

Co-op students can play a bigger role in advancing United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals

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Co-op students and interns can play a more significant role in advancing the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals, new research shows.

In work placements and internships across 12 countries, a new study found that 13 per cent of students from the University of Waterloo's Faculty of Environment carried out work related to the [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs). The goals include zero hunger, [quality education](#), and clean water and sanitation.

The study's findings suggest more could be done to increase awareness for the SDGs and more effective ways to better assess the impact of students, institutions and employers on reaching those goals.

"The research comes as higher-education institutions are looking to act as allies for change and achieve the SDGs through teaching, work-integrated learning, research and partnerships," Norah McRae, associate provost of Waterloo Co-operative and Experiential Education and co-author on the study, said. "Educational institutions and students all play a vital role in taking on global challenges and ensuring a sustainable future. Universities can play a role in developing students who can bring those skills and motivation to the future workforce.

"It is imperative that we leverage our co-operative and experiential education programs to understand how we can further engage our students to work towards advancing the SDGs."

McRae and co-author Shabnam Ivković, director of international strategic initiatives in CEE, assessed job descriptions, projects and responsibilities to determine relevance to the goals. The researchers collaborated with the University of Waterloo Sustainability Office, Waterloo Institute for Sustainable Energy and Waterloo Global Science Initiatives. They considered factors like business model, stakeholders, organizational mission and student experience. Waterloo's Sustainability Office used a qualitative approach to determine impact, while WISE and WGSi developed a rating system.

"Research indicates that there is a need to build further awareness of SDGs among employers and students," Ivković said. "Our programs offer outstanding opportunities abroad, and we can use those opportunities to determine how students play a role in creating a more [sustainable future](#)."

As a result of the study, Waterloo has put together a pilot program to further understand co-op [student](#) and employer perception of their engagement with the SDGs.

Based on the approaches the collaborators applied, the researchers implemented a self-guided exploration instrument in Spring 2021 across all international internships, whether done remotely or in-person abroad. Eventually, the [goal](#) is to extend the activity to domestic co-op terms.

The study, "[Improving engagement of interns and employers with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals](#)," was recently published in the journal *Work-Integrated Learning*.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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