

University and Research Leadership Forum

Universities 4.0 Discussion Paper

Drivers of Resilience, Prosperity, and Recovery



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The days when universities were habitually described as ivory towers seem long gone. The worldwide response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been led by scientific discovery and will be solved by a vaccine developed in collaboration between science and industry. In many different parts of the world, policy-makers and industry have grasped the power of universities to accelerate prosperity, prepare a well-trained labour force with advanced-level skills, address wicked social and environmental challenges and to support soft power agendas. Now, alongside resilience and prosperity, universities will play a vital role in driving recovery in physical, psychological, economic and social terms. Universities often find themselves playing the role of anchor institutions in their local communities at the same time as partnering for impact in their global operations. With their set of values and the importance of openness to knowledge and impact, universities are uniquely well-placed to rebuild and drive inclusive and sustainable growth. Multi-faceted resilience will be the foundation stone of this effort.

The term often used to describe this outreach of research, education and innovation is 'translation'. Universities are now increasingly measured for their capacity to achieve not just scientific impact but also impact on wider society, cultural life and the economy. As policy-makers continue to discuss whether higher education is a public or a merit good and thus frame universities more strongly as political actors than has hitherto been the case, universities increasingly occupy a space as knowledge translation agents. This is an exciting development and also fraught with challenge.

We argue here that the translation role of universities can be ideally harnessed and supported by the convening power of GFCC. Bringing the education, research and innovation power of universities into structured contact with industry and the third sector helps promote economic, cultural and social impact which in turn virtuously informs the core missions of the same universities. Moreover, universities pursue a values-rich agenda that enables them to build trust – where others at times may struggle.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis creates a major challenge as well as an enviable opportunity for the university sector. Apart from the obvious financial risks that COVID-19 poses for academia, it also creates the challenge for universities to adapt to developing realities of social distancing and the need to move traditional face to face education delivery to online learning. This challenge is not a straightforward one and it needs to be addressed in an effective way within a short period of time. If universities cannot adapt to this change in the delivery of teaching, which may need to stay place well beyond the initial impact of COVID-19, then academia will have become a more agile environment able to withstand future similar challenges.

In addition, the COVID-19 crisis, gives the opportunity to the university to showcase its value in bringing together research activities with the common aim of combating the virus, both its health impact but also its wider impact on economies, social norms and human behaviour. GFCC can have a very significant role to play in this by bringing together the network of academic and corporate partner in a dialogue of how to address the broader challenges of COVID-19.

We argue that with new political, social and economic uncertainties potentially dangerous faultlines are beginning to emerge that will do serious damage to global prosperity and social resilience (n.b. meaning uncertainty management rather than self-reliance). This is the time to build bigger coalitions across sectors to effect a significant scale shift and thus embed lasting impact.

What is the Type of Impact Universities Can Have? How Should They Engage With Stakeholders?

Universities play a major role in economic, cultural and societal development in various ways:

- Universities are engines of economic growth;
- Universities can become accelerators where the multiple challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis can be addressed;
- Universities can contribute to the well-being of communities;
- Universities can assess the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on society, contribute to society's adaptation to this pandemic, and the preparation of society for the next event of a similar magnitude;
- Universities attract global talent and foster mobility;
- Universities help address societal challenges; and
- Universities foster creativity and open debate.

University research contributes to society as a whole, and there are numerous examples of the impact the pursuit of research has on economic and social welfare. Research enhances the knowledge base of our society, introducing new perspectives to cultural and ethical debates. In doing so it reaches beyond the codified knowledge unique to academia, disseminating expert knowledge in ways that are relevant, accessible, and of value to a wide audience. Universities should fully embrace the societal impact agenda, safe in the knowledge that it is fully compatible with their historical fundamental missions of knowledge creation and transmission. Universities can play an important role in seeking to support and promote societal impact as a dynamic, open, and networked process in a culture of sustained engagement and co-production of knowledge.

Research has led to social debates on ethical values, making a vital contribution to fundamental shifts in attitudes and policy and promoting a stable and progressive society. Universities are creating and collaborating actively in a node of networks globally. Universities are increasingly recognising their need to operate as a node within a network. Networks are an effective way of organising and mobilising knowledge and cooperation. In that spirit, academic institutions fill a growing need to connect with other like-minded players who are experimenting with shifting institutions and systems. The GFCC is admirably placed to play a convening role as such a network – open to the world.

Universities should engage with stakeholders across the broad spectrum of the research ecosystem, including governments, research funders, the private sector, civil society, and society at large, so as to foster a better understanding of impact, to develop future-oriented policies, and implement innovative practices based on the concept of impact described in this paper. To achieve this, universities should, as a consequence, develop open, explicit, and transparent reward systems that include the value of all kinds of impact, reward it, and take it into account for individual promotion. They should avoid (inadvertently) creating or following perverse incentive systems.

If universities were to embrace more ambitious stakeholder engagement, they must become more agile in the approach to traditional means of education and knowledge dissemination and more readily identify:

- Relevant research topics, data/case study sources, and funding;
- Courses that employers need and students want;
- How to leverage industrial and other partnership at scale;
- Ways in which alumni can help; and
- Ways to effectively influence thinking and behaviour towards more sustainable practices at home and at work.

Identifying stakeholder concerns is likely to give rise to opportunities as this can address the barriers to incorporating sustainability into strategy. A systematic approach to identifying the key stakeholders makes for a relevant and contemporary strategy of universities and can address risks to achieving it. Being attuned to stakeholder expectations increases the chances of delivering on strategy. Some of the best innovations arise from cross-functional and multidisciplinary engagement. This can be a particular challenge for universities where budget models, leadership styles and territorial cultures need to be addressed. Universities often lack mechanisms to facilitate multi-disciplinary research that can be relevant for stakeholders. The approach to engaging stakeholders should consider what their stake is, what their key concerns are and what expectations they have from engaging with the universities.


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