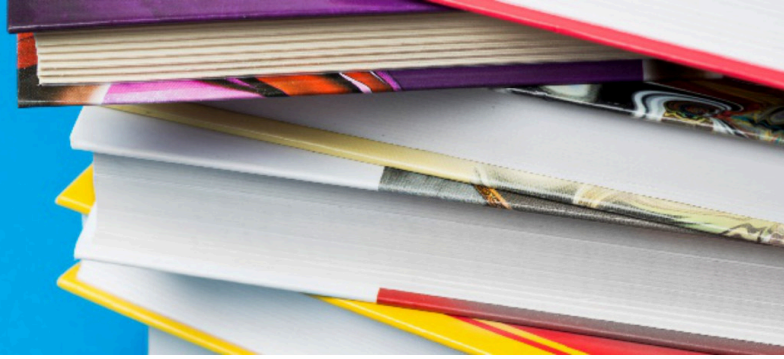


Syllabus

Course title	Making a Difference: Effective approaches to doing good
Course number	0920406701
Semester	A 2026/27, Wednesdays 14:00
Lecturer	Dan Goldshmidt · dan.goldshmidt@gmail.com
Online course by	Dan Lahav & Sella Nevo (TAUx, on edX)
Mode	Hybrid: online Lessons on edX + 3 in-class Sessions
School	Porter School of Environmental Studies, Tel Aviv University (MA)

Description

In the last two centuries, humanity's average wealth has grown tenfold while child mortality has fallen tenfold. Yet hundreds of millions of people still live on less than $2 a day, animal cruelty is worse than ever, and risks from climate change, pandemics and artificial intelligence are rising. Many of us care about these problems. This course asks how to help well: how to turn good intentions into meaningful impact.

It brings together practical tools from economics, public health, behavioral science, ethics, technology and the life sciences, and applies them to decisions at every scale: the initiatives we choose to support, the career paths we take, the research we pursue, all the way to the everyday choices we make. Lessons 1–4 build the foundations of evidence-based impact: cost-effectiveness, measurement and evaluation, and whose interests count, from distant strangers to animals. Lessons 5–9 turn to prioritizing when information is limited and the stakes are extremely high, including risks to the survival and prosperity of human civilization, and end with what all this means for your career. The environment runs through the course, most directly in Lesson 6 (Climate Change) and in the environmental Dig Deeper items.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course you'll be better equipped to:

- **evaluate an intervention** by its effectiveness, marginal cost-effectiveness and counterfactual impact;
- **judge the strength of the evidence** behind an impact claim and reason about expected value under uncertainty, including with Fermi estimates;
- **compare cause areas and interventions** by their importance, tractability and neglectedness;

- **examine the moral assumptions** behind prioritization, about distant people, animals and future generations, and form a reasoned position of your own.

You'll be ready to apply these tools to decisions in your own career, research, environmental or charitable work, or personal life.

Course requirements

- **Study all 9 Lessons on edX**, paced by the schedule below: one Lesson a Week, any time before the next Wednesday.
- **Three in-class Sessions:** Opening (21 Oct), Mid-course (25 Nov) and Final (13 Jan), Wednesdays at 14:00.
- **Final exam**, in person, during the exam period.
- **Optional:** 5 Activities on Moodle, for Bonus points.

Final grade components

Grade = final exam + up to 25 Bonus points, capped at 100. You need to pass the exam (60 or above) for Bonus points to count. If you fail the exam, you fail the course, whatever Bonus points you've earned.

- **Final exam:** in person, written, covering Lessons 1–9 (not the Dig Deeper items). Format details and sample questions will be published at least 2 weeks before the exam. The exam date is set by the secretariat within the exam period.
- **Bonus points.** There are 5 optional Activities, each worth up to 5 Bonus points. Each opens on a Wednesday at 14:00 and is due a week later. Taking part can never lower your grade.
- **Late work** earns no Bonus points. Extensions are given only through the secretariat (for example, for reserve duty or medical circumstances).
- **Lesson 9 is core.** On edX, Lesson 9 carries edX's “Bonus Lesson” label. In this course it is core material and is covered by the final exam.
- **edX quizzes** are ungraded self-checks and don't count toward the grade.

Course schedule

Each Week opens on Wednesday at 14:00. No new Lesson opens in Weeks 6 and 10; use them to catch up and review. We meet in class three times.

WEEK	DATE	SUBJECT
Part 1 · Lessons 1–4 · MaD101: Evidence-based impact		
W01	21 Oct IN CLASS	**Lesson 1 · The Big Picture** How using data and evidence can inform our decision-making and help increase our impact by orders of magnitude; Common biases and misconceptions that undermine our ability to help others; Considering the consequences of our actions, alongside other moral considerations.
W02	28 Oct	**Lesson 2 · Effectiveness & Global Health** Measurement and evaluation; Cost-effectiveness analysis; Marginal cost-effectiveness and diminishing marginal returns; Quantifying impact in Global Health; Promising interventions & opportunities in Global Health; Two pillars of decision making: facts & values.
W03	4 Nov	**Lesson 2 or 3, your pace**
W04	11 Nov	**Lesson 3 · Tackling Uncertainty & Global Development** Counterfactual thinking, opportunity cost, replaceability, and uncertainty; Expected cost-effectiveness, and risk aversion; Getting high-quality evidence: controlled trials and RCTs; Promising interventions & opportunities in Global Development; The challenge of prioritizing promising interventions.
W05	18 Nov	**Lesson 4 · The Expanding Circle & Animal Welfare** The Drowning Child thought experiment; The Expanding Circle of moral concern; Understanding the state of animal welfare; Measuring the welfare harms suffered by animals; Promising interventions & opportunities in Animal Welfare.
W06	25 Nov IN CLASS	**Mid-course Session** Catch-up, a synthesis of Lessons 1–4 and an in-class application.
Part 2 · Lessons 5–9 · MaD102: Prioritizing under uncertainty		
W07	2 Dec	**Lesson 5 · Global Catastrophic Risk** Global Catastrophic Risks (GCRs): Anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic; Assessing the risk from GCRs; The inter-cause prioritization challenge; The ITN framework: Importance, Tractability, Neglectedness; Promising interventions & opportunities in GCRs.

WEEK	DATE	SUBJECT
W08	9 Dec	**Lesson 6 · Climate Change** Understanding the state and possible trajectories of Climate Change; On the importance of expert opinion; Choosing between climate interventions: a case study; Promising interventions & opportunities in Climate Change.
W09	16 Dec	**Lesson 7 · Biological Risk** Understanding Biological Risks - both natural and man-made; Assessing the scale and extent of Biological Risk; Prioritization and assessment with limited empirical data; Pandemic prevention, detection and response; Promising interventions & opportunities in Biological Risk.
W10	23 Dec	Catch-up Week (Christmas), nothing new opens
W11	30 Dec	**Lesson 8 · AI Risk** Understanding Artificial Intelligence: a crash course; Risks from current and future AI; Artificial General Intelligence (AGI); Existing work on AI safety and security; Promising interventions & opportunities in Artificial Intelligence Risks.
W12	6 Jan	**Lesson 9 · High Impact Careers** Does money = happiness?; The makings of an impactful career; Finding a good fit; Paths to impact: direct work, research careers, professional services; Career capital.
W13	13 Jan IN CLASS	**Final Session · Review** Review and exam preparation.
Exam	20 Jan – 8 Mar	**Final Exam** The final exam takes place during the exam period (20 Jan – 8 Mar 2027) on the date set by the secretariat.

Optional reading

Each Lesson comes with a short list of things to read, listen to or watch, picked to take its topics deeper or wider (“Dig Deeper”). They are enrichment: optional, and not on the exam. You'll find them under each Week on Moodle, and more may be added there during the semester.

AI policy

AI is allowed in this course and even welcomed, but with limits.

- **In Activities, AI is welcome and encouraged.** Add one line to each submission saying which tool you used and what for.

- **Your work is yours.** AI makes mistakes: check what it gives you before you rely on it. Think before you prompt (know what you're asking for), and judge what comes back (check it, question it, decide what holds). **The test: be ready to explain and defend anything you submit, as if you'd written it without AI.**
- **In the final exam, no AI** and no devices.

Why: this course is about judging evidence, so using AI well, and checking what it tells you, is part of the skill. But AI can help you learn or stop you learning: hand it all your thinking and you may get an acceptable answer without having learned anything. The exam tests your own understanding.

Comments and contact

- **Questions about course content:** post them in the discussion forum of the relevant Lesson on edX, so everyone can join in and learn from the answer.
- **Personal matters or unanswered question:** email dan.goldshmidt@gmail.com.
- **Office hours:** weekly, on request, in person or on Zoom. Email to find a time.