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THE IMPACT IMPERATIVE: BUILDING UNIVERSITIES AND INSTITUTIONS THAT DEMONSTRABLY MATTER

Why impact has become a test of institutional design, purpose and credibility.

Impact follows incentives and institutional design.

In dispersed-authority institutions, change rarely comes from full consensus—or from top-down declarations.

The strongest impact strategies treat public value as advantage, not compliance.

The university has never been more powerful—or more embattled. Research output has expanded sharply. Global collaborations span continents. Elite institutions, once concentrated in the West, have taken root across Asia, the Middle East and beyond. Universities anchor innovation districts, train professionals and generate discoveries that shape modern life. By the conventional measures long used by the academy to evaluate itself—publications, rankings, enrolments, revenue—higher education, taken as a whole, is thriving in many contexts.

And yet, as higher education scholars Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt argue in *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*, higher education finds itself at a crossroads that recalls nothing so much as the upheavals faced by the newspaper, music and film industries when digital disruption arrived. Those industries, too, were enormously productive right up until the moment their business models became untenable. The lesson, Levine and Van Pelt argue, is pointed: institutions that wait passively for transformation to play out on someone else's timetable often find that it arrives on worse terms than for those that act while they still can.[1]

The pressures on universities today are diverse and structural, not merely cyclical. In some countries, political polarisation and declining public trust have turned higher education into a cultural battleground. In others, financial models are under strain as tuition regimes stagnate and public subsidies tighten. Demographic shifts threaten enrolment growth. Concerns about research integrity have unsettled confidence in parts of the scientific enterprise. Artificial intelligence now reshapes research workflows, challenges assessment models and raises sharp questions. What is the distinctive value of campus-based education when generative tools can produce essays, code and analysis on demand?

These pressures vary by country and institution, and there is no single global pattern to the challenges, let alone a coherent mandate for reform. International rankings still reward publication counts and research income. Disciplinary prestige continues to shape academic careers. Universities operate within a field of competing signals—prestige, revenue, public scrutiny, social expectations—rather than a unified call to change.

Nonetheless, one thread runs through otherwise disparate contexts: universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate, more convincingly and systematically, the value they create for society. This expectation is also being articulated explicitly in international discourse. UNESCO's World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) 2022, for example, frames higher education as a public good and calls for transformation aligned with wider societal needs. Parallel movements to reform research assessment (such as DORA and CoARA) are pressing institutions to value a broader range of contributions, including forms of societal influence that sit beyond journal-based metrics.

When trust in higher education is lost for a significant share of the population, as in the United States, the stridency can reach a deeply dysfunctional point of no return. The tone may be more measured elsewhere, but the expectations are no less real. Governments want clearer returns on public funding. Students and families compare outcomes with growing transparency. Employers want graduates equipped for rapidly evolving industries. Communities expect visible contribution to local challenges.

Such pressures are driving what might be called the impact turn: a growing recognition amid universities, echoing broader signals across sectors (as explored throughout this issue), that societal contribution is becoming central to institutional legitimacy and that this recognition has architectural implications for how universities and other institutions organise themselves. The shift tends to appear in three ways, with reform-oriented universities:

- Reorienting key delivery strategies in core mission areas such that research, teaching and engagement more logically and intentionally connect to valued societal outcomes.
- Pursuing more systematic, co-produced partnerships beyond campus—with policymakers, employers, industry and communities—rather than relying on influence to flow indirectly from academic excellence alone.
- Investing in the capacity to demonstrate public value more credibly, through improved information systems, structured case studies and more strategic communication.

Taken together, these shifts signal not a rejection of the research university model but a recalibration of it, at least among universities drawing attention for attempting to make impact more visible and meaningful. To see what the impact turn looks like in practice, it is useful to examine three arenas—research, workforce alignment and community engagement—using well-known examples of university reform to illustrate developments.[2]

RESEARCH WITH PATHWAYS OF USE

The impact turn is often misread as a call for research to sacrifice rigour in favour of immediacy or instrumentality. The more consequential shift, however, lies elsewhere: it is the insistence that rigour itself include serious attention to use. To ask how research may inform policy, shape practice or enter public deliberation is not to dilute standards. It is to expand them.

This reframing treats the movement of knowledge beyond the academy as something that can be anticipated, structured and assessed—rather than left to chance. Impact is not an afterthought appended to publication. It is a pathway that can be designed, supported and, over time, strengthened institutionally.

This logic is increasingly visible in Asia as well. For instance, Hong Kong's system-wide University Grants Committee incorporated an explicit impact component into its 2020 Research Assessment Exercise, requiring universities to submit impact case studies demonstrating how research has contributed to wider societal benefit, and publishing a curated selection of these cases.

Two contrasting levers illustrate how this logic can be embedded. One operates internally, through reforms that align expectations and incentives within an institution's operating model. The other functions externally, through system-wide frameworks that compel institutions to develop impact capability whether or not they would have done so voluntarily.

The RAND Corporation

Few organisations have operationalised the pathways of use more deliberately or systematically than the RAND Corporation, an American non-profit global policy think tank. Though not a university, RAND offers a close analogue: it houses deep disciplinary expertise, peer-reviewed scholarship and champions independence—with an explicit institutional mandate to influence public decision-making, making it a useful reference point for universities seeking to make impact more deliberate.

Under President Michael Rich's leadership [Editor's note: See Rich's *At the Helm* interview in this issue], RAND made becoming "impact-centric" its overriding institutional imperative, embedding impact across strategy, performance review and internal evaluation. RAND articulated a three-tier framework applied to all research projects: address issues at or near the top of the policy agenda; ensure findings reach key decision-makers; and, where feasible, contribute directly to changes in policy or practice. Researchers were prompted early in the project lifecycle to identify intended users, understand policy windows and clarify what meaningful influence might look like.

Importantly, this was not framed as a departure from analytic rigour but as its extension. Project proposals were expected to articulate plausible impact pathways alongside methodological design. Senior leadership tracked not only publications and contracts, but documented instances of policy engagement and uptake. Internal review increasingly asked: who needs to hear this finding and what would make it legible? The aim was not to guarantee policy wins, given how difficult attribution can be in complex governance systems. It was to build a culture where relevance and influence were discussed explicitly rather than treated as incidental.

Over time, RAND invested in systems to capture and narrate impact more systematically, producing structured impact stories that traced the arc from research question to decision-maker engagement to observable change. This documentation served multiple purposes: strategic learning, external accountability and internal signalling about what counted. The result was an organisation in which

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the expectation of public relevance was not left to individual inclination, but embedded in hiring, evaluation and leadership messaging.[3]

System-wide reform in the UK

If RAND illustrates what internal design can accomplish, the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework (REF) shows what happens when impact expectations are enforced through external incentives. Since 2014, between 20–25% of public research funding allocation has been linked to the demonstrated capacity of universities to translate scholarship into social and stakeholder impact. Universities submit detailed case studies explaining how specific bodies of research influenced legislation, professional standards, industry practices or public understanding. These submissions are reviewed by expert panels and linked to funding outcomes.

When a quarter of public research funding is contingent on impact performance, institutional behaviour adjusts.[4] A complex balance sheet of progress and challenge has emerged after more than a decade of implementation. Preparing REF submissions has required universities to invest in professional impact officers, improved data systems and closer tracking of external engagement. At the same time, the process has raised transaction costs, concentrated attention on research rather than teaching and broader engagement and, at times, incentivised performative responses. It remains difficult to determine empirically to what extent the REF has increased the overall production of societally impactful research, as opposed to primarily improving the documentation thereof.[5]

Despite these caveats, the structural significance of the REF is clear. It has normalised the idea that translating research beyond publications is legitimate academic work—and it made that legitimacy consequential. Where influence was once treated as incidental, it has become something to organise for. There is little doubt that the result is a *more engaged* higher education sector.

Across these examples, what marks the impact turn in research is not a retreat from rigour but an extension of rigour to pathways of use. Impact does not follow reliably from excellence alone. It becomes more likely when institutions treat uptake as an organisational capability and adjust their internal architecture accordingly.

BEYOND RESEARCH: EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT REWIRED

The same logic is increasingly visible in education and community engagement. For much of the twentieth century, universities relied on an implicit contract with labour markets: provide rigorous education and employers will recognise its value. In more volatile labour markets shaped by technological change and AI-enabled automation, that assumption has weakened. Students and governments scrutinise employability, mobility and return on investment more closely. Employers want graduates who can not only master disciplinary content, but also apply it in dynamic environments, collaborate across boundaries and adapt to evolving technologies.

Again, the question is not whether universities value employability or engagement in principle. The question is whether those aims are built into the institution's design or left to individual initiatives and patchwork programmes.

Northeastern University's cooperative education model

Northeastern University offers a distinctive example of how one institution has responded vigorously and innovatively in this domain. Its long-standing "cooperative education model" integrates extended, paid months-long work placements into degree programmes at scale. Students graduate having spent roughly a third of their degree programmes working in professional environments alongside their academic studies.

The value this creates flows in multiple directions. Students earn competitive wages during co-op placements, reducing the debt burden of a degree while building professional networks before graduation; many receive full-time offers from their co-op employers. Employers gain access to a talent pipeline already tested under professional conditions, reducing the costly uncertainty of graduate hiring. Northeastern, meanwhile, turns demonstrable graduate outcomes—tracked systematically, not inferred from reputation—into a strategic differentiator at a moment when the employment value of a degree faces unprecedented scrutiny. The university grew from a regional commuter school into a nationally ranked university in large part because this model created durable, reciprocal value for every party involved.[6]

The point is not that every university should replicate Northeastern's approach. It reflects particular institutional history and decades of investment in employer relationships. The point is that workforce alignment becomes far more credible when it is designed into programmes, supported by sustained employer relationships and measured through outcomes rather than asserted through reputation.

Arizona State University's public engagement model

Arizona State University (ASU)'s "New American University" model provides the most ambitious illustration of this commitment, pursued at extraordinary scale. Under President Michael Crow, ASU explicitly rejected the traditional equation of excellence with selectivity, arguing instead that a public research university should be measured by whom it includes and what it contributes.[7] ASU has grown to become one of the largest universities in the United States by enrolment while simultaneously increasing the proportion of low-income and first-generation students—all while improving graduation rates.

ASU's community engagement model is among the key features of the model—shifting from episodic service to sustained partnership that leaves durable capacity behind. Community-based projects are institutionally supported at scale rather than dependent on individual faculty champions. Long-term partnerships with local organisations in the Phoenix metropolitan area connect research and teaching to regional challenges in sustainability, public health and workforce development. Faculty receive support in embedding community engagements into curricula; and crucially, outcomes are evaluated for both student learning and community benefit.

Engagement of this sort does not scale on goodwill alone, requiring scaffolding that most universities have not yet built: dedicated partnership offices, funding streams that support multi-year engagement, promotion systems that recognise externally engaged scholarship alongside traditional publications and data systems that track sustained outcomes for community partners. Without these structures, engagement risks remaining episodic and dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than institutional design.

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AGAINST THE GRAIN: WHY REFORM IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

It would be misleading to suggest that most universities have ignored the impact imperative. On the contrary, service-learning initiatives are now widely recognised as "high-impact" educational practices; community engagement offices have proliferated; mission statements routinely invoke societal contribution; and few institutions would dispute that research and teaching should leave durable value beyond campus. The more difficult question is why the gap between aspiration and delivery persists so widely. The answer is not primarily a deficit of intention. It is a function of governance and incentives.

Brian Rosenberg, president emeritus of Macalester College, makes this case with unusual candour in '*Whatever It Is, I'm Against It*': *Resistance to Change in Higher Education*. Rosenberg's diagnosis is structural. Shared governance—the power-sharing arrangement between governing boards, presidents and faculty that is the constitutional DNA of most Anglo-American universities—requires consensus before action. "Anyone who studies organisational change will tell you that consensus is the enemy of change," he writes. "Most transformational change happens or originates with a smaller group of people. That's antithetical to the way shared governance works."[8] A reform that requires the approval of faculty senates, curriculum committees, accreditation bodies and department chairs is a reform that will move slowly, if at all.

Rosenberg argues that tenure compounds this inertia: once awarded, faculty members are, "frozen in place for as long as they choose to be."[9] And the incentive problem runs deeper still, because higher education has no internal constituencies reliably incentivised to push for transformation. Faculty identify with their disciplines rather than their institutions. Administrators are rewarded for stability. External rankings reward prestige and research volume more reliably than societal outcomes. In such a system, universities may adopt impact language and even build impact units while leaving the core determinants of behaviour untouched.

This is why success stories tend to share certain features. ASU, Northeastern and similar institutions typically began their reform journeys when they had less to lose from change than inaction. They were led by presidents who achieved unusual longevity in office and genuine strategic authority, willing to act before full consensus materialised.

A pessimistic read of Rosenberg's work suggests that crisis may be a more common catalyst than persuasion. More constructively, however, he implies that leaders who recognise the design problem can still shift institutions—but only by aligning governance, incentives and resources around the change they claim to want.

ORGANISING FOR IMPACT—AND WHY IT MATTERS BEYOND CAMPUS

Once the impact turn is framed as an organisational design problem, a familiar failure mode becomes easier to name. Indeed, aligning research, education and engagement around societal contribution is an organisationally demanding commitment. Adding expectations for impact without adjusting structures risks what Rosenberg calls reform theatre—an institution can hire impact officers, publish an impact strategy and commission reports about community engagement without changing a single promotion criterion that shapes the day-to-day choices of researchers and teachers.

Singapore Management University's Office of Impact

Recently established but building on longstanding commitments to external engagement, Singapore Management University's Office of Impact illustrates both the promise of this agenda and the early-stage complexity of institutionalising it. Still in its formative phase, the office is less a finished model than an experiment in structural alignment. Its strategy combines several strands: revising faculty promotion and performance appraisal criteria to more explicitly recognise demonstrated societal impact; developing structured impact case studies as both learning tools and external signals; strengthening pathways for faculty engagement and co-production with societal partners; and improving the systems by which research insights are translated and made visible beyond academic journals. The aim is not to layer impact activity on top of existing structures, but to adjust the incentives and scaffolding that shape how academic work travels outward.

The challenges ahead may be considerable, but they are broadly predictable. Impact unfolds over years, whereas performance reviews are annual. Attribution is diffuse while disciplinary norms remain powerful. Engagement requires collaboration across schools and administrative units that operate with distinct priorities and rhythms. None of these tensions are signs of failure; they are features of the institutional design Rosenberg describes. Whether such reforms take root will depend less on rhetorical commitment than on sustained attention to incentives, evaluation processes, partnership infrastructure and resource allocation—a gradual recalibration rather than a dramatic pivot.

The broader relevance of the impact imperative extends beyond higher education. Corporations face parallel tensions as ESG expectations intensify: publishing sustainability reports is considerably easier than aligning executive incentives and capital allocation with environmental and social goals. Philanthropic foundations grapple with measuring systems change without distorting grantee behaviour. Governments oscillate between performance metrics and broader notions of public value. In this wider landscape, universities are both subjects and exemplars—under pressure to demonstrate value while convening the expertise needed to shape societal debates about what value means. The lesson is not that universities have solved the problem. It is that some are demonstrating, concretely and at scale, that it is worth attempting, both for the value created for stakeholders and for their long-term legitimacy and credibility.

CONCLUSION

The impact turn is a recalibration that a small number of universities are pursuing with a systematic approach, and that many more are contemplating but struggling to initiate or scale. Levine and Van Pelt frame the historical stakes clearly: higher education is entering a period of disruption as profound as any since the Industrial Revolution, and institutions that adapt on their own terms will fare better than those that wait to be remade by others. Rosenberg supplies the counterweight: the likelihood of rapid, widespread reform is low, given how systematically universities are designed to resist it.

Both perspectives are right at once. The evidence from institutions such as ASU and Northeastern suggests that more impact-oriented models can be built and sustained. The harder question is how many universities and institutions will have the leadership resolve, institutional positioning and willingness to experiment that such change demands,[10] and what discernible shifts in the wider ecosystem will follow. In a world where legitimacy increasingly hinges on visible, credible societal contribution, the cost of not finding that combination is rising.

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