

The Reach Alliance is a student-driven, faculty-mentored research and leadership initiative examining how critical interventions and innovations reach those who are the hardest to reach: those living in extreme poverty, the geographically remote, administratively invisible and marginalized. Our research has been featured in leading outlets (BMJ Global Health, Lancet, Bulletin of the WHO, etc.), and our in-depth case studies are available on the Reach website. To date, the Reach Alliance has launched more than 70 case study reports across over 30 countries, authored by researchers at eight leading global universities: University of Toronto, Technologic de Monterrey, Ashesi University, University of Cape Town, University of Oxford, University College London, Singapore Management University, and University of Melbourne.

Methodology

For this paper we examined the experiences of three universities, engaging the themes laid out in the introduction. The three universities (UCL, Ashesi University, and Tecnológico de Monterrey) were selected from the eight participating universities for their diverse structures—two private, one public (UCL)—and geographies—Europe, West Africa, and Central America—allowing the authors to explore areas of similarity or convergence, despite their heterogeneity.

The short cases were compiled by authors from each university, as key informants, reflecting on their experiences. This approach follows the call from Francis and Hester to honour the insights of researcher-practitioners: “If inquiry requires data – as we believe it does – then why not take our own experiences and actions as our data? All you need is ready to hand – your capacity for self-reflection” [17, p. 35]. This article builds upon discussions between the authors and participants in the 17th Higher Education Reform (HER) Conference, entitled “Sustainable Development Goals: Their potential and relevance for higher education policy and reform,” which took place in 21–23 June 2023, at the University of Glasgow.

The cases are based on each author’s subjective experiences. The lead author then used these cases to create Table 1 and to assess the strength of institutional embeddedness and the relative importance of localisation

and global partnerships. This table and the qualitative assessments were then refined through discussion and reflection among the authors. This combination of individual experience and collaboration “contributes to a more in-depth understanding and learning of the self and others” [18, p. 288]. This process helps to mitigate some of the limitations of not conducting broader-based survey or interview research.

Short cases: UCL, Tec de Monterrey and Ashesi University

The following cases examine how the Reach Alliance was piloted and embedded within these three universities, each with differing sizes, contexts, and structures. As noted above, whilst the initiatives are distinct, they share a dual focus on global and local engagement. It is also important to note that each of these universities is involved in a range of SDG activities across teaching, research, operations, and partnerships; while important, describing these broader portfolios and the role of Reach therein is beyond the scope of this article.

University College London (UCL)

The Reach Alliance was established at UCL in 2021, with discussions and exchanges beginning in 2019, including the faculty mentors travelling to Toronto in March 2020 to attend the Reach Symposium and see both the University of Toronto students and mentors in action. Reach is now in its third year at UCL. UCL is a large and globally recognised, research-intensive public university located in London, UK.

Embeddedness

The theme of embeddedness for UCL raises important observations regarding the challenges—and opportunities—of the SDGs to push universities to support (and adapt to) cross-disciplinary work. Recognising the challenge of finding an appropriate home for cross-disciplinary and partner-driven work, Reach is housed in the Global Engagement Office (GEO). The GEO oversees global collaborations for UCL, including a long-standing relationship with the University of Toronto.

Table 1 A comparison of embeddedness, localisation, and global partnerships

University	Embeddedness	Localisation	Global partnerships
University College London	Low-Medium—situated in Global Engagement Office, not credit-bearing	Medium—pursuing a mix of local and international projects; part of ‘third mission’	High—strong interest in demonstrating linkages to the global SDG agenda and university network
Tec de Monterrey	High—recognised for academic credit, scaled across Mexico	High—pursuing local projects; part of ‘third mission’	High—strong interest in connecting students and faculty internationally
Ashesi University	High—recognised for academic credit; connected to university-wide agenda	High—pursuing local projects; part of ‘third mission’	High—strong interest in connecting students and faculty internationally; linked to global rankings

