

# TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS TRANSFORMATION PLATFORM FOR RMIT UNIVERSITY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What would it take for RMIT University to be a world-leading university in Sustainable Development Goals innovation and transformation?

Momentum is rapidly growing around *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, otherwise known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Laid out by the United Nations, this transformational vision takes a systemic view of the problems and solutions facing the world. Integrating environmental sustainability, social justice and prosperity to an unprecedented degree, it presents a road map of concerted action for all nations, sectors and organisations over the coming decade. It makes clear that society is at a key decision point on multiple intersecting challenges, including climate change. How we collectively respond has far-reaching ramifications. Australia is officially committed to the agenda, but is one of few countries going backwards in its SDG performance.

It is increasingly expected that universities take a lead on SDG action, both as unique enablers of sustainable development progress and as corporations that - like all others - are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that they are meeting ethical standards. The SDG agenda requires universities to work systemically across all four of their main functions - *research, education, external leadership, and operations and governance* - in partnership with others in their innovation ecosystem. Across business and government, organisations are rapidly reorienting their work to align with the SDGs. Academic disciplines from chemistry and construction, to fashion and finance, are turning their attention to how they can contribute, reflecting revitalised interest in the academy's real world impacts.

At RMIT, a growing number of external and internal stakeholders - from RMIT University staff and students, to industry partners and policy makers - are already strongly committed to helping implement the transformative SDG agenda. The question is: how will RMIT University support them? How will it engage with the 2030 Agenda as an institution? The University was an early official signatory to the agenda, and has a critical mass of academics with internationally recognised standing in relevant areas, a legally mandated institutional commitment to social justice, and an energetic Sustainable Development Senior Advisor leading a range of work on the SDGs. The question now is: what does the next phase of RMIT engagement look like? Will the institution commit as a whole and if so, will it strive to move to the forefront of SDG innovation and grasp the multiple opportunities this presents?

The aim of this Concept Note is to provoke focused discussion about RMIT's next phase of SDG engagement. Informed by a wide scan of the situation, the report presents four possible options for RMIT University's SDG engagement, outlines why the University should take the option of **Deep and Bold Engagement** seriously, and offers practical suggestions for taking this forward through an *RMIT University SDG Transformation Platform*.

In some circles, RMIT university is recognised for its cutting-edge, engaged work on sustainability and equity problems, its strategic commitment to gender issues and environmental justice, and its visionary re-shaping of Indigenous research and education through *Bundi Girri* (Wiradjeri for 'shared futures'). Some of this is reflected in the recent high ranking of the university in the new Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings based on the SDGs. Yet, explicit SDG initiatives at the university remain relatively isolated and largely obscured behind the current focus on means (e.g. technology, design, innovation), not ends or purpose (e.g. a more positive, ethical future). This is despite the fact that there is growing demand from groups inside and outside RMIT for thoughtful guidance, leadership and training on how to contribute energetically to not just any future, but a more sustainable, equitable one. Such demand reflects a current gap in the supply of the knowledge, skills and innovations needed for meaningful SDG action. RMIT University has the opportunity and capacity to build on its existing strengths and SDG initiatives and to take the lead in enabling ethical SDG action, underlining its commitment to being a global university and generating new synergies across its research, education, external leadership, and operations and governance arms.

An SDG Transformation Platform would harness RMIT University's latent potential to become a world-leader in progressing the 2030 Agenda (see Figure 1). Through the Platform, RMIT University could deliver and demonstrate its commitment to transformative progress on sustainable development across sectors and scales, centred on an ethos of ethical innovation – that is, innovation that eschews habitual approaches and strives to be Responsible, Inclusive, Disruptive and Engaging. The Platform could foster the cross-scale, cross-sectoral linkages, creativity and experimentation needed to successfully pursue *genuine* sustainable development. With a strong virtual and physical presence in Melbourne, Barcelona and Vietnam, the Platform could lead critical thinking and action on the SDGs, co-developing advice and advocacy. It could develop particular expertise in key cross-cutting issues such as how to localise the SDGs, the role of cities in sustainable development, and the complex relationship between the SDGs and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The overall vision would be: *When you think of SDG innovation and transformation, you think RMIT University.*

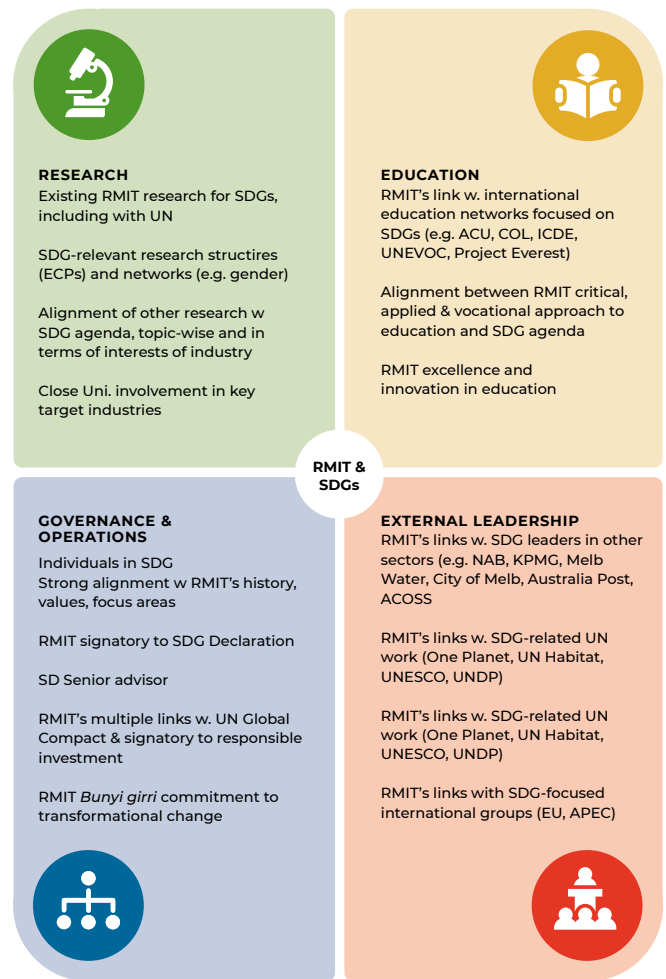


Figure 1. Summary of some of the main drivers impelling RMIT to engage more strongly with the SDGs.

To enable this vision to be realised, institutional commitment and leadership is needed to bring the different arms of the university together and embed the SDGs in all of its structures, practices and strategies from the ground up and top down. The SDG Transformation Platform would serve as a flexible, adaptive portal through which this transformative change is enabled, catering to the specific and evolving needs of different groups and parts of the university.

This Concept Note makes the case for RMIT University to embrace a deep commitment to the SDGs combined with a bold genuinely innovative innovation culture. This will lead to *transformational* change in and through the organisation, if operationalised effectively. It represents the *scaling up* of an SDG-orientation from a niche consideration in the university into a mainstay of the workings of the organisation. Ethical innovation for the SDGs would become a guiding light, culture and ethos embedded in everything RMIT University does, including leadership, strategies, partnerships, culture and branding. In this way, RMIT University would consolidate and enable better, inclusive futures and ensure the world recognises and benefits from its positive, transformative approach.