



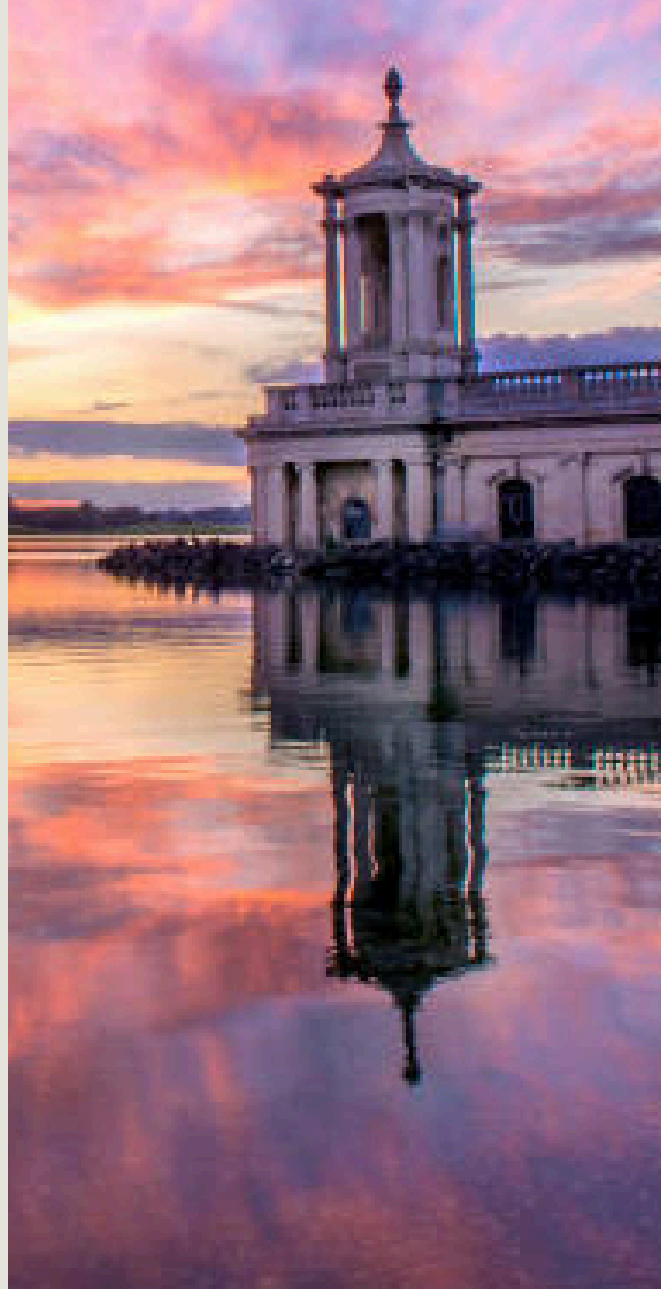
# Sustainable Development Goals and the Universities Partnership

A Civic Universities Partnership Project Report

# Executive Summary

This report analyses how the Universities Partnership (UP) – a collaboration between De Montfort University (DMU), the University of Leicester (UoL), Loughborough University (LU), and civic partners in Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland – aligns its civic initiatives and projects with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

By mapping projects, identifying gaps, and presenting case studies, this report offers a comprehensive overview of the UP's contributions to sustainable development. It demonstrates how higher education institutions, working together with civic partners, can deliver measurable impact on local communities while also contributing to global challenges.



## Key Findings:

- SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) dominate UP activity, reflecting the universities' academic missions, regional workforce priorities, and civic leadership in sustainability.
- SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is a cross-cutting enabler of all activity, underpinning collaboration across institutions and partners.
- Gaps exist in SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), shaped by geographical constraints and the current civic strategy.
- There is strong potential to strengthen alignment with SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through ongoing and emerging projects.





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# Introduction

## **What are the SDGs?**

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, form a universal blueprint for tackling poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation by 2030. Each goal contains 169 specific targets and 232 indicators for measuring progress.

## **Why are they relevant to the Universities Partnership?**

The UP exists to combine the collective strengths of three universities and civic partners for the benefit of local communities. Its five theme areas naturally intersect with the SDGs:

- Arts, Culture & Heritage;
- Environmental Sustainability;
- Health, Wellbeing & Sport;
- The Economy; and
- Education.

By aligning projects with the SDGs, the UP can:

- Demonstrate civic impact against a globally recognised framework.
- Provide consistency and credibility in measurement and evaluation.
- Strengthen national and international reputation through benchmarking.
- Enhance collaboration and resource mobilisation across institutions and sectors.

## **What this project aims to do**

This project maps UP activity against the SDGs, analyses gaps, and highlights opportunities for greater alignment. It also identifies risks (e.g., greenwashing, over-claiming) and proposes a roadmap for embedding SDG thinking into the partnership's civic strategy.

# Methodology

- Data Sources: UP project details, the latest Achievement Report, project notes, university websites, and civic partner reports. To complement this, publicly available datasets were used to build a fuller picture of each university's contribution, including but not limited to:
  - Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (THE) – benchmarking performance against SDG indicators.
  - Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data – including graduate outcomes, research outputs, and access measures.
- Process: Projects were mapped against SDGs using the UN SDG indicator framework. Manual verification was carried out to ensure alignment with targets and indicators rather than only headline SDG titles.
- Simplification Aim: At the time of data collection, one of the aims was to help all UP members simplify how they collect and report SDG-related data. This was particularly relevant given the growing emphasis on THE Impact reporting frameworks.
- Sector Challenge: However, since 2025, THE has significantly increased participation fees for the Impact Rankings. This has sparked debate within the sector over whether universities should continue investing in these ranking models during a period of financial constraint. For the UP reps, this raises questions about balancing the reputational value of rankings with the need to use resources wisely.

## Limitations:

- Uneven reporting across institutions.
- Subjectivity in interpreting SDG alignment.
- Challenges in localising international SDG indicators (e.g., marine goals).

# Mapping of UP Projects Against SDGs

The UP portfolio demonstrates clear strengths in education, sustainable growth, and climate action. Activities cut across multiple goals but cluster most strongly around SDG 4, SDG 8, SDG 11, SDG 12, and SDG 13.

Project	SDG Alignment	Contribution
Open Libraries Initiative	SDG 4 (Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities)	Expands access to learning, strengthens community connection, promotes cultural heritage.
Responsible Business Toolkit	SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption)	Equips businesses with sustainable, ethical practices.
Graduate Retention	SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)	Builds local talent pipelines, addressing skills gaps and economic resilience.
Evolve: Your Skills for Success	SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)	Raises attainment, aspirations, and self-regulation in KS3 learners.
Rutland Innovation Business Support (RIBS)	SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 9 (Innovation), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities)	Supports rural SMEs with innovation and growth.
Collaboratory Research Hub	SDG 4 (Education), SDG 9 (Innovation), SDG 11 (Communities), SDG 17 (Partnerships)	Co-creates solutions to civic issues, embeds research in communities.



# Mapping of UP Projects Against SDGs

Project	SDG Alignment	Contribution
VentureVersity	SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 9 (Industry & Innovation)	Converts academic ideas into commercial reality.
Leicester Collaborate to Accelerate Net Zero (LCAN)	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 17 (Partnerships)	Whole-system climate leadership model.
Greener Future Leicestershire	SDG 8 (Work), SDG 11 (Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action)	Advisory service supporting businesses to thrive in a green economy.
LIAS Civic Research Calls	SDG 3 (Health), SDG 4 (Education), SDG 9 (Innovation), SDG 17 (Partnerships)	Promotes interdisciplinary research tackling local health and sustainability challenges.
Social Value Portal	SDG 8 (Work), SDG 10 (Inequalities), SDG 12 (Consumption & Production)	Embeds social value in procurement, supports SMEs.
Student Climate Ready Action Guide	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action)	Encourages student-led behavioural change aligned with local climate goals.
Let's Get Moving (Health & Wellbeing)	SDG 3 (Health), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 17 (Partnerships)	Tackles inequalities in physical activity in underserved communities.
Creative Clusters / Arts, Culture & Heritage	SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 9 (Innovation), SDG 11 (Communities)	Strengthens the region's creative industries ecosystem.

# Gap Analysis

Themes ▾

Projects ▾

Events

Agre

Evolve

Co(I)laboratory

RIBS

International students

Responsible Business

Retaining graduates

Open libraries

## Underrepresented SDGs:

- SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger): Limited activity; no targeted initiatives addressing food insecurity or poverty alleviation.
- SDG 14 (Life Below Water): Geographically irrelevant due to landlocked region.

## Strengths:

- SDG 4 (Quality Education): Strong portfolio, with Evolve, Pathways, and Open Libraries.
- SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Graduate Retention, RIBS, VentureVersity.
- SDG 13 (Climate Action): LCAN, Greener Future, Carbon Literacy training.

## Areas for Strengthening:

- SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing): While projects like Let's Get Moving are impactful, broader health inequalities (e.g., mental health, food access) require stronger focus.
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Limited visibility of gender-focused projects. Opportunities exist in staff wellbeing and equity initiatives.
- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Many projects touch this, but reporting and impact measurement could be clearer.





# Recommendations

## 1. Incorporation & Strategy

- Embed SDG mapping into theme group delivery plans.
- Develop a joint UP SDG Strategy, clarifying ownership and accountability.

## 2. Promotion & Visibility

- Create accessible web content and press releases highlighting SDG impact.
- Use THE Impact Rankings selectively for benchmarking, but also develop independent, locally relevant indicators to reduce reliance on costly external frameworks.

## 3. Collaboration & Gaps

- Develop initiatives targeting food security, poverty, and health inequalities.
- Strengthen alignment with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) through staff and student-focused projects.
- Continue building synergies across SDG 11, 12, and 13 where multiple projects overlap.

## 4. Measurement & Evidence

- Adopt consistent KPIs across theme groups.
- Avoid greenwashing by verifying data against SDG targets and indicators.
- Explore low-cost sector tools (e.g., NCIA Civic Impact Dashboard, HESA datasets) as alternatives to expensive ranking systems.



# Conclusion

The Universities Partnership has made significant progress in embedding the SDGs into civic activity, with particular strengths in education, economic development, and climate action. This mapping exercise shows the power of collaboration but also highlights where activity is thin, particularly in poverty, hunger, and gender equality.

One of the added values of this work has been pulling together publicly available data from THE and HESA to give a more rounded picture of how each university contributes to the SDGs. Initially, this was intended to simplify data collection for rankings, but the sharp rise in THE Impact Ranking fees has raised serious questions about whether universities should invest in rankings during a period of sector-wide financial strain.

Moving forward, the UP can play a leadership role by:

- Continuing to champion the SDGs as a shared civic framework.
- Developing transparent, low-cost, and locally relevant measures of impact.
- Ensuring that resources are deployed strategically, balancing reputational value with practical outcomes for communities.

Through these steps, the UP can strengthen its position as a national leader in civic engagement and sustainable development — not just by aligning with the SDGs, but by helping to shape how universities measure and communicate impact in the future.

# Sustainable Development Goals



## Sustainable Development Goals against Universities Partnership: A Civic Universities Partnership Project Report

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