

# **A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF USING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AS A FRAMEWORK TO ASSESS UNIVERSITIES SUSTAINABILITY: MAIN FINDINGS**

## **ABSTRACT**

Universities have become increasingly involved in sustainable development processes over recent years, which is coupled with a rise in sustainability reporting efforts. Sustainability assessments are important for guiding university actions, and for benchmarking progress against other institutions. However, literature shows that there is an absence of a framework that can holistically assess university sustainable development progress across all core university areas: operations, education, research, and community outreach. Recently, some universities have started to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a method to assess sustainability across different university areas. However, there is a lack of literature supporting the implementation of a SDGs framework. Therefore, this dissertation will use qualitative methods to investigate how a SDGs framework can be used to assess universities sustainability, using the University of Bristol as a case study.

The results of this investigation find that SDGs framework methodology is still in its infancy, and a universal framework has not yet been created. This research finds several universal characteristics in the data and resources that are required from universities to engage with the SDGs. Research shows the SDGs could provide an innovative way to assess sustainability and create multiple benefits for universities. A SDGs framework could provide a mapping resource, a gap-analysis tool, and could be used for communication and education purposes. Looking at Bristol specifically this research highlights several underlying characteristics and resources that support Bristol University in engaging with a proposed SDGs framework, as well findings several barriers. This dissertation goes on to suggest recommendations for university strategy that support the engagement with the SDGs, both for Bristol University specifically, as well as for a wider university context.

## KEY FINDINGS

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATION REVIEW

- Universities operate across 4 main areas; campus operations, education, research, and community outreach.
- Universities are increasingly engaging with sustainability and sustainability reporting.
- Currently universities do well in environmental and operational sustainability reporting. However, lack a holistic university sustainability reporting tool to assess all aspects of sustainable development (SD), and across all university core areas.
- Some universities are starting to use the SDGs as a framework for assessing sustainability.
- This section details the methodology used to collect and analyse data in this dissertation. Due to the complexity of the topic, a mixture of primary and secondary qualitative methods was employed to collate the data needed to answer the research question. This investigation used a case study comparison, a document review and semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions.
- The case studies that will be analysed from this data source are Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Macquarie University, University of Technology Sydney and Victoria University of Wellington (SDSN 2016) and UWE.
- To refine the aims and objectives of this investigation, three research questions (RQ) have been created, which will be investigated in the dissertation:

**RQ 1:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the SDGs as a framework for assessing sustainability within a university context?

**RQ 2:** What are the possible methods, resources, and data that are needed to support the use of a SDGs framework for assessing universities sustainability?

**RQ 3:** Are the SDGs an appropriate method to be applied to University of Bristol to assess their sustainability?

## RESULTS: UNIVERSITY LEVEL

- Based on case study analysis found that a SDGs focussed frameworks are becoming increasingly common with universities
- No universal methodology currently in place
- Methodologies need to be university specific
- The main sustainability indicators used are; Self-identification (of researchers to sustainability topics), Keywords searches; Holistic review of content based on aims, objective, and vision.
- The framework can be used for;
  - **Gap-analysis:** Highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of universities are against the SDGs
  - **Alignment:** To align university actions with international strategy
  - **Communication and Education:** Provides a universal language and simple way to communicate and engage with the multiple stakeholders that universities have.
- The main **limitations** for this dissertation is that all frameworks are resource
  - Intensive in time and human resource.
    - Lack specific quantifiable measurements e.g. Carbon emissions

## UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL RESULTS

- The second strand of this dissertation explores Bristol University's capacity for engaging with the SDGs. To assess if the University of Bristol's resources are appropriate for a SDGs framework a matrix has been created, which maps SDGs framework requirements against data available in Bristol's core areas (Table 1). The resources required are based on findings from the previous research questions, whilst the SSG interview results provide information on resources available at Bristol.

**Table 1.** Bristol University’s data mapped against the requirements needed for a SDG framework.

Requirement for Bristol to engage with a SDG framework	Operations and strategy	Education	Research
Detailed account of actions within area			☑
Indicators to use for SDG basis			☑
<b>Communication Platform</b>			
Human resources			
Key word list	☑	☑	☑
Self-identification with SDGs	☑	☑	☑
<b>Subgroups of main area</b>			
Clear aims and goals			

**Key**

	Data readily available
	Data not available
☑	Data could be made available

- The table shows that Bristol has the resources required to engage with a SDGs framework across multiple core areas. All university areas have platforms to communicate actions from the sustainability assessment, and the crosscutting SSG provides necessary human resources.
- Research highlights that Bristol University report on lots of different types of data. However, based on the finding in RQ2, much of this data cannot be used directly to map the SDGs, although many of these resources are a good basis for measuring data and for providing information. For example, Bristol University collected data on sustainability content in formal educational units, which could provide a good data basis. Furthermore, Bristol has data sources to support a methodology based on sub-grouping, similar to that of UWE.
- However, Bristol does not have lists of keywords, nor have conducted a self-identification process that RQ2 found to be important to multiple methodologies. Therefore, Bristol would benefit from extra indicators to map actions against SDGs (Table 1).
- Furthermore, the SSG interviews highlighted that the variability in the quality of data for the different departments.

- Bristol engages with some high-level data monitoring, particularly within environmental operational impacts and ESD work. However the university's research needs work to create indicators to map against SDGs.
- A further key finding highlighted from the research is the absence of data collected about partnerships and community from Bristol University. Cortese argues that this is the fourth key area and it should be integrated into Bristol's data collection process. The importance of this finding is supported by the interview with Longhurst, who states that partnerships are the next area that the HEI is next going to map against the SDGs.
- Bristol University has further traits that are supportive of a SDGs framework. Firstly, based on the interview findings and the document analysis we can see that Bristol University aims to achieve sustainability goals through collaborative efforts across different core areas. The holistic approach taken by the SSG is a strong foundation for the introduction of a SDGs framework, which similarly encourages collaboration. Collaboration is a key-supporting element in this framework, which requires work across different departments and collaborative data collection.
- On the other hand, there are areas that Bristol could make changes to support a SDGs framework. Bristol University places emphasis on environmental sustainability assessment, which is similar to other university strategies. A more balanced approach would support the holistic data collect process required from this framework. In comparison, UWE's sustainability document is focused evenly on all sustainable development aspect, which has proved to be supportive of a SDGs approach (UWE 2013).
- Engaging with this framework would bring benefits to Bristol for several reasons
  - Currently struggles to engage wider staff in SD processes and this framework is good for communication and engagement
  - Currently UOB do not monitor SD actions in research and community outreach extensively. Therefore, engaging with this framework would provide a more holistic sustainability assessment.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Several strategy and policy recommendations can be made based on the findings of this investigation. Recommendations can be made on two levels: to a wider university audience and specifically for the Bristol University.

## University wide recommendations

- *Universities should be clear from the start of their engagement on the aim and objectives of engaging with a SDGs framework.*
- *A SDGs framework should be tailored specifically for each university. It is important that aims, priorities, and data available, are considered when starting to engage with this strategy.*
- *Universities should not focus their framework around using the targets.*

## University of Bristol Recommendations

The University of Bristol's sustainability strategy is up for renewal at the end of 2017, based on the findings for this research several recommendations can be made to develop the HEI in progressing forward.

- *It could be beneficial for Bristol University to engage with a SDGs framework, providing a more rounded assessment of sustainability across all university core areas and addressing the sustainability language barriers between different departments.*
- *The university should incorporate more balanced sustainable development terminology in their new sustainability strategy. This would address the current environmental-focus of data collection and could increase the effectiveness of implementation of this framework.*
- *Bristol should primarily focus engagements with the SDGs on mapping research and community engagement. This recommendation is based of the finding that Bristol has limited resources available, and due to the resource intensive nature of implementing a SDGs framework, Bristol University should prioritise current areas of weakness.*

## LIMITATIONS

- There are several limitations to this dissertation that should be acknowledged.
- Firstly, due to the infancy of this research, only a small number of case studies were analysed, which decreases the validity of these findings (Bryman 2008).
- Secondly, only a small sample Bristol University's sustainability actions were investigated in the semi-structured interviews, due to the resources and time available in this investigation. Although the results were sufficient to understand the universities' sustainability approach, a full analysis of all actions might have yielded different results.
- Furthermore, all of the interviews were conducted with members of Bristol's SSG, who are already knowledgeable about SDGs and interested in sustainability, which might of caused bias in results

(Bryman 2008). Furthermore, there are several practical limitations that are inherent to each research method, as outlined in the methodology section (Bryman 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

- Reviewing the literature highlighted the absence of a framework for holistically guiding sustainability assessment in universities. This dissertation has aimed to address this gap, finding that the SDGs can be used as a framework to assess sustainability across multiple university areas.
- A SDGs framework has the ability to provide a new stance on sustainability reporting by providing a flexible and holistic assessment tool for monitoring sustainable development contribution. However, due to institutional barrier that universities face when trying to conduct sustainability reporting and the resource intensive nature of SDGs frameworks, the implementation of this framework at university level could face several challenges.
- Furthermore, this research has shown that the University of Bristol has the capacity and resources to engage with the SDGs. A SDGs framework could address the lack of reporting across Bristol's core areas, and increase engagement with sustainability.
- Looking forward, if Bristol University are to stay at the forefront of sustainable development processes and be seen as a leader in sustainability, they should start to report sustainability in a holistic manner through engaging with the SDGs.