

A Digital-Fairer Start

Digital Innovation for Social Inclusion: Responding to COVID-19 and beyond

DECEMBER 2020

Digital 4 Social Innovation
and Inclusion (D4SII)
Working Group

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Acknowledgment of Country

RMIT University acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University. RMIT University respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present. RMIT also acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where we conduct our business.

Executive Summary

Expertise/and capabilities responding to key COVID-19 issues

What's the social impact of COVID-19 on people in Australia and beyond?

The pandemic has radically transformed how we do things in our life, school, work, and leisure. Digital pivots have rolled out unevenly, amplifying existing inequalities such as digital access and literacy. The present changes are profound enough, but as we move toward a so-called “new normal”, impacts will continue to ripple outward, with far reaching effects. The use of digital technology and social media has grown exponentially, raising the need for a fairer normal. *This means addressing the challenges of the pandemic in terms of digital innovations for social inclusion.*


RMIT has vast expertise in understanding the role of the digital in everyday life. Researchers from the Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC), the Centre of People, Organisation & Work (CPOW), the Blockchain Innovation Hub, the Centre for Information Discovery & Data Analytics (CIDDA) and the Centre for Cyber Security Research & Innovation (CCSRI) have many decades of experience building and testing innovative methods around home, work, and social contexts. Using ethnographic techniques that focus on practice and motivation, they can glean insights which complement big data approaches.

The group includes experts such as Julian Thomas who combine big and small data to measure digital access and affordability to produce the **Australian Digital Index**.

Researchers like Annette Markham, Ingrid Richardson and Larissa Hjorth have developed and tested conceptual and pedagogical tools for building digital literacy across various publics through creative and arts-based interventions. Natalie Hendry, Cat Gomes and Jenny Kennedy have a long history of successful engagement within disadvantaged communities, building stronger models for digital inclusion. Ellie Rennie and Indigo Holcombe-James have been working with Indigenous groups in the Northern Territory and Telstra to understand digital choices in remote areas. Elizabeth Tait, Vanessa Cooper, and Flora Salim have tested models and practices for automation in data collection and analysis in embedded technologies fundamental to smart city development. Damiano Spina, Jenny Zhang, Matt Warren and others are leading work in partnership with RMIT ABC Fact Check on disinformation in society.

D4SII—the Digital 4 Social Innovation and Inclusion initiative—seeks to coalesce this existing expertise to response to industry challenges around **digital access** and **literacy for inclusion** and **social innovation**. In keeping with RMIT’s commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), D4SII addresses the following SDGs: Reduced Inequities; Good Health and Wellbeing; Quality Education; Decent Work and Economic Growth; and Sustainable Cities and Communities.





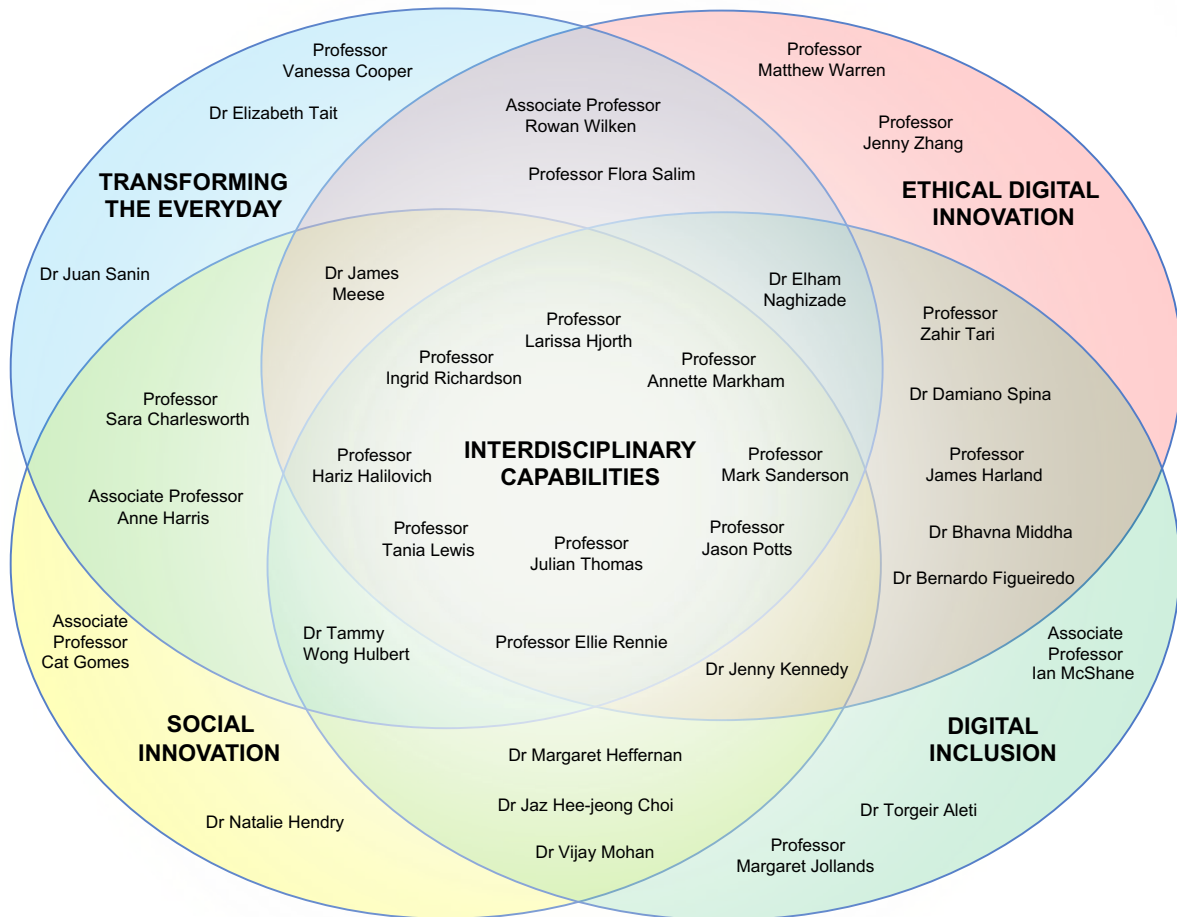
As we move towards a different (and ideally fairer) normal, we aim to bring key learnings around digital social inclusion and innovation forward in prescient ways. This working group seeks to respond to current industry challenges through questions that can be implemented in collaboration with research and industry. These include:

1. What are the underreported technological, social and societal shifts brought by COVID-19 especially in terms of deep inequalities that already existed prior to the pandemic? Who is being excluded from the current digital transformations, and how can they be included?
2. With the sudden explosion of *Working From Home*, and a huge range of social, leisure, education and family practices and rituals moving online, what are the opportunities and risks of recalibrating multiple aspects of our lives into digital settings?
3. COVID-19 has seen the energies of medical experts directed toward treatment, vaccination and cure, yet key areas such as social and mental health and wellbeing risk being overlooked. How can new, hidden and emerging health issues within a pandemic be detected and addressed?
4. In times of lockdown, how can the shared experiences and connectedness within cultural and public spaces – and the people who visit them – be maintained? How can museums, libraries, galleries and other public spaces be (re)activated through digital social innovation?
5. What new social, political, ethical and practical responsibilities do various industry and policymaking stakeholders have regarding information authenticity and security?
6. How can we use the shift toward the digital to build strong critical digital literacy around issues such as misinformation, automated decision-making systems, corporatisation of platforms for education, work and public sphere debate in a post-COVID-19 age?
7. How can we address the complex legislative and regulatory impacts to new work practices, business models, and worker and consumer rights? How do we ensure that the new turn to the digital is egalitarian, and sustainable?

In this report we **map RMIT's unique expertise** in the digital-social inclusion and innovation space. We include **snapshots of key projects** and how they can provide **new insights into the challenges** facing industry moving forward, while also mapping their relevance to **UN Sustainable Development Goals**. These projects reflect upon new pedagogies, digital inclusion, games, informal literacy, ethical decision making, reconfiguring publics in a time of COVID-19, futures of work, entertainment, community and creativity.

Theme Expertise Map

Key Researchers – Key Themes



TRANSFORMING THE EVERYDAY

Responding to the social and cultural changes in the everyday, working from home, resilience, relationships, and cultural arts institutions/experiences such as galleries, libraries, theatres and museums.

SOCIAL INNOVATION

Generating resilience and growth through digital social innovations, blockchain innovations, new creativities, the value of the creative/arts sector to societal and community wellbeing.

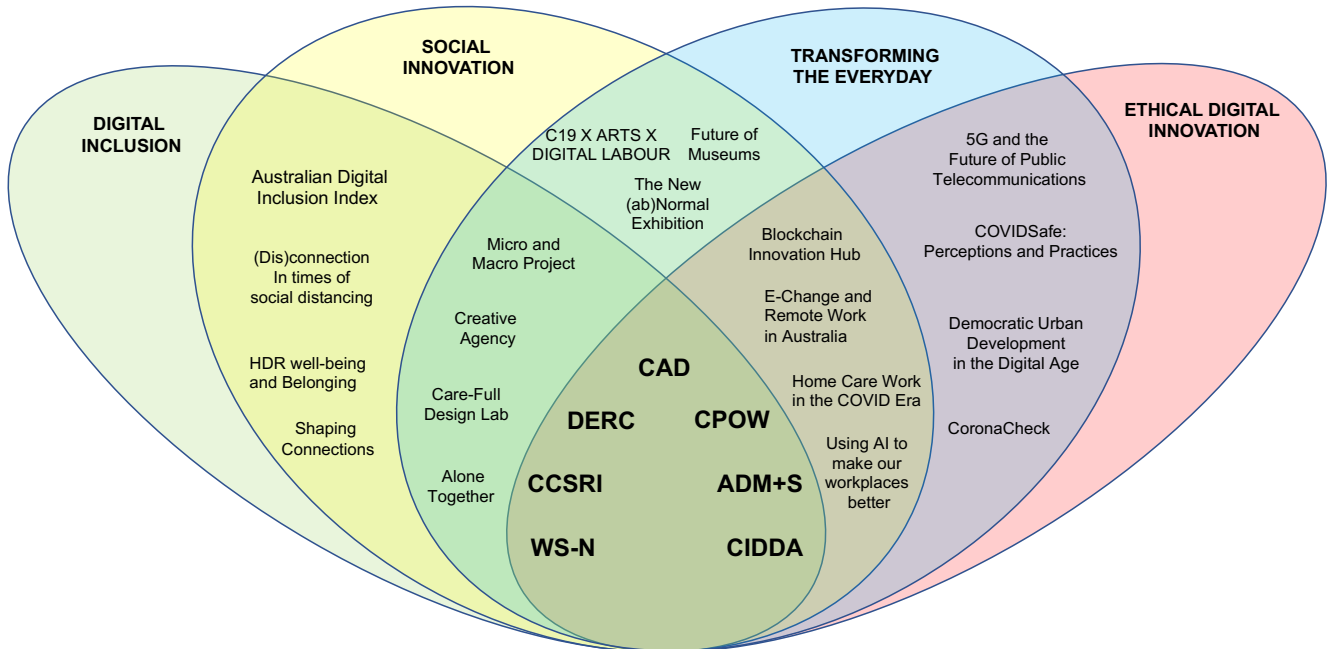
ETHICAL DIGITAL INNOVATION

Understanding the changing impacts of digitalization, cyber security, disinformation, datafication, surveillance systems, automated decision-making, ethics and activism/intervention.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Fostering resilience, participation, accessibility in and across communities, mental health and wellbeing, online education, participation, indigenous knowledges, ethics of AI.

Project Alignment Map



ADM+S - The ARC Centre of Excellence for **Automated Decision-Making and Society** aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making.
<https://www.admscentre.org.au/>

CAD - The **Creative Arts and Design Network** seeks to respond to the various ways in which national and international frameworks are being used to articulate the value of the creative arts and design, specifically their social and cultural impact.
<https://dcp-ecp.com/networks/cad-network>

CCSRI - **Centre for Cyber Security Research and Innovation** is a world-class Cyber Security research centre and a leading source of knowledge and expertise in multi-disciplinary Cyber Security research.
<https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2020/sep/rmit-leads-national-cybersecurity-project>

CPOW - The **Centre for People, Organisation and Work** is located in RMIT's College of Business and Law. The centre researches the world of work in terms of Social Care, Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Political Economy, Digital Work and Society.
<https://cpow.org.au>

CIDDA - The **Centre for Information Discovery and Data Analytics** specialises in developing new approaches to find relevant information in massive data collections.
<https://www.rmit.edu.au/research/centres-collaborations/centre-for-information-discovery-and-data-analytics>

DERC - The **Digital Ethnography Research Centre** is the world's leading centre for digital ethnography known for its innovative ethnographic approaches to digital culture and society.
<https://digital-ethnography.com>

WS+N - The **RMIT Wearables and Sensing Network** brings together RMIT's world-leading practitioners in the development of wearable and sensing technologies.
<https://www.ws-network.com.au>

Projects: Social Innovation

Alone Together



The *Alone Together* project seeks to understand the experiences of older people in Australia from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds during COVID-19. *Alone Together* maps how COVID-19 has impacted everyday life; how people are coping with these changes; and what type of services have been useful to them. These findings help to understand how to provide better support to these communities in the future.

<https://dcp-ecp.com/projects/alone-together>

(Dis)connection in times of social distancing



This project explores the challenges and opportunities for community resilience and connectedness during COVID-19. Giving focus to how young refugees use sports and arts to develop a sense of identity with peers from different cultural backgrounds, this project examines how shared interests and passions can create resilient community ties and networks of support in times of crisis.

<https://cpow.org.au/disconnection-in-times-of-social-distancing/>

Creative Agency



Creative Agency is a community of creative makers, academics, industry professionals and organisations committed to arts, education and social change. The Agency is both a virtual and material co-share workspace in and beyond Melbourne's urban centre where creativity finds expression through co-designed research, events and cross-sector partnerships

<https://www.creativeresearchhub.com>

HDR Wellbeing and Belonging



This project developed short term and long-term projects around understanding Higher Degree Research wellbeing through human-centred approaches to digital innovation. It seeks to address issues around the 2020 crisis (bushfires, climate change and COVID-19) and how to empower HDRs for sustainable futures and emerging work practices.

<https://dcp-ecp.com/projects/hdr-wellbeing-and-belonging>

Care-full Design Lab



The Care-full Design Lab brings together unique and diverse capabilities to become an internationally leading catalyst for transformational urban future-making. Doing care-full design calls for new ways of thinking about values, methods, and the scale/speed of how we do research, as well as who needs to be engaged in what way and when. It requires strong experience in transdisciplinary research and practice, and capacity to balance creativity-criticality and strategic-tactical approaches in an agile manner.

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/design/research-and-projects/care-full>

C19 X ARTS X DIGITAL LABOUR



The arts and creative sector has been severely impacted by government restrictions due to COVID-19. Galleries, museums, cinemas and concert halls have locked their doors, while multiple festivals have been canceled. This pilot study maps the mental health impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on arts and creative sector workers in Victoria, Australia.

<https://digital-ethnography.com/c19-x-arts-x-digital-labour/>

Projects: Digital Inclusion

2020 Australian Digital Inclusion Index



Published by Telstra, RMIT and Swinburne University, the *Australian Digital Inclusion Index* is an annual report that provides a snapshot of Australians' online participation using the measures of access, affordability and digital ability.

"The impact of COVID-19, with its shutdown of schools, services and social facilities, has accelerated the shift to digital alternatives and, while that brings benefit to many, there are still too many Australians facing real barriers to online participation."

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2020/oct/digital-inclusion>

Democratic Urban Development in the Digital Age



This project investigates citizen participation in urban development processes. Drawing on a range of academic disciplines and data sources, the project explores the relationship between citizen participation, decision-making and urban policy outcomes.

<https://cur.org.au/project/democratic-urban-development-in-the-digital-age/>

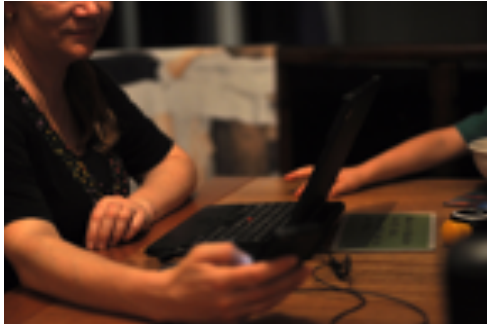
Shaping Connections



Social exclusion is a significant threat to the wellbeing of older adults, many of whom cite a lack of engagement with ICT and the digital economy. This two-year funded by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) focuses on codesigning strategies with older adults that account for their lived experiences of ICT—connecting practice with perceptions.

<https://www.shapingconnections.org/>

The Shut-in Worker: COVID-19 and home-based digital practices



Working from home has quickly become a new daily experience for many Australians due to COVID-19. How has the use of digital devices, software and home offices changed during periods of 'lockdown'? Recording the experiences of individuals across the country, this project examines the role of digital technology and practices for Australian households who have had to transition to working from home arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://digital-ethnography.com/the-shut-in-worker-working-from-home-and-digitally-enabled-labour-practices-during-covid-19-call-for-participants/>

E-Change and Remote Work in Australia



Remote work – also known as 'telecommuting' – is a form of work where employees rely on digital technologies to perform their work, rather than physically commuting to an office or place of employment. This project brings focus to Work Life Ecology exploring the opportunities, intricacies, extent and limits of work that can be performed remotely, without the need for frequent travel.

<https://worklifeecologies.org/e-change-and-the-future-of-work>

Home Care Work in the COVID Era



COVID-19 has brought to the fore the heroic work of residential aged care staff, despite their historically poor pay and inadequate working conditions. However, little has been heard about home care clients or the workers who support them. With nearly one million older Australians living at home, this project seeks to discover: "what are the conditions of home care workers in the COVID-19 lockdown environment?"

<https://cpow.org.au/home-care-work-in-the-covid-era/>

Projects: Transforming the Everyday

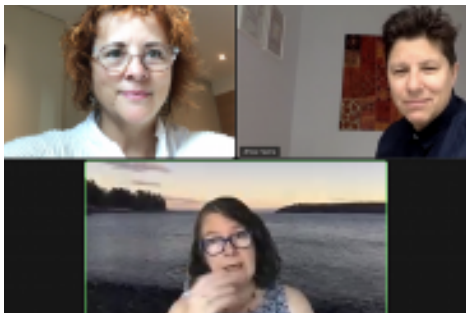
COVIDSafe: Perceptions and Practices



Recognising the social, civil and governance impact of the COVID-19 crisis, *COVIDSafe: Perceptions and Practices* has sought to discover how Australians are understanding and responding to these changes at a community and personal level. Through surveys interviews and analysis, this project brings light to the social and cultural impacts of COVID-19.

<https://dcp-ecp.com/reports/covidsafe-perceptions-and-practices>

Micro and Macro Sensemaking



Changes brought by the pandemic occur at multiple scales. Developing unique collaborative digital ethnography research methodologies, this project responds to the need for deep understanding of the lived experience and social impacts of COVID-19 crisis, by working with people to study their own experiences and produce rich autoethnographic narratives and consider their futures, at the microscopic as well as macroscopic levels.

<https://futuremaking.space/project/massive-micro/>

The New (ab)Normal Exhibition



What does the life of an artist look like at this time; is work created at home, or is there still access to a studio? Are there children to educate too? What does an ordinary day look like in this new territory? The online exhibition *The New (ab)Normal* present creative responses that reflect the reality of the pandemic context, giving an insight into the personal, emotional and transformative aspects of creative practice.

<https://rmitgallery.com/exhibitions/the-new-abnormal/>

Future of Museums



How do museums respond to audiences as technologies, habits and modes of engagement change over time or more rapidly such as during a pandemic? Through innovative ethnographic research undertaken with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) this project seeks to identify and develop deep understandings of the (digital and non-digital) experiences and potential opportunities for older adults in the museum sector.

<https://dcp-ecp.com/projects/the-future-of-museum-audiences-ii>

Projects: Ethical Digital Innovation

CoronaCheck – RMIT ABC Fact Check Unit



With the world in the grip of an unprecedented health crisis, RMIT ABC Fact Check has launched *CoronaCheck* to ensure that the information we share is accurate and fact-based. Fake news and misinformation are spreading as fast and as far as the coronavirus itself, infecting our newsfeeds and timelines at this challenging time. *CoronaCheck* is an email newsletter bringing the latest in fact-checking from around the world in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/all-news/2020/march/corona-check-from-abc-fact-check>

5G and the Future of Public Telecommunications



5G will radically transform the role and function of the telecommunications sector. This project aims to examine the roll-out of 5G and assess the implications of this emerging technology for public telecommunications from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. It will provide an evidence base from which to chart a new role for public telecommunications during a period of structural change with the ambition of informing a more efficient use of public resources in the telecommunications sector.

Using AI to make our workplaces better



New research between Arup and RMIT University is looking into how work environments affect productivity helping managers and designers organise 'new normal' office arrangements, or planning fit-outs or refurbishments. The combined team of artificial intelligence specialists, psychologists and engineers examined the effects of work environments on productivity indicators such as concentration, comfort and activity.

<https://www.arup.com/news-and-events/using-ai-to-make-our-workplaces-work-better>

Blockchain Innovation Hub



The *Blockchain Innovation Hub* is an interdisciplinary team of researchers working on crypto-economics, business strategy and adaptation to blockchain technologies. We apply our expertise in economics, political-economy, organisational theory, law, sociology, politics and communications to map the blockchain economy and identify the public policy challenges that shape this economic revolution.

<https://rmitblockchain.io>

Recommendations

The pandemic has served as a catalyst for change and innovation driving of all aspects of society toward digital adoption. This is reshaping the way we operate, collaborate and innovate. These changes will have significant personal, community, business and governmental implications for years to come. Current insights into the role of data could be enhanced through interdisciplinary approaches to media from both social and computer science areas. The following recommendations are offered to guide and inform government, business, and other decision-makers through the process of post COVID-19 transformation.

- 1. Prioritise inclusion, integration, and access to ensure all Australians benefit from the digital economy.** With a sudden and accelerated shift to the digital, many Australians face real barriers to online participation and risk being left behind. Research has shown that the most adversely impacted were those already disadvantaged. Widespread attention must be given to at-risk groups to ensure that inequalities are reduced across a **diversity of communities and individuals**.
- 2. Review and formalise digital transformations into everyday lived practices and experiences.** Abrupt changes in education and working from home quickly introduced radical new ways of doing things. Home environments have transformed into schools, offices and care centres. These changes must be carefully evolved from ad-hoc solutions to formalised processes ensuring **quality education, sustainable employment, equitable working conditions and future economic growth**.
- 3. Technological connectedness for good health and well-being.** The rollout of technological solutions must encompass more than functional imperatives but also serve social needs such as cultivating a sense of connectedness and belonging among individuals and communities. The use value of technological connection includes well-being and the capacity to combat the physical, social and mental health challenges of social isolation.
- 4. Embed, enact and enhance opportunities for shared and co-created experiences in cultural and public spaces.** With access to public spaces changing, local governments and GLAM (Gallery, Museum, Archive, Library) institutions must develop new ways of engaging the public. The desire of communities to share their own rich narratives presents opportunities for institutions to establish, build and sustain deep connections with the cities and communities they serve.
- 5. Emphasise and make clear the responsible use of data.** The rise and normalisation of surveillance technologies and the newly intensified digital age requires new corporate, governmental and personal responsibilities and awareness regarding data and its use. New modes of regulation and literacy must be developed to identify and counter threats to privacy. These are not only ethical imperatives but are required to **uphold trust in democratic institutions**.
- 6. Develop robust resources for information and technological literacy.** Misinformation and disinformation have emerged as key threats for social, political and democratic stability and health. Resources must be directed to map misinformation and to transmit and translate reliable information to society at large. The flow and spread of factual information are fundamental to **peace, justice and strong institutions**.
- 7. Innovative, reflexive and connected approaches to a changing future landscape.** Our ability to navigate this rapidly evolving environment requires input from a range of researchers and other experts. Each of the new challenges and opportunities brought by the pandemic must be approached with interdisciplinary knowledge and expertise to ensure effective and **sustainable solutions for individuals, cities and communities**.

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