

# Teaching with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals — an opportunity or obligation?

By Leonie McIlvenny

## Biography

Leonie McIlvenny has been an educator for over 35 years. Initially a primary school teacher, then teacher librarian, Leonie has taught in both primary and secondary schools in the public and private sectors in Western Australia. During her career, she has been a curriculum consultant, online course developer, library consultant and ICT project manager for the Western Australian Education Department. She was a project officer for the Teaching Teachers for the Future project at Curtin University and also lectured in digital literacy and inquiry learning for pre-service teachers. Her interest in information and digital literacies and digital badges was the driver behind such projects as **Studyvibe**, the **Research Safari**, **My Digital Passport** and the **UN SDG Digital Passport Challenge**.

*There is no more powerful transformative force than education — to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity. — Irina Bokova, former Director-General of UNESCO*

## What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 goals defined by the United Nations (UN) to tackle the world's biggest problems by 2030 (Table 1). These goals spring from, and refocus efforts, for global transformation that derived from the original eight Millennium Development Goals that concluded at the end of 2015.

## What is the role of education in the development of the SDGs?

*TARGET 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals*

*By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of*

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



*a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.*

Source: United Nations, 2015

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialised agency for education, is responsible for leading and coordinating the *Education 2030 Agenda*, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through the UN SDGs. It has been promoting *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)* together with *Global Citizenship Education (GCED)* which are both at the forefront of ensuring the SDGs are addressed in curriculum programs throughout the world. Their main focus relates to Target 4.7 of the SDG on education, which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. They have also been spearheading the *Global Action Programme (GAP)*.

## The United Nations SDGs and the Australian Curriculum

There is no doubt that the UN SDGs make an excellent context in which to explore

a range of learning outcomes within the Australian Curriculum. When conducting a keyword search on the Australian Curriculum website, 880 results are listed, which have either direct or indirect links to the SDGs across a range of learning areas, year levels and, in particular, the General Capabilities. This would suggest that by using the UN SDGs as the context for a learning program, one would not only be addressing the imperative to interrogate these goals as part of the ESD global initiative, but more directly would be using them to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes from the Australian Curriculum (Table 1).

## How can the SDGs be used in the learning program?

Using the SDGs as part of the teaching/learning program allows a teacher to:

- explore the intersections between subjects through the development of an integrated unit of work;
- provide an authentic context for problem-based learning using real-life situations, information and data;

Table 1: Australian Curriculum General Capabilities and the UN SDGs

General Capabilities from the Australian Curriculum that address the UN SDGs				
Personal and Social Capability	<i>Social awareness</i>	<b>Appreciate diverse perspectives</b> Acknowledge the values, opinions and attitudes of different groups within society and compare to their own points of view	<b>Contribute to civil society</b> Analyse personal and social roles and responsibilities in planning and implementing ways of contributing to their communities	<b>Understand relationships</b> Identify indicators of possible problems in relationships in a range of social- and work-related situations
Intercultural Understanding	<i>Recognising culture and developing respect</i>	<b>Investigate culture and cultural identity</b> Explain ways that cultural groups and identities change over time and in different contexts	<b>Explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices</b> Analyse the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices in a range of personal, social and historical contexts	<b>Explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices</b> Analyse the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices in a range of personal, social and historical contexts
Intercultural Understanding	<i>Interacting and empathising with others</i>	<b>Communicate across cultures</b> Explore ways that culture shapes the use of language in a wide range of contexts	<b>Consider and develop multiple perspectives</b> Assess diverse perspectives and the assumptions on which they are based	<b>Empathise with others</b> Imagine and describe the feelings and motivations of people in challenging situations
Intercultural Understanding	<i>Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility</i>	<b>Reflect on intercultural experiences</b> Reflect critically on the representation of various cultural groups in texts and the media and how they respond	<b>Challenge stereotypes and prejudices</b> Identify and challenge stereotypes and prejudices in the representation of group, national and regional identities	<b>Mediate cultural difference</b> Identify and address challenging issues in ways that respect cultural diversity and the right of all to be heard
Ethical Understanding	<i>Understanding ethical concepts and issues</i>	<b>Recognise ethical concepts</b> Analyse behaviours that exemplify the dimensions and challenges of ethical concepts	<b>Explore ethical concepts in context</b> Analyse the ethical dimensions of beliefs and the need for action in a range of settings	

Table 1(continued)

General Capabilities from the Australian Curriculum that address the UN SDGs				
Ethical Understanding	<i>Reasoning in decision making and actions</i>	<b>Reason and make ethical decisions</b> Analyse inconsistencies in personal reasoning and societal ethical decision making	<b>Consider consequences</b> Investigate scenarios that highlight ways that personal dispositions and actions can affect consequences	<b>Reflect on ethical action</b> Analyse perceptions of occurrences and possible ethical response in challenging scenarios
Ethical Understanding	<i>Exploring values, rights and responsibilities</i>	<b>Examine values</b> Assess the relevance of beliefs and the role and application of values in social practices	<b>Explore rights and responsibilities</b> Analyse rights and responsibilities in relation to the duties of a responsible citizen	<b>Consider points of view</b> Draw conclusions from a range of points of view associated with challenging ethical dilemmas
ICT General Capability		<b>Investigating with ICT</b> Students locate, access, generate, organise and/or analyse data and information and apply criteria to verify the integrity and value of the digital data, information and sources using ICT	<b>Creating with ICT</b> Students use ICT to generate ideas, plans and processes that clarify a task, generate and manage digital solutions or respond to a need or creative intention	<b>Communicating with ICT</b> Students use ICT to share ideas and information to collaboratively construct knowledge and digital solutions
Critical and Creative Thinking		<b>Inquiring — identifying, exploring and organising information and ideas</b> Students pose questions and identify and clarify information and ideas, and then organise and process information	<b>Generating ideas and possible actions</b> Students imagine possibilities and connect ideas through considering alternatives, seeking solutions and putting ideas into action	<b>Reflecting on thinking and processes</b> Students think about thinking (metacognition), reflect on actions and processes, and transfer knowledge into new contexts

- promote inquiry learning through research-based investigations into the various goals;
- build deep insights into the SDGs through global and local partnerships that connect students to people experiencing and working on the topics they're learning about;
- use the SDGs for the development of global competencies and global citizenship;
- connect the SDGs to local issues and challenges as much as global ones, so that they are real and relevant for students;
- partner with organisations working to connect the SDGs into classroom curriculum worldwide; and
- access a growing range of carefully curated, high-quality resources to support the learning program.

Table 2: Five resources

Five resources that support the UN SDGs			
Name	Source	Resource types	Detail
Teaching the SDGs	<b>ESD Expert Net</b> <a href="https://esd-expert.net/home.html">https://esd-expert.net/home.html</a>	Handbook/ website	Provides competences and suggests teaching ideas that support cross-curricular learnings.
Education for Sustainable Goals: Learning Objectives	<b>Education 2030</b> <a href="http://www.oecd.org/education/2030/">http://www.oecd.org/education/2030/</a>	Handbook/ website	This publication is designed as a guide for education professionals on the use of ESD in learning for the SDGs.
Teach SDGs	<b>TeachSDG Educators</b> <a href="http://www.teachsdgs.org">http://www.teachsdgs.org</a>	Organisation/ website	The TeachSDGs organisation supports the work of the UN's efforts within K–12 classrooms, and contributes to the 2030 Agenda in a range of ways.
UN SDGs Digital Passport Challenge	<b>UN SDG Project</b> <a href="https://www.unsdgproject.com">https://www.unsdgproject.com</a>	Project Challenge website with digital badges	The Digital Passport Challenge is designed for students to explore the 17 SDGs set to be achieved by the UN by 2030. Ten challenges are provided in the form of a long-term inquiry. Badges can be awarded at the completion of each challenge (Australian).
Teaching SDGs in your classroom	<b>Microsoft Educator Community</b> <a href="https://education.microsoft.com/teachsdgs">https://education.microsoft.com/teachsdgs</a>	Microsoft Community — Skype in the Classroom	The SDGs are built on the idea of partnership and Microsoft tools and Skype provides resources, courses and Skype offerings to support collaboration with classrooms all around the world.

### Resources to support a learning program around the UN SDGs

The growing range of resources available that relate to the SDGs provide an excellent opportunity for teachers to implement a dynamic program that not only supports the goals but addresses many learning area outcomes as well as the General Capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities from the Australian Curriculum. If you are interested in using the SDGs in your program, then the five resources in Table 2 provide a useful place to start.

### What role does the library have in supporting the UN SDGs?

There are numerous ways that the library resource centre can support and even champion the UN SDGs:

- **Resource selection** — ensure that the concepts, topics and issues related to the 17 SDGs are considered when purchasing resources for the library.
- **Bibliographic records** — where possible, add appropriate metadata to catalogue

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Table 3: Acronyms and their meaning

Acronym	Meaning
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is holistic and transformational education that addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment
DESD	United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) is aimed at integrating the principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning
GAP	Global Action Program
GCED	Global Citizenship Education
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations

records to improve access to relevant resources for teachers and students that relate to the SDGs.

- **Online resource curation** — ensure that online resources are curated and added to digital repositories, lists or bibliographies (for example, LibGuides).
- Stay informed about resources that are available, both for teachers and students, that relate to the SDGs as well as any initiatives in which teachers, students or the whole school could become involved.
- **Promote** the SDGs through displays, information bulletins, activities and projects.
- Consider developing a **school policy statement** that articulates how the school is supporting the SDGs, formally and informally through the curriculum as well as extra-curricular programs.

opportunities to address multiple outcomes that relate to the SDGs and the growing array of resources, lesson ideas and professional support provides a springboard to act. The challenge then, for schools, is to decide 'how' and 'when' this opportunity and responsibility will be acted upon.

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*So, is the teaching of the UN SDGs an obligation or an opportunity? I believe it is both. Never before have we had the capacity and opportunity to connect globally with others around the world through inspired programs, initiatives and resource banks, and in that connection, we are offered an incredible insight into the challenges that face humanity on so many levels.*

### Conclusion

So, is the teaching of the UN SDGs an obligation or an opportunity? I believe it is both. Never before have we had the capacity and opportunity to connect globally with others around the world through inspired programs, initiatives and resource banks, and in that connection, we are offered an incredible insight into the challenges that face humanity on so many levels. The Australian Curriculum is replete with

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United Nations (UN). *United Nations Millennium Development Goals and Beyond*. UN. Accessed 23 September 2018 from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

### Websites

**ESD Expert Net** <https://esd-expert.net/home.html>

**Education 2030** <http://www.oecd.org/education/2030/>

**Sustainable Development Goals**. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

**TeachSDGs** <http://www.teachsdgs.org>

**Teaching Sustainable Development Goals in Your Classroom** (Microsoft) <https://education.microsoft.com/teachsdgs>

**United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Digital Passport Challenge** <https://www.unsdgproject.com>

**United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform** <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>