



Five ways universities are organising themselves to increase societal impact

Julie Munk, So Jung Rim & Louise Pulford
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Introduction - What are universities for?

For many, universities and higher educational institutions continue to be viewed as elitist and isolated institutions, with little connection to the society, communities and organisations around them. Indeed, universities are large, bureaucratic organisations, and many still operate in this stereotyped ‘traditional’ way. However, at a time when the challenges facing society are increasing in scale and complexity, traditional institutions, from banks to the public service to NGOs, have begun reviewing their roles, in an effort to be more collaborative. Universities are no different.

Aside from the major responsibility of education and knowledge, what purpose do universities serve? Many academic institutions around world are beginning to recognise their role in creating political, economic and social value, as well as their ability to become an ‘embedded brain’ within society. The vast resources, research capabilities and connections which universities hold can foster, promote, and lead social innovation globally.

There are multiple ways for this to be achieved. There are several approaches to leverage their social innovation power, from the way they organise themselves internally, to the way they collaborate with each other and other actors. Whether it be business schools or labs, we are seeing universities experimenting with and changing the usual ways of working. At SIX we argue that a new era of universities for social innovation is emerging globally.

Below we have identified 5 ways that universities are embracing social innovation. We call them new ways of organising. Under each, we have provided cases in which new approaches are being operationalised and tested. This article is not designed to be an in-depth, comprehensive study. Rather, it is a high-level scan of global examples.

1. Creating spaces and changing structures internally

Labs, institutes- spaces for experimentation

The most common way universities organising themselves differently is through their structure. . There has been a new wave of labs, units and departments inside universities all over the world. They infiltrate the larger institutional systems to different extents - some influence institutional systems from the periphery, whilst others influence from inside within specific departments.

A current trend is the creation of **innovation labs** - spaces where universities can experiment and test new ideas and approaches. This is a well-known concept from the places where ‘labs’ have their origin; tech, bio and natural sciences. However labs - as institutional organisations- are still relatively new in social sciences and humanities. There are primarily three types of labs emerging – design schools working on social challenges in the community, policy labs working in partnerships with government, and labs that function



internally with the purpose of working across institutions to foster internal change. ESADE Business School in Spain is in the process of publishing a scan on lab trends around the world which informs this work. Other well-established examples include: The [POLIMI-DESIS Lab](#), based in the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano, Italy explores how design can enable people, communities, and enterprises to activate and manage innovation processes. The Milano DESIS lab focuses on food, urban, mobility, distributed manufacturing and housing systems. This lab is part of a network of 46 design schools around the world. (See also networks section below.)

The [Melbourne Policy Lab](#) and the [Cambridge Policy Labs](#) have a more policy-orientated focus and use design techniques to work with government and society on public policy design experiments and policy-relevant research.

[I-Lab at Harvard University](#) has a more internal function, helping to foster innovation and entrepreneurship across the university. Similarly, ESADE Business School are developing a lab in their [Institute for Social innovation](#), which will have a similar cross university function. There are also several other kinds of **units and departments** that are dedicated spaces for social innovation.

Many focus on design specifically. The d.school at Stanford, the New School at Parsons and the [Centre for Social Design, MICA](#), Central St Martins and Goldsmiths in the UK all place creativity at the core and use design to demonstrate new ways to tackle societal challenges.

Several universities have research centres focussing on social impact, innovation and more broad social innovation research - global examples include [Center for Social Impact Swinburne and The Social Impact Hub in Australia](#), [Jindal Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship \(JSiE\), Jindal Global University](#), [the Social Lab at Lee Kyan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore](#); Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, whilst the most well known is [Stanford Center for Social Innovation](#).

2. Embracing a network approach

Partnerships, Collaborations - networks for change

Universities are creating and collaborating actively in a node of networks globally. Traditionally universities have produced experts in ivory towers, however, they 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.

[Ashoka U Changemaker Campus](#) is a network of 40 institutions who are re-envisioning the role of higher education. Universities go through a selection process to become part of a group that builds social innovation into an institutional culture. [DESIS](#) network, mentioned above, is another network of 46 design global labs, located within institutions. Their purpose is to promote design for social innovation in higher education institutions, so as to generate useful design knowledge and to create meaningful social changes in collaboration with stakeholders.

European Union projects provide prompts that facilitate the start of cross-regional networks and collaboration. The [LASIN](#) and [SEASIN](#) projects (supported by the Erasmus+ programme



of the European Commission and led by [Glasgow Caledonia University](#)) are developing regional networks of universities in Latin America and Southeast Asia, that are supporting social innovation in the communities around them, whilst engaging their students beyond the classroom.

Universities are also forming long-term cross-sectoral partnerships. [The University of Waterloo](#) in Canada is one of the founding partner of a collaborative partnership with [SiG](#), The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the MaRS Discovery District, and the PLAN Institute. The aim is to support whole system change through changing the broader economic, cultural and policy context in Canada to allow social innovations to flourish.

3. Redefining their strategy

Strategy, policy - changing institutional frameworks/ systems /mindset & culture shift

“The Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences has declared a commitment to social innovation and embedded creativity. This is embodied in the breadth of expertise of our staff and in their imaginative, interdisciplinary and problem-based approaches to learning and research.” (University of South Australia Department of Education, Art and Social Sciences, 2016)

As the above statement explains, the [University of South Australia](#) is one example of how universities are articulating their social innovation responsibility.

Other examples include the [Copenhagen Business School](#) with their ‘Business in Society Strategy, a strategy based on the principle that universities hold a core duty as changemakers. The strategy is set out alongside the university’s aim to engage in context-driven, problem-focused knowledge production. Another example is the [Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge](#) who highlight themselves as a ‘platform for research and engagement with social innovators, academia and policy in UK and across the world’ and their primary focus is ‘to understand, promote, and engage with social innovators and create and support social ventures and projects.’ Whilst [Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland](#), the university for the Common Good, promote social innovation through their teaching practice and student activity.

The [Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#) is the first academic centre in Africa dedicated to advancing social innovation and entrepreneurship at a societal level. Established as a specialist centre at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) in late 2011, in partnership with the [Bertha Foundation](#), it is a great example of a strategy that is embedded in all activities. The Centre is now a leading academic centre in Africa. Its mission is to pursue social impact towards social justice in Africa, through teaching, knowledge-building, convening and catalytic projects with a specific focus on social innovation. In collaboration with the GSB, the Centre has integrated social innovation into the business school curriculum, established a wide community of practitioners and awarded over six million Rand in scholarships to students from across Africa. Additionally, it provides thought leadership to the field globally, including on social finance and systems change.



4. Preparing students for the real world

Programmes, student experience, curriculum

Societal readiness and real social impact requires new ways of educating. Put broadly, this encompasses new and cross-discipline training opportunities and real-life engagement for students.

Universities are increasingly transforming their student programmes allowing closer interaction with real-life experiences and cases as part of the curriculum. This transformation is about changing the way education is taught and how knowledge is created. Simultaneously, it is about building a stronger bridge between students and their future work-life, providing them with opportunities to engage in practice and equipping them with skills to act in a cross-disciplinary way.

At the [ESADE Business School](#), the [Design Thinking for Business Innovation](#) programme-hosted with [Aalto University Executive Education](#) - is an example of this model of education. Students work on place-based actions focusing on, for instance, customer value mapping, prototyping and experimentation. Student teams apply these approach to solve challenges such as “How to fight digital piracy?”, “How to redesign the patient experience in primary care of a hospital?” or “How could personal transport solutions be produced and purchased as a service?”. Not only are the students educated and trained in new methods, but they are also connected to organisations and businesses where they might be able to engage and find work afterwards. Especially as companies begin to use more design thinking to improve services, internal processes and create new products.

In Switzerland, [Challenge Based Innovation \(CBI\)](#) is another example where multidisciplinary student teams and their instructors collaborate with researchers to discover novel solutions for the future of humankind. The projects are an elaborate mix, where technologies derived from research at [CERN](#) meet societal, human-driven needs.

In Australia the UniSA's [MatchStudio](#) is a dynamic space where students, academics and researchers can step outside of their knowledge domains to generate out-of-the-box ideas and co-create feasible innovations that address challenges faced by society. It draws upon more than 45 academic disciplines and develops project-specific interdisciplinary communities of practice that approach problems from new and user-focused perspectives to help local communities.

Universidad de Desarrollo (UDD) in Chile, in partnership with Miguel Kast Foundation, set up the [Social Innovation Institute](#) to prepare students and changemakers for the development and support their social ventures and initiatives. The institute works with the Government of Chile to select and fund the best social entrepreneurship ideas.

The University of Northampton, in the UK takes a different approach. Despite not being recognised for academic excellence, they have an extremely high employment rate for graduating students. Their focus is on the student experience, and a new, different, kind of curriculum and timetable is in process of being rolled out university wide.

New academic courses have been introduced that help young people continue to study a variety of science and humanity courses, rather than specialising. Whilst not having an practical element, the principle behind these courses is that in order to tackle societal challenges, ideas and solutions can be drawn from several disciplines. 2 courses available in



the UK are [the UCL combined Arts & Sciences degree](#) and [University of Birmingham Liberal Arts and Sciences degree](#).

In contract, as a funder, capacity builder and convener, [RECODE](#) in Canada supports the capacity of schools to weave social innovation tools and practices into the very fabric of campus and community culture.

5. Building shared knowledge

Developing research - shared definitions, theory of social innovation and cross-sectoral research areas

There is recognition that despite thriving practitioner networks and a real commitment from policymakers and foundations to support social innovation, empirical and theoretical knowledge of social innovation remains uneven.

Many universities have been interested in building this knowledge base and the European Union is a driving force that supports multiple research projects with such a focus. Dortmund University is leading a European Union funded project, [SI-Drive](#), a research project aimed at extending knowledge about social innovation (SI) through European and global mapping, as well as connecting policymakers and practitioners. [TRANSIT](#) is a research project led by [DRIFT](#) that develops a theory of transformative social innovation, focussed on empowerment and change within society. [TEPSIE](#) is a research collaboration between six European institutions aimed at understanding the theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for developing the field in Europe. The project explores the barriers to innovation, as well as the structures and resources that are required to support social innovation at the European level.

Research conferences and events are another way of building the cross-disciplinary research community focusing on social innovation. The aim of [Social Frontiers Research Conference](#) in London (2013) and in Vancouver (2014), was to build and strengthen the cross-disciplinary community of researchers, in order to develop a more robust foundation for social innovation. [EMES](#) is a research network consisting of 11 institutional members, which creates common initiatives, opportunities for exchange and events with peer networks. The purpose of the network is to build up an international corpus of theoretical and empirical knowledge, pluralistic in disciplines and methodologies, around “SE” concepts: social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, social economy, solidarity economy and social innovation.

Another way of disseminating knowledge is through publication (both online and print) activities. [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) is a quarterly magazine published by Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at Stanford University and aims to advance, educate, and inspire the field of social innovation by seeking out, cultivating, and disseminating research and practice-based knowledge.

Concluding thoughts - Creating a global mindset shift

The question, what universities are for, is being asked more frequently. But transforming big institutions, and the system of academia that surrounds them is no easy task. Mindset is a



binding element of all the examples we introduced above. But the cultural shift needed can be huge, and it can't happen without all parts of the institution being involved- from senior leadership, to teaching staff, to administrative and communication offices, to students, to alumni. For each of these groups of people, the approach to change will be different.

This work is hard. The organisations listed above are brave in their attempts to try new ways of doing things, and they need peer support. At SIX, we are beginning to collect more examples of universities that are trying out new methods which will help them increase their impact in, with and for society. We are developing a new piece of work to connect them to their peers, and to highlight these new approaches, in order to spread them more widely. We will only be able to fully support the needed new mind-sets and modes of work if we come together and join our efforts for societal impact.

Do you belong in this field, or know of initiatives that should be included? Please join us in our exploration and peer learning to transform the way academic institutions engage in the society.

If we have missed your organisation, or if you would like to work with us to develop this work further, please get in contact.

Recommended reading

[Three Ways Universities Can Dramatically Advance Social Enterprise](#)

[Innovating Together: Collaboration As A Driving Force To Improve Student Success](#)

[Robin Dick on the social innovation landscape & changemaker education](#)

[College for social innovation](#)

[Global universities of the 21st century](#)

[Why universities don't just need more innovation – but also more of a system for making the most of the best ideas](#)

[The challenge-driven university: how real-life problems can fuel learning](#)

[Recode Resources for Schools: Building Social Infrastructure & Retreat Report](#)