping process generated discussion around the values and purpose of the university and the library, and how they aligned with the SDGs. This prompted some library staff to consider how the work they do relates to their personal values and contributes positively towards global sustainability. The opportunity for personal reflection enabled staff to make connections with those SDGs that are meaningful for them. Creating a connection between the SDGs and workplace tasks can give staff a stronger sense of motivation and purpose alongside personal responsibility and willingness to act.

USQ Library has completed two of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia/Pacific's five steps to engage with the SDGs:²³

- Mapping existing activities—from business-as-usual tasks to annual strategic and operational goals
- Building internal capacity and ownership of the SDGs—by engaging staff at different levels across the library to identify their individual contribution to the goals

Next steps will include monitoring and evaluating progress from the 2019 baseline evidence to determine if progress is being made towards the SDGs at USQ Library. As an assessment tool, the SDG framework positions the academic library in a broader context, demonstrating value and impact to the university, local and global communities. The goals are a useful tool by which academic libraries can explore how the work they do impacts their clients, their communities, the world, and themselves.

VI. Future opportunities

As library staff reflected on the mapping exercise and reviewed the work conducted, the authors have identified five levels in which academic libraries can consider engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals.

- Personal experience—through the mapping and peer review exercises, library staff and stakeholders connected their individual values and work to the 17 goals and deepened their understanding of and commitment to sustainability.
- Within the library—the goals provide a tool to measure impact, engage in advocacy and develop new reporting strategies about the library’s activities and projects.
- Within the university—the academic library has an opportunity to raise awareness of the SDGs, and to promote and advocate for sustainable development at the university planning and reporting level.
- Within the library industry and at the national level—the development of national benchmarks and academic library assessment frameworks that include the goals are identified gaps. Addressing these gaps will make mapping and measuring the goals within academic libraries easier and more achievable.
- Globally—academic libraries can contribute to existing international reporting strategies, such as the Library Map of the World.²⁴

The effect of undertaking this first mapping exercise has led to ongoing conversations and an annual review of USQ Library’s activities against the goals. The SDGs are considered a key external driver for the library’s future stretch targets, policies and practices. A second mapping exercise was undertaken in 2020, and in 2021 focus will shift to identifying gaps in services and evaluating progress against the eight goals that are relevant to the library’s work.

VII. Conclusion

The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an opportunity for academic libraries to assess, demonstrate and communicate their contribution to quality education, reducing inequalities, supporting innovation and economic growth, and building communities. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a remarkable and unique common platform in which civil society, governments and organisations, such as libraries, can contribute to solving the world’s biggest sustainable development challenges.²⁵ As traditional assumptions about libraries, including those in the academic sector, are being re-questioned or reshuffled in the post-COVID-19 era,²⁶ the SDGs remain relevant as a way for libraries to demonstrate their value, impact and relevance to the communities they serve. USQ Library is exploring and understanding how activities and projects make meaningful contributions towards the priorities identified in the SDGs. A strong academic library culture is one where sustainable development is embedded in everyday operations.²⁷

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Endnotes

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