

School of Geography and Sustainable Development

Strategic Plan 2021-2026

The School of Geography and Sustainable Development (SGSD, formed 2017) has an international reputation for linking the study and teaching of social and environmental challenges and processes at a high intellectual level, and with a strong ethical dimension and impact and policy imprint. It has developed this reputation through research strengths and ingenuity in a range of natural and social science areas (especially glaciology, palaeoecology, population and health, international development, and sustainability) that engage pressing and compounding global and planetary issues of climate change, inequality, population change, ecological degradation, and sustainability initiatives.

We were one of the first Geography schools in the UK to develop a concerted interest in Sustainable Development (SD), and our 'cross-over' Geography-SD identity and strategy with regard to research, teaching, and synergies within and across them, is one of the key things that makes us distinct and is central to our aspirations. Our strategic ambition is to evolve the reach, significance, and (not least) collaborative nature of this research culture and its close connections to flourishing undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes in Geography and Sustainable Development (that have been placed at the top of subject and student satisfaction league tables), and with SD providing an intellectual and educational anchor for the University's sustainability agenda. These strategic ambitions and trends are pursued through our promotion and delivery of rigorous and interdisciplinary work that is based on an ethic of societally meaningful and analytically holistic research that spans myriad regions and environments of the world (polar regions, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Europe) and engages diverse community and international partners.

Tactically, the School is well poised to respond to growing funding priorities that are targeting research in the overlaps between natural and social science, as well as respond to immediate economic, social and environmental crises, and has been successful in this regard, for example, with the GCRF initiative.

Aspirations

We seek to develop our ambitions, reputation and cohesion as an internationally leading and distinguished centre and voice in research and impact around ideas and practices of SUSTAINABILITY, and we see COLLABORATION (Geography-Sustainable Development, physical-social science, quantitative-qualitative, and internal and external, through teams and networks) as a *modus operandi* of this goal. The aspiration and this *modus operandi* revolve around the above specialisms/expertise in bespoke areas and with long-term partners, and new sustainability initiatives linking them. Ways of operationalising (including measuring) the aspiration are by: (a) taking closer stock of our current networks and collaborations; (b) hosting a significant School conference on Sustainability with contributions from across the School and to develop possible synergies and mechanisms of collaboration; (c) expanding the use of honorary positions to raise the visibility and strengthen existing and new international networks; (d) devising explicit strategies for early career researchers; and (e) progressing the online/social media staging/promotion of our work, reach, and influence. These initiatives will explicitly reflect on how we support post-colonial modes of collaboration.

Policy-facing

We are acclaimed for policy-relevant teaching and research and aspire to be a go-to institution (School) for critical comment and policy evidence in the subject areas and regions in which we work. Policy engagement is incorporated into many of our grant applications, and we seek to take this further. This involves being responsive to real-world crises and the groups and regions they affect, but also in recognising the universal and long-standing nature of some of the physical and social processes and issues we tackle. Working together as a team, and identifying and shaping key national and international networks is central to this aspiration, as is the augmentation of support given to academics to develop fully their research and impact expertise by having the time to continue to conduct high-quality impactful research.

Diversity

We have an opportunity to be truly aspirational in pushing forward with both socio-economic and ethnic diversity across four pillars: recruitment and retention (of staff and students); pedagogy (the study and teaching of both geography and sustainability hinge on questions of difference, diversity, inequality, and justice, including our Unravelling Privilege work – see below); staff support; and engagement and research activities.

Sustainability

We aspire to significantly reduce our operational carbon emissions and enhance and promote the sustainability of practices within the School, e.g. research and teaching-related travel. We will frame our understanding of 'sustainability' through our commitment to place and long-term relationships and develop research-led goals, policies and practices, engaging our diversity of students and staff in all decision making. We will achieve this through innovative use of technology and Scottish locations and we will communicate and share our practices and progress with other Schools across the University.

Goals

(i) To be innovative in research in environmental, population and developmental change by integrating natural and social science approaches to deliver effective and relevant research-led programmes in Geography and Sustainable Development; (ii) to engender a stable staff population, balanced across subject areas, experience, by gender and ethnicity, and with reasonable and realistic workloads; (iii) strive for a staff complement that is proportionate in number with the student population (and trends in recruitment), delivering quality teaching alongside quality research; (iv) secure quality facilities (including digital facilities) that are appropriate for staff and the student population of the mid-to-late 2020s, to deliver quality teaching and research.

The strategic appointment of academic and support staff is needed to maintain excellence in teaching and research, and the coherence and quality of our teaching programmes. These appointments would aim to complement existing staff. We aim to transform how we teach and research through the incorporation of digital technologies at every level. This digital transformation is linked to a broader facilities development, including substantial refurbishment within the Irvine (now that structural work has been completed), and the provision of large-class wet and computer labs.

World-leading excellence in research, teaching and impact

We currently excel in broadly four areas (environmental change, population and health, international development, and sustainability), and one of the keys to our strategy and aspirations is to both harness their reach/qualities and seek new 'sustainability' synergies and collaborations within and between them, and with external partners. We currently do this by managing research through three overlapping research groups (Environmental Change, Population and Health, GOSSIP [human geography and sustainable development]) and a research centre, BEGIN, which works with all research groups to develop new methods and modelling approaches for geographic problems, using GIScience and Remote Sensing.

Much of our research proceeds from the recognition that we live in a dynamic world, and that change in social, physical and biological environments works and interacts on timescales from annual/decadal up to multi-millennial. We work at a variety of geographic scales – from local to global – and see an emphasis on 'change' (physical-biological, population, socio-population-political and environmental, past to future, including drivers, processes, consequences, and geographical variations) as underpinning much of our work. Our research is relevant to all three recent and current global challenges: the Covid-19 pandemic; the Black Lives Matter movement; and the climate emergency, supporting our aspirations and vision.

Teaching

We are renowned for excellence in research-led and training-focused teaching. We graduate high-attaining students who are creative, flexible, and critically engaged. This will remain at the forefront of what we do, while extending research-engaged pedagogy, enhancing diversity, and bolstering collaboration.

The evolution of our teaching programme will be underpinned by the progression of the School's world-leading research agenda. To strengthen prospects for our graduates, we must strive to provide parity in technical support for teaching across Physical Geography, GIScience, and Spatial Data analysis. Over time, this ambition will need further technical staffing resource and developed teaching spaces for lab and spatial science, so that we can embed an expanded skills programme throughout our degrees and support senior students' uptake of such skills in their own research. Our commitment to fieldwork remains (and indeed is a key Geography benchmark requirement) but we will be exploring possibilities for incorporating more virtual and Scotland-based fieldwork into our programmes, to align with SGSD's commitment to reducing operational carbon emissions and developing more sustainable practices.

SGSD is committed to a programme of "Unravelling Privilege" in how and what we teach, but furthermore in our outreach, engagement, and building student diversity. In order to embed awareness of multiple issues of privilege and exclusion in the everyday practice of the School, we will create space for diverse epistemologies, voices, and pedagogies in our teaching and research, starting by (i) requiring racial sensitivity and LGBTQ+ awareness training for all teaching and support staff; (ii) conducting regular curricula review to explore ways diverse perspectives can be incorporated into all modules; and (iii) make funding available to invite guest speakers into modules to offer these perspectives where module coordinators feel unsure how to offer these perspectives themselves.

We will enhance our current provision and strengthen collaboration through conveying industry and third-sector representatives into our teaching, working across the University to provide true inter-disciplinary learning, and co-creating our curriculum with our students. We will expand student-led research opportunities by involving students in ongoing research within the School to foster career preparedness and entrepreneurial thinking. We will ensure that the strategic advantage of our programmes is maximised through the expansion of joint-honours programmes. We see opportunities with Chinese Studies, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Middle East Studies, Modern Languages, and Classics.

We see our involvement in non-degree/entry-level programmes as an excellent opportunity to entice diverse students to St Andrews. We have already made in-roads as one of the first Schools to contribute to the Upskilling and GOYO programmes. We seek to increase applications and admissions from Scottish students, particularly from less advantaged backgrounds. A programme engaging with local Schools will actively support such students' pre-applications to ensure that we encourage diverse local voices into the classroom. We will continue to work with IEI and the Global Office to deliver Summer Schools.

Capabilities, Configuration and Resources

We seek a shift in the nature of technical support to a higher and more skilled level (especially in GIScience / Remote Sensing), transforming ourselves digitally and prioritising the appointment of a data manager to support teaching of large-class data-intensive subjects, including GIS and Remote Sensing.

We undertake regular reviews of research structure and internal relationships (research groups, institutes, administrative committees) to keep School structures active and fit for purpose.

We strive for gender balance of all staffing areas and grades, with change currently focussed at the higher grades, and for increased ethnic diversity (all areas and grades), with support from HR over recruitment mechanisms to achieve this.

Key steps

The School has staff and facilities that combine both science (physical geography) and social sciences and the humanities (human geography and sustainable development). Recently the balance of staffing has moved towards the humanities, and especially towards sustainable development, following expanding student numbers and demand in that area. This trend follows University strategy, so continuing growth is anticipated, with a matched rise in staffing.

The School's three research groups were maintained through the first few years since separation from Earth and Environmental Sciences. However, the time is now right for a discussion of whether these clusters are the best possible to meet our aspirations and the degree to which alternative arrangements would be better aligned to future developments.

New appointments are needed to (i) continue to provide high quality teaching to increasing numbers of students, and (ii) to develop coverage of expanding areas, including data science and integrated natural-social science research at the Geography-SD interface (as noted above). As well as concern over the rising Student-Staff Ratio, two professorial staff are likely to leave (by retirement) within the next few years, and discussion is needed on how these roles are best filled or replaced.