

The SDG Accord

The University and College Sector's Collective Response to the Global Goals



University
of Exeter

Career Zone



Integration of SDGs in

- Institutional governance/strategic level
- SDGs in research
- SDGs in campus operations
- SDGs in curriculum development
- SDGs in student engagement activities
- SDGs into community activities
- SDGs at a whole-institution level

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Focus on

- Goal 1 - No poverty
- Goal 2 - Zero hunger
- Goal 3 - Good health and wellbeing
- Goal 4 - Quality education**
- Goal 5 - Gender equality
- Goal 6 - Clean water and sanitation
- Goal 7 - Affordable and clean energy
- Goal 8 - Decent work and economic growth
- Goal 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Goal 10 - Reduced inequalities
- Goal 11 - Sustainable cities and communities
- Goal 12 - Responsible consumption and production
- Goal 13 - Climate action
- Goal 14 - Life below water
- Goal 15 - Life on land
- Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions
- Goal 17 - Partnerships for the goals

Summary:

Grand Challenges enables undergraduates to work on wicked 21st Century problems in small interdisciplinary groups exposing students to different ways of thinking and working. The programme has been running since 2012 and normally takes about 400 students who select which global issue they want to address, with the wide range of topics mapped to the UN SDGs (e.g. social inequality, climate and environment emergency, future food, mental health). The programme focuses on a week-long intensive activity, with optional skills training sessions running before the week to help students prepare and excel in their challenge. After the Grand Challenges Week, students complete a brief online reflection to consolidate learning and skills they have developed. Students feel passionately about the issues addressed by Challenges. They are motivated by a desire to make a difference by applying their knowledge and skills to a real-life problem. The outputs students create take many forms, ranging from the creation of apps, social media campaigns, videos, blogs, books and games. Students often work in the community and create legacy that different groups and organisations can benefit from. The true impact may not be felt for years. Students comment on how their behaviour will change as a result of increased sustainability awareness and how they will take this learning with them into whichever sector they end up working in. In 2022, more than 90% of student participants said that they were satisfied with Grand Challenges and that they would recommend the programme to a friend. Our student-centred approach focussing on global issues is scalable and applicable to different contexts and relevant anywhere in the world. We have created a safe environment for playful experimentation. Students take risks and learn through action and co-creation.

Quote: "We are future scientists, researchers, politicians, engineers, writers, CEOs and our opinions on these topics will largely influence the future world" [student].

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Outline the 3 key benefits of integrating this theme:

- 1. Employability-related skills development. By working in interdisciplinary groups to tackle complex problems, students have an opportunity to engage in creative problem solving, organising their own work, setting up their group goals and taking responsibility for delivering outputs within the set deadlines. As a result, they develop a wide range of generic collaboration, communication and presentation skills, which improve their employability.*
- 2. Community engagement. Students get to engage with a wide range of local businesses, service providers, charities and community-based initiatives. Students are exposed to lived experience and non-academic perspectives. The activity enhances their sense of belonging and wellbeing, of a fulfilment created by returning something to the community.*
- 3. Benefit to the University: Students create projects and initiatives that help the University of Exeter reach its zero carbon goals and puts students at the centre of decision making. Students drive changes by suggesting sustainable practices and policies in food, procurement, travel and other areas of campus life.*

Outline the barriers or challenges encountered in integrating this theme and how you overcame these:

- 1. Large interdisciplinary programmes often face operational challenges such as timetabling and demand for a large number of small collaborative learning spaces and lecture theatres with large capacity.*
- 2. The team needs to be agile, adapting quickly to varying resourcing levels, priorities, partnership possibilities and stakeholder feedback. We respond to student interest and current affairs, changing the focus of the problems that students tackle and introducing new subject areas. This year we set up a campaign for students to vote which Challenges they want us to run.*
- 3. Grand Challenges programme has a complex profile of stakeholders, from staff and students across many Faculties, services and societies, to external collaborators and non-academic experts. Working with such a wide number of individuals, teams and organisations requires careful planning and organisation, as well as comprehensive communication and evaluation strategies.*

Please outline your conclusions and recommendations to others (Max 200 words):

Our students are passionate about making a difference and can see that they have the potential to make a huge impact on the world as they progress through their careers.

Students are empowered by their sense of achievement. They demand to be taken seriously and expect the university to take action to implement some of the ideas they create.

Students come back year after year to participate in Challenges, progressing from Undergraduate, to postgraduate facilitator to academic lead in some cases. Alumni also get involved as externals once they have graduated bringing their expertise back to the next

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generation of students. This demonstrates how deeply embedded this programme is at our Institution and the passion with which it is held.

Interdisciplinary student development programmes are resource intensive and require a holistic approach. Operational challenges, a matrix of internal and external collaborators and complexity of parallel delivery of dynamic content on multiple locations, including online, require adequate staffing and precise planning and organisation.