

IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT OF INTERNS AND EMPLOYERS WITH THE UNITED NATIONS' SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This research examines the ways interns might contribute to the advancement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on their work terms. Higher education institutions are exploring ways to have more impact on achieving these goals and sustainable futures.

Researchers conducted an analysis to measure the impact students have on the SDGs during their work terms, beyond measures like how many students work for not-for-profit organizations. From this analysis, the researchers propose an instrument to encourage guided conversations around SDGs with the goal to increase awareness among students and employers.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about the United Nations' SDGs and how post-secondary institutions (universities and colleges) can measure and assess how work-integrated learning (WIL)¹ students influence and advance these goals on their work terms.² The advancement of the UN's SDGs is becoming increasingly important in post-secondary education, as post-secondary institutions are increasingly being measured on their impact on these goals. Graduates need to be prepared to contribute solutions to the world's complex global problems.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The authors consulted three groups of experts in the Waterloo community who advance UN's SDGs through their work: University of Waterloo's Sustainability Office, Waterloo Institute of Sustainable Energy, and Waterloo Global Science Initiatives. Through this consultation, the researchers applied three models they developed to measure University of Waterloo co-op students' current impact on advancing SDGs during their work terms. This analysis was completed on 78 international work terms (those occurring outside of Canada and USA) from the Faculty of Environment. The work terms were assessed by the job description, specifics of the projects assigned, the influence the student might have had during their work term, and how the SDGs might map to the organization's goals.

¹ **Work-integrated learning (WIL):** an education model that combines academic studies with a workplace or practice setting. Work-integrated learning includes a partnership of an academic institution, a host organization, and a student.

² In Canada, work-integrated learning opportunities are often referred to as "work terms". Internationally, they may be referred to as "internships".

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers found that a low number of international work terms (13%) had a definite impact on one or more of the 17 SDGs. Each model effectively measured this impact, but this analysis required a lot of time and resources. The researchers identify a need for a time-effective and low-cost approach in making this assessment for the 21,000+ work terms per year (within Canada, USA and international) at the University of Waterloo.

The researchers argue that building awareness of the UN's SDGs in partnerships with students and their employers will increase engagement with the SDGs. This awareness, interest and knowledge of the SDGs may increase commitment and ultimately progress towards the SDGs.

From these findings, the researchers use a blend of the analysis models to propose an instrument to direct conversations around SDGs to raise awareness with students and employers. The purpose of the instrument is to promote a guided, free-flowing conversation (but not an assessment or evaluation) that covers four areas for SDG awareness and exploration:

- the basic business model
- sustainability culture & governance
- value-chain influence
- internship experience (job/project) & intern agency (role)

Each area includes a list of “prompts” for discussion between the student and the employer. The effectiveness of this exercise will be measured with a survey to University of Waterloo international co-op students starting in the Spring 2021 term. It will measure perceptions, awareness, and self-reported impact on the SDGs. The goal is to expand this exercise to all University of Waterloo work terms within Canada and internationally. Findings will be shared with the broader sustainability and higher education community.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Educators and WIL practitioners can use this work to implement programming and policies that raise awareness of the United Nations' SDGs in work-integrated learning programs.

KEYWORDS

UN Sustainable Development Goals, impact of international internships, guided conversation, SDG engagement and motivation

CITATION

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ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Norah McRae is the Associate Provost, Co-operative & Experiential Education at the University of Waterloo. Shabnam (Shay) Ivković is the Director, International Strategic Initiatives for Co-operative & Experiential Education at the University of Waterloo.

The Work-Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo is the only institute in the world dedicated to research on co-operative education and other forms of work-integrated learning.