University of Waterloo

Our Vision

The motivation of the University of Waterloo to advance its social innovation zone is our recognition that Canada faces increasingly complex challenges that cut across linked social and ecological systems. These challenges require new configurations of public and private solutions seekers, and approaches that have greater capacity to adapt, and more willingness to embrace entrepreneurial (innovative, resourceful, persistent) characteristics. We recognize the tremendous potential of the university to bring its intellectual and human capital to bear on these challenges.

UW has long been recognized as a national and international leader in entrepreneurship and innovation, and is strongly positioned to leverage its existing experience and expertise in addressing the pressing social and environmental problems facing humanity.
At the heart of the University of Waterloo's vision for creating a flourishing social innovation zone is a desire to create a strong culture of transformation on our campus and within our community.

The near term vision for the UW social innovation zone is to focus on four pillars: curriculum development, incubation, experiential learning, and solutions labs. We have focused on these areas because they build on existing strengths, each provides opportunities to connect UW with the broader social innovation and social entrepreneurship community and were viewed by our community partners as making important contributions to their work, each provides opportunities to link theory with practice, and the pillars are strongly reinforcing of one another. In addition to these pillars, we would propose to build on our knowledge mobilization activities that connect researchers with other constituent parts of the social innovation zone (such as social benefit providers, entrepreneurs, and impact investors) within and beyond Waterloo Region.

Our Guiding Principles:

a. We approach social innovation and social entrepreneurship from a systems perspective, by which were cognize that transformational change is profoundly impacted by complex system conditions.
b. UW seeks to create a social innovation zone that is highly permeable to our community. Critical to the success of our vision is to be able to bridge the university community with social entrepreneurs and social-purpose businesses and non-profits within and beyond the Waterloo region.
c. Our approach emphasizes the connection of theory and research to practice and the importance of experiential learning to achieving this objective.
d. Finally, our approach to structuring and governing the social innovation/entrepreneurship zone is to focus on facilitation and building system coherence. The zone should be understood to be dynamic, opportunistic and self-sustaining.

Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Curriculum

UW has pioneered the development of academic programming on social innovation through the location of SiG@Waterloo in 2007, and the subsequent creation of the Waterloo Institute for Social innovation and Resilience (WISIR) and delivery of the Graduate Diploma in Social Innovation, the only dedicated graduate program in this field in Canada. Building upon these initiatives, UW has developed undergraduate and graduate courses in social entrepreneurship, complex systems change, design for social innovation and institutional entrepreneurship. UW is also a leader in entrepreneurship education through the Conrad Centre for Business, Entrepreneurship and Technology (CBET). The two lead faculties in this proposal, Environment and Applied Health Sciences, have existing programming in complex systems, social innovation and social entrepreneurship, through programs in environment and business, international development and public health.

Our Areas of Expertise

UW is a research leader in both the theory of the social innovation and social entrepreneurship and in its practice. Within the lead faculties, Environment and Applied Health Sciences, the areas where there is considerable strength in applying social innovation and social entrepreneurship frame works to problem domains include, water governance and security, energy and climate change adaptation, aging, healthy and sustainable communities, food security, and ecological restoration. An area of growing expertise, we would exploit is the area of technologically enabled social innovation, which brings IT solutions and digital media applications to bear on social challenges.

The short-term goal within this element is provide enhanced programming that would have broader reach both on and off campus. To this end, we are proposing to increase the course offerings at the undergraduate and graduate levels and ensure that the courses are guided by a consistent epistemological, pedagogical and thematic approach. Specifically, we are proposing to:

a. Create a cross faculty survey course on social innovation;
b. Develop new undergraduate courses on design thinking for innovation and social finance;
c. Rebuild our existing courses in social entrepreneurship to place the practice elements of entrepreneurship within the theoretical context developed in earlier courses;
d. Take existing graduate level courses on complexity and social innovation, design, system entrepreneurship to an online format and make more broadly available to the RECODE network and beyond (perhaps in MOOC format);
e. Develop an applied course on social innovation labs to support the lab component described below.

A further goal with the curriculum is to provide opportunities for off campus participation, particularly for professionals working in social purpose organizations, including the development of practice-oriented courses. This would include online learning, but we are also considering alternative course formats, such as week-end and short block courses, or evening courses that would facilitate greater community participation in our programming. The goal is to create a shift away from university activities as separated from the community towards a more integrated learning and practice community.

St. Paul's GreenHouse: UW's Social Entrepreneurship Incubator

Launched in 2013, GreenHouse is a live-in, innovation community for undergraduate students passionate about creating social-purpose start-ups and social change initiatives—the first known innovation community of its kind in Canada.

GreenHouse students develop skills and networks to facilitate successful entrepreneurship endeavours. They are provided with wrap-around supports in terms of coaching, mentorship, physical space, access to professional expertise, start-up funding and tools for measuring environmental and social impact.

The GreenHouse has great potential to be a key part of the Waterloo region social entrepreneurship eco-system. To realize its full potential over a period of 3 years to an annual cohort of 70 students per term GreenHouse has identified the following key objectives that the RECODE proposal would help move forward:

a. Inspire more youth to become engaged in social entrepreneurship both across campus and throughout Waterloo Region through campus-wide social innovation challenges, panel discussions, talks, and the end-of-term GreenHouse Innovator showcase.
b. Connect GreenHouse to aboriginal entrepreneurship, via activities run by the Environment Faculty and by Waterloo Aboriginal Education Centre.
c. Establish a social innovation fund to support the development of high potential, high growth, early-stage social purpose start-ups.
d. Develop wrap-around supports for more advanced GreenHouse start-ups to reach a state in terms of potential scale and impact in which they can be "handed-off" to entrepreneurial and governance services offered by Communitech's ASCent program, MaRS and Capacity Waterloo Region (all partners in this proposal).
e. Expand an advice and mentorship network to service the growing cohort of GreenHouse students and alumni.
f. Connect GreenHouse to the academic community as a living laboratory in which social innovation/ entrepreneurship practices can be tested and evaluated and the ingredients for social purpose start-up success can be measured and explored. GreenHouse can serve as 'research subject', for mobilizing the knowledge acquired from operating as an incubator and this knowledge can be shared with the RECODE network.

Experiential Education

UW is a global leader in experiential education, particularly through its extensive co-operative education program. UW has been expanding the range of experiential opportunities to include entrepreneurial pursuits and practicums.

The UW Enterprise (E)-Co-op program is an entrepreneurial focused co-op option for undergraduate students looking to start their own business. E Co-op is open to students from all faculties with any type of business concept, including a social-purpose start-up. In collaboration with the Conrad Centre, which is responsible for E-Co-op, we are proposing to provide learning modules in partnership with MaRS that are specific to measuring impact and social return on investment. These modules will better prepare E-Co-op students that start social-purpose enterprises and will help them attract interest from the social impact investment community.

A second area of experiential education that we will further develop is co-op opportunities within established for-profit and non-profit social enterprises, as well as within social-purpose start-ups. Co-op employment opportunities within these organizations are important because many students are interested in social change organizations but wish to direct their energies to supporting existing organizations, as opposed to starting new organizations. There are capacity and funding obstacles that prevent many of these organizations from providing co-op employment opportunities for students. A successful pilot was conducted this winter term within GreenHouse to provide shorter and partially subsidized co-op placements within resource-constrained social enterprises and social-purpose start-ups. An opportunity exists to further expand upon this pilot and evaluate its impact in building the capacity of this sector locally as well as serving a starting-point in which students become inspired to pursue social entrepreneurship as a career endeavor.

A third area that further infuses social innovation and entrepreneurship opportunities into experiential learning is through research internships in the social innovation lab and through undergraduate and graduate capstone courses in which students engage the social enterprise community. These programs are highly beneficial to both the students and the client groups, as they match research with practical application. Through the RECODE initiative, we would seek to develop further community research-based opportunities.

Social Innovation Labs

The fourth pillar in this proposal is the development of a social innovation lab (SI Lab) with our community partners, where strategies for designing and scaling up social inventions can be supported and pursued. UW (through WISIR) is unique in having an established process and trained staff to provide research support, convening and facilitation of such lab processes. The SI Lab would be designed to be self-supporting, and would provide long-term financial stability to the social innovation zone. The SI Lab will establish working relationships with foundations, non-governmental organizations, corporations and governments interested in social innovation solutions to complex problems they identify.

The SI Lab would provide internships for students interested on learning how to provide research and facilitation support for this kind of work in order to develop an understanding of the lab process and to increase capacity in this area. Lab personnel would also engage in teaching courses related to the lab processes and the underlying approaches to social innovation. The SI Lab would also be a focus of community partner engagement, where partners can identify key challenges from specific problem domains and then play key roles in participation directly in the lab processes.

Knowledge Sharing and RECODE Network Contributions

UW is committed to continuing to play a leadership role in convening discussions, conducting research and building community and network capacity in this field. We have identified the following areas where UW can make specific contributions:

a. Provide access to curriculum, including making on-line curriculum available to RECODE network members;
b. Provide social innovation lab training and contribute to the scaling up/out of solutions labs across the network;

c. Share knowledge acquired from operating an incubator for social-purpose start-ups, and linking the RECODE network members into the larger business incubation network in Canada.