

Living Lab: Applied research to affect change for sustainable development

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Teaching, learning and assessment



Institutional Context

The University of Manchester is a large institution with a 40,000 strong student body. With Social Responsibility alongside our goals of Teaching and Learning and Research and Discovery we take pride in our students who graduate inspired, equipped and empowered to affect change for sustainable development.

Key words

Applied research, SDGs, Research Methods, Employability

Outline of activity or project

We have created a living lab of applied research set by organisations (charities, NGOs, private organisations and so forth) across the globe. The purpose is to deploy student power to offer research that organisations need to affect change. The interdisciplinary projects are framed around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They are broad enough that they can be tailored for any assessment at any level for any discipline and could be longer dissertation pieces or short reports. The projects offer methodological freedom, including desk based study. We share the completed research with the organisations so that they can use them to affect change. Our online platform showcases students' work to the benefit of their employability and open source knowledge. We welcome collaboration to grow this project, enhance the student learning experience and to affect change for sustainable development.

Intended project outcomes

- + apply their knowledge to a specific problem, identified by an external organisation, devise an action plan and communicate this in a well-argued report
- + apply an understanding of the theoretical framework for research and the role of the individual researcher in advancing knowledge and affecting change
- + demonstrate practical experience in research methods, project design and time management skills
- + present an original project that is distinctive when applying for jobs or further study
- + feel empowered to affect change for sustainable development.

Further guidance for project leads

Students need an understanding of research methods and methodology and some guidance to construct a project to address the research brief. There are general ethical guidelines on the Living Lab website but students should complete a comprehensive risk and ethics review ahead of undertaking the research. It is recommended to give students the chance to complete a project proposal that receives detailed feedback and ideally a chance to review the research approach. We encourage our students to discuss their research ideas in groups (ideally interdisciplinary groups) before formulating their research proposals.

Assessment or Evaluation

We have piloted this approach for four years across different undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes with great success. Student feedback suggests that it is meaningful assessment which equips them with skills for the rest of their studies and beyond their degrees. Two students have been employed by the organisations they did their research for and other students spoke of how this experience was instrumental in achieving employment. Student research has been used to inform council policy, to shape strategy of social enterprises and to critique policy documents.

Useful resources

The [Living Lab](#) platform offers a range of applied research projects sourced by the University of Manchester. Further projects are very welcome – we would love to work in partnership through this platform.