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Moving beyond traditional measures – lessons from evaluating collaborative initiatives at Lund University

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Abstract

Over the last decade, universities and other institutions of higher education (HEIs) worldwide have witnessed an evolution to their role relative to society – with increasing attention to external engagement and expectations on societal impact. This has fostered an upswing in activity as research and innovation funding bodies and universities alike explore new approaches to working with external engagement, and led to questions regarding how to evaluate the societal impact of these efforts. Although there are examples of national frameworks to evaluate research impact, the large majority of countries and HEIs around the world are still experimenting with approaches to evidence and assess their pathway to societal impact. This paper aims to contribute to evolving practice in this field by presenting lessons from the evaluation of a new strategic instrument (thematic collaboration initiatives) at Lund University (LU), Sweden.

The evaluation of the strategic instrument “thematic collaboration initiatives” encompassed both initiative/operational and LU leadership/strategic levels. The approach to the evaluation combined traditional measures and processes, together with new indicators and evaluation approaches. The evaluation has resulted in a better understanding of the range of activities and outputs that one can expect from such collaborative initiatives – informing the selection of measures to include in evaluation efforts. The evaluation also provided new insights on how universities can work with and use evaluation to guide the further development of the university’s approach to fostering external engagement. Participatory processes and facilitated reflection were very beneficial to draw out multiple perspectives and possible implications for future development of the instrument.

Keywords

Evaluating universities’ external engagement, societal collaboration and impact

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, universities and other institutions of higher education (HEIs) worldwide have witnessed an evolution to their role relative to society – with increasing attention to external engagement and societal impact in relation to research funding, university rankings, and even national legal frameworks. This, in turn, has led to questions on how universities can work more strategically to foster external engagement, as well as how they can evaluate the societal impact of these efforts.

Universities need to constantly assess how they can best serve society in the short- and long-term, as a moderating force but also as drivers of development. Although some countries (notably the [UK](#) and [Australia](#)) have already implemented national frameworks

to evaluate and allocate research funding based on impact, the large majority of countries and HEIs around the world are still experimenting with new approaches to evidence and assess their pathway to societal impact (van den Akker and Spaapen, 2017).

In Sweden, recent research and innovation bills stress the important role of HEIs' collaboration with surrounding society to tackle crises and address societal challenges. Although there is increasing attention to impact cases and other methods to analyse HEIs' societal collaboration and impact (Vetenskapsrådet, 2020), there is no national framework, set of measures or standard process to assess HEIs' societal impact. Thus, Swedish universities are actively exploring and developing their own measures and methods for evaluating societal impact.

This paper aims to contribute to evolving practice of assessing societal collaboration and impact by presenting lessons from the evaluation of a new strategic instrument (thematic collaboration initiatives) at Lund University (LU) in Sweden – providing insights on both the university's strategic approach to foster external engagement, as well as the measures and approaches used to evaluate these efforts.

Following this introduction, the next section reviews the background to this topic – both in terms of academic theory and in terms of shifts in HEI policy, strategy and practice related to societal impact (and its evaluation). In section 3, the empirical case is described, including an overview of LU's instrument “thematic collaboration initiatives” and the approach taken for its evaluation. Results from the evaluation and a discussion of lessons learned are presented in section 4. Finally, conclusions and next steps are presented in section five.

2 Background

Universities (or institutions for higher education – HEIs) are integral parts of their surrounding societies. The central role assigned to knowledge for societal and economic development has resulted in a rise in the size of universities and the resources at their disposal, as well as growing expectations and pressures on universities to assume a broader responsibility and contribute to societal development, together with relevant stakeholders (see, among others, Perez Vico et al., 2017). In addition to their missions of education and research, universities have a “third mission” to contribute to the socio-economic development of the places where they are located.

This “third mission” of universities (Laredo, 2007; Nedeva, 2008; Pinheiro et al., 2015) involves interaction with societal groups and has adopted various conceptual forms over the years. For instance, concepts like technology transfer (e.g. Bozeman, 2000; Breznitz and Feldman, 2012), academic entrepreneurship (e.g. Clark, 1998; Shane, 2004) or the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz, 2001) put a focus on innovation and commercialisation of knowledge. Later, regional systems of innovation literature and the rise of regional smart specialisation strategies highlighted a key role for universities in the development of the regions in which they are rooted (Goddard and Puukka, 2008;

Goddard, 2009; Goddard, Kempton and Vallance, 2013; Kempton et al., 2014). More recent academic literature highlights the role that universities can play as curators of learning, knowledge and thinking, as well as catalysts of change – contributing proactively to responses to major societal challenges and driving sustainable transformation processes (Trencher et al., 2014; Aranguren et al., 2016; Benner and Schwaag Serger, 2017; Weber and Newby, 2018; Schwaag Serger et al., 2021; Aranguren et al., forthcoming). In this work, external engagement and societal collaboration is considered as a reciprocal interactive process based on mutual knowledge creation and diffusion (rather than a unidirectional transfer process). This implies that interaction and reciprocity between academic actors and external actors is a key fundament in societal collaboration.

As the conceptual understanding of universities’ “third mission” has evolved (from entrepreneurial to civic, and now to transformative universities), so too has the approach for evaluation. In the early 2000s, frameworks for evaluation focused on measures of knowledge/technology transfer and the valorisation of research (e.g. third party research, co-production of knowledge, use of research facilities/infrastructure, intellectual property, academic spin-off companies) (Molas-Gollart et al., 2002). Later, measures for assessing “the entrepreneurial university” evolved to include aspects related to strategy, leadership and governance; organisational capacity, people and incentives; and monitoring and learning activities (EU and OECD, 2012).

More recently, we witness a further evolution of the conceptual understanding as well as the types of measures used to evaluate the “third mission” (Wolf et al., 2013; Thune et al., 2016; Blasi et al., 2019). As elaborated in Reed et al. (2021), evaluation of research impact on society is a process of assessing the significance and reach of research over different time scales, social scales (from individuals to society), spatial scales (from local to international) and across multiple domains (including social, economic, environmental, health and well-being, and cultural). In addition, to the ultimate impact domains, there are a range of intermediary domains where impacts can occur, including understanding/awareness, attitudinal change, behaviour change and decision-making, policy and capacity building. Thus, evaluation of impact must go beyond the measurement of outcomes to more nuanced assessments of tacit and implicit effects of research that may need to be accessed indirectly and evaluated in qualitative terms (ibid.: 3). Recent evaluation measures include, e.g.:

- › Interdisciplinarity of research
- › Institutional factors
- › Modes of external engagement and productive interactions
- › Types of actors/actor groups involved in collaboration
- › Evidence of relevance and application/contribution to problem solving
- › Production of public goods (health, lifelong learning, cultural heritage) and other impacts of research on practice and society

In addition to an evolution in the measures used to evaluate impact, we also observe an evolution in the approaches to evaluation (including more involvement or feedback from practice and society; more attention to and documentation of significance, reach and attribution – “the pathway to impact”; as well as more reflective processes and formative feedback/learning loops).

Attention to universities’ societal impact is reflected not only in theory, but also in practice. We witness an increased use of these “new” measures of universities’ impact on society in university rankings (Times Higher Education 2021), and in the allocation, selection and evaluation of research funds (Jonkers and Zacharewicz, 2016; van den Akker and Spaapen, 2017; Arnold et al., 2018). The UK’s [Research Evaluation Framework](#) and Australia’s [Engagement and Impact Assessment](#) are among the most well-known examples of countries with significant components of engagement and impact as part of their national performance-based research frameworks.

In Sweden, the research and innovation bills in 2012, 2016 and 2020 have continued to stress the importance of research and knowledge in tackling crises and societal challenges, and the role of HEIs’ collaboration with surrounding society to address these challenges. Although there is increasing attention to impact cases and other methods to analyse HEIs’ societal collaboration and impact (Vetenskapsrådet, 2020), there is no national framework, set of measures or standard process to assess HEIs’ societal impact in Sweden. Rather, assessments take place within the framework of national quality assurance of higher education and research, under the responsibility of the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ).

Parallel to institutional evaluations of research quality, HEIs are exposed to evaluations of research impact through evolving demands in competitive research and innovation programmes (in applications and project evaluations). For instance, new approaches to assess socio-technical impact have been piloted in the evaluation of Vinnova’s Strategic Innovation Programmes (Åström and Arnold, 2020; Åström et al. 2020), and requirements for describing longer-term, system impacts are included in the Swedish Energy Agency’s recent call for competence centres (Swedish Energy Agency 2020). Thus, HEIs in Sweden are actively exploring and building capacity on approaches to evidence the societal impact of their work. The following sections present Lund University’s experience from developing and evaluating a new strategic instrument: thematic collaborative initiatives.

3 Empirical context and evaluation approach

3.1 Lund university’s thematic collaboration initiatives

After Sweden’s 2012 Research and Innovation Bill and the government assignment (to Vinnova, the Swedish Research Council, Formas and Forte) to design methods and criteria for assessment of performance and quality in higher education institutions’ (HEIs) collaboration with surrounding society, Vinnova initiated a series of activities to support and strengthen HEIs’ external collaboration efforts.¹ Among the most important results

of these activities was changed attitudes and working methods for HEIs' external collaboration. Charlotte Brogren (DG Vinnova 2009-2017) has said:

The focused strategic and operational development of HEIs' work with societal interaction has been the most important result. We've managed to plant a seed and initiate changed behaviour among Swedish HEIs (Wise et al., 2016: 35).

In the Government's 2016 research and innovation bill "Knowledge in collaboration - for society's challenges and strengthened competitiveness" (Swedish Government, 2016), continued focus was placed on the reinforcement of HEIs' collaboration with surrounding society and the connection between education and research. At Lund University (with a new management in 2015), a newly established External Engagement Council (2016)² and a new strategic plan³ highlighted "stimulation of active collaborations to solve societal challenges" as a priority area. Based on the strategic goal of "jointly identifying, prioritising and developing collaboration issues and increasing the opportunities for synergy effects between the faculties' areas of activity", the External Engagement Council launched a working group with representatives from five faculties with the task of developing an operational approach to respond to two main questions:

- (1) How can the university support the development of new challenges and ideas, sprung from society and cross-disciplinary research together?
- (2) How can this be done in a way which leads to impact in society?

The working group's proposal resulted in the launch of a new funding instrument called Lund University thematic collaboration initiatives (Swedish abbreviation TSI) – see Figure 1 below for the aims and modalities.

Figure 1: Strategic Aims and Modalities of Lund University's TSI instrument

Strategic Aims of the thematic collaboration initiatives (TSI):

- › To contribute to solutions of societal challenges within areas where Lund University has well established research which may contribute to future breakthroughs
- › To create platforms which provide good conditions for collaboration between researchers at Lund University and identified external partners
- › To stimulate collaboration across faculty borders and demonstrate good examples of collaboration projects
- › To give legitimacy and create time for researchers to develop/catalyse collaboration processes
 - To develop relationship with new/additional external parties
 - To be allowed/mandated to try new collaboration activities and/or new collaboration areas
 - To develop the individuals' competence to lead and run collaborative work

Modalities (the implementation frame for the TSI instrument):

- › Total committed investment over seven years (2017-2023) of 52 MSEK (around 5 MEUR), of which the initial 6 initiatives were collectively allocated 10,2 MSEK (around 1 MEUR)
 - Financing to individual initiatives: max 0,5 MSEK (50.000 EUR) per year for three years, with the possibility of a two-year extension (in 2019, the annual allocation was increased to 0,7 MSEK or 70.000 EUR)
 - Coordination and support from the university's central collaboration office
- › The External Engagement Council prepares proposals for budgets and handles the call text, selection and evaluation of the thematic collaboration initiatives
- › Decisions on the allocation of funds are made by the University Vice-Chancellor
- › The collaboration office (within the university's section for research, collaboration and innovation) supports with coordination, communication (internal/external), preparation of documentation, follow-up dialogues and support to the coordinators of the thematic collaboration initiatives

The call text outlined requirements for the initiatives to involve at least three faculties at the university, national and international partners within and beyond academia. Furthermore, the applications were evaluated on the basis of choice of societal challenge, co-workers' competence, and how the initiative could respond to its goals. A first call was announced in spring 2017, and since then calls have been announced 2018, 2019 and 2021. The response has exceeded expectations with a total of 81 applications submitted over the four call announcements (of which 30 applications were submitted in the first call). Of these, 20 initiatives were selected and have received funding and other support for up to five years (see Figure 1) to co-create and co-develop their own ideas through collaborative activities focused on global challenges.

In 2020 the first six initiatives ("Generation I") reached the end of the initial three-year period and were subject to an assessment of progress (see next section for details).

3.2 Evaluation of thematic collaboration initiatives

The evaluation of Lund University's strategic instrument "thematic collaboration initiatives" conducted in 2020 (Nilsson et al., 2020) included both the three-year assessment of the first generation of (six) thematic collaboration initiatives (operational level), as well as a review of the aims and achievements of the funding instrument

(strategic level). The objective of the evaluation exercise was to assess progress and realisation of goals (summative evaluation), as well as to inform the continued development of the individual initiatives and of the strategic instrument (formative or developmental evaluation). The approach to the evaluation combined traditional measures (e.g. number and volume of research applications) and processes (e.g. summary reports and evaluation panels), together with new indicators (e.g. visibility and development of the collaborative initiative) and processes (e.g. reflective discussions in focus groups and interactive consultations). The evaluation approach for operational and strategic levels is further elaborated below.

The **evaluation of the individual thematic collaboration initiatives** (six in “Generation I”) was focused on four *main questions* (outlined in the initial call text):

- (1) Have applications, made within the thematic initiative, resulted in research projects?
- (2) Has the initiative created external visibility, where the theme has been profiled as a strong area for Lund University?
- (3) Has the initiative advanced the field?
 - a. Effects/impact
 - b. Describe the collaborative processes
- (4) Assess a societal impact case study: Can *societal impact* of the Initiative’s knowledge dissemination be demonstrated already now or be expected within a period of ten years after the ending of your Initiative?

To monitor and evaluate these questions, the *measures* that were used included:

- › Number (and which) of faculties involved (at start and after three years)
- › Number (and type) of external actors involved (at start and after three years)
- › Number and funding levels for new research applications (submitted and approved)
- › Number and type of activities conducted for knowledge development and dissemination, and for raising visibility
- › Qualitative descriptions of development of collaboration processes
- › Qualitative description of short-term outcomes
- › Qualitative descriptions of longer-term outcomes and pathways to impact (through impact cases)

The *evaluation process* included self-reported information from the thematic collaboration initiatives at mid-term (1.5 years) and at the end of the three-year period. At mid-term, the initiatives gave oral presentations and were interviewed by the External Engagement Council’s working group. The mid-term presentations were based on parts of the questions (1, 2 and 3b) included in the call texts (see above). After three years, the

initiatives wrote a full self-assessment report (including data on activities, various output measures and an impact case). This report was reviewed and evaluated by the working group, and followed by an assessment interview with the External Engagement Council.

This process was complemented by an ongoing dialogue and other support activities provided by the collaboration office, including:

- › annual individual meetings with all coordinators (this dialogue was central to attaining a more detailed and balanced picture of the initiatives' development over time – particularly given their different starting points)
- › debrief sessions following the mid-term presentations
- › workshops on writing impact cases followed by feedback on the individual contributions to the three-year assessment

The evaluation of the strategic instrument was focused on two main *questions*:

- (1) Did the instrument achieve its initial aims?
- (2) What were perceived contributing/hindering factors?

To monitor and evaluate these questions, the *measures* that were used included:

- › A summary of the indicators/assessments of the first generation initiatives
- › A summary of the perceptions and suggestions for development

The *evaluation process* included a review of all documents relevant to the launch and implementation of the funding instrument thematic collaboration initiatives and interviews with two members of the External Engagement Council's working group (who were responsible for developing the initial proposal). In addition, workshops (or reflective discussions) were held with two focus groups (the initiative coordinators and the External Engagement Council's working group).

In the workshop with the *initiative coordinators* four questions were discussed:

- (1) What is the most important progression steps for your particular initiative? For the initiatives as a whole? For the university?
- (2) What characterizes a successful initiative?
- (3) How would you describe the significance of the funds and collaboration initiatives as an instrument of LU (both the funds and the support / strategic investment)? What is missing?
- (4) Development potential for financing collaboration. What advice do you want to give future management? How do you see LU's role in the future?

In the workshop with the *External Engagement Council's working group*, two questions were discussed:

- (1) Have the collaboration initiatives achieved the goals they intended to achieve? Have they achieved something that was not expected? Has the progression been as expected, or has it developed in another way?
- (2) Given the collaboration initiatives and their effects - What different ways forward do you see? How does LU want to benefit from lessons learned for the next step?

4 Evaluation results and discussion

4.1 Results from the evaluation

The **evaluation of the operational level** (the six “Generation I” initiatives) demonstrated clear progress in several of the *quantitative indicators measured*: number of faculties involved; number of external actors involved; number and funding levels for new research applications; number of activities conducted for knowledge development and dissemination, and for raising visibility (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Overview of results from the first generation of thematic collaboration initiatives (TSIs)

Results	Details
Increased cross-disciplinary work within Lund University	Between 3 to 7 faculties have been involved in each of the 6 initiatives, with cross-disciplinary work at Lund University.
Increased involvement of external partners	An increase in external engagement was seen over time. At the start, the 6 initiatives had 87 external partners involved; after three years they had increased to 170 external partners.
Strengthened research areas	Together the 6 initiatives had received approximately 200 MSEK (20 MEUR) in external research funding, and broadened their transdisciplinary research collaboration.
Developed new collaboration activities	Development of over 550 activities with external actors involved, and increased visibility of the work for a large range of relevant target groups.
Added value for external partners	The external partners which were involved in the 6 initiatives have described that their participation has led to positive effects for their professional work.

All six initiatives have managed to attract external funding, in total around 200 MSEK (approx.. 20 MEUR). Several of the initiatives have also seen an increase in external partners involved in collaborative activities. At the start in 2017, the six initiatives gathered a total of 87 external partners (listed in their applications). At the time of the three-year evaluation, this number had expanded to 170 external partners. The TSIs had

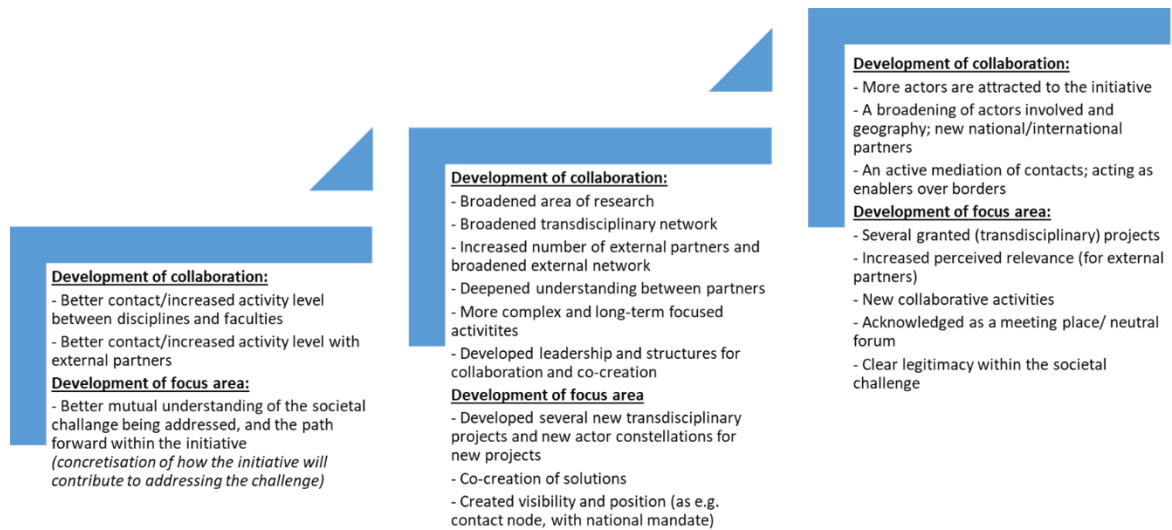
not only been fruitful with engaging external partners, but also with expanding their cross-disciplinary networks.

The money allocated to run the TSIs was targeted at initiating activities to strengthen and broaden collaboration and co-creation with external partners. The evaluation highlighted that the initiatives developed a large range of innovative and progressive ways to work with the needs identified with the external partners, which addressed the specific challenge they had in focus. In total, the six TSIs implemented 550 different events where external actors had been involved, ranging from traditional knowledge exchange (e.g. seminars, workshops, conferences, network-meetings, webinars and round-table-discussions) to more targeted activities to enhance dialogues (e.g co-creation dialogues, speed-dating, excursions, co-creation workshops, collaborative projects and educational events). Some activities have targeted society at large (e.g. events at the Political Week in Gotland, activities during the local Cultural Festival night in Lund, events at water festivals, interactive exhibitions, competitions, book clubs and book circles, book releases events and talk shows). To increase visibility, the initiatives have also worked with webpages, newsletters, books, networking and social media.

In addition to these quantitative measures, the coordinators of the TSIs described how their collaborative initiatives developed over time, and how the activities contributed to advancing the focus area and addressing the societal challenge. The qualitative descriptions of short-term outcomes and pathways to longer-term impact (through impact cases) have helped evidence how external partners' involvement in the collaborative activities of the TSI had led to positive effects in their professional work.

Complementing the written answers and impact cases submitted by individual TSIs, the workshop with initiative coordinators as a group (part of the **evaluation of the strategic instrument**) further synthesized an understanding of both the progression of collaboration over time and the coordinators' view of characteristics for a successful initiative. This resulted in a qualitative summary of the development of collaboration within the TSIs – referred to as “steps in a staircase” (see Figure 2 below). For each step, the collaboration is strengthened and broadened, the convening/leadership role of the initiative is more recognised, and the focus area with the societal challenge at its centre within each initiative is better understood and explored in more depth (with new questions and concrete actions).

Figure 2: Steps of collaborative development within the TSIs



This work highlighted additional *qualitative indicators* of collaborative development that can be tracked (not necessarily measured) including: deepening of the internal (transdisciplinary) collaboration, deepening of the collaboration with external partners, strengthened legitimacy and acknowledgment as an important actor (or platform) within the field, and strengthened visibility on the national or international scene.

The summary of results from the first generation of TSIs confirmed that the strategic aims of the instrument had been achieved (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Summary of TSI instrument – aims and results from the first generation (2017-2019)

Aims with TSI instrument

- Stimulate collaboration across faculties and demonstrate good examples of transdisciplinary collaborative projects
- Create platforms that provide good conditions for collaboration between researchers at Lund University and identified external partners
- Contribute to solutions of societal challenges within areas where Lund University has well-established research which may contribute to future breakthroughs

Results (examples from first generation)

- Cooperation between 3-7 faculties in each initiative; approved initiatives span over all LU faculties
- Increased engagement with external partners (87 at the start; 170 at the 3-year evaluation)
- Strengthened research areas and broadened transdisciplinary collaboration (initiatives have secured approximately 200 MSEK in new project financing)
- Development of new collaborative activities (550 external activities) and increased visibility with many different target groups
- Perceived effects among collaborative partners, addressing societal challenges

Furthermore, the reflective discussions held with the initiative coordinators and the External Engagement Council's working group provided additional insights areas for further development of the strategic instrument. These are presented in the next section.

4.2 Discussion of insights and lessons learned

The evaluation of the thematic collaboration initiatives (the operational level) combined quantitative and qualitative measures and a process of self-assessment reporting and panel evaluation to demonstrate that targeted results had been achieved. The evaluation of TSI as a strategic instrument focused on qualitative measures and reflective discussions (with TSI coordinators and the External Engagement Council's working group) to draw out insights about this attempt at a structured approach for strengthening Lund University's work to stimulate active collaborations to address societal challenges. These overall lessons learned are summarised below.

4.2.1 Lessons from the operational level – the six thematic collaboration initiatives

Running collaboration processes requires time, other types of activities and working methods as well as skills

Getting to know each other, starting work and building trust with researchers in other disciplines as well as with external parties requires time and other kinds of activities (in addition to activities for 'regular' research and education). Those who work with collaboration need a mandate and incentives to be able to do it as part of their core task. Running and developing collaborative processes with many actors requires structures and working methods that may need other types of support (e.g. with communication, websites and digital meeting places), exchange of experience and competence development.

Collaborative initiatives lead to results that cannot be described with traditional measures of research impact

The first generation of thematic collaboration initiatives has shown a diversity of results, not only in terms of increased research funding and more interdisciplinary research, but also in terms of increased engagement with external parties, enhanced external visibility, improved national and international position, contributions to broader regional and national strategies and policy work, and impact in society (in the short and long term). These kinds of results and advancement of collaboration are difficult to capture with traditional measures of success in the university world (with research funding, scientific publications etc. in focus). There is a need for a broader perspective and complementary way of describing the development of collaborative processes and subsequent results.

The management's introduction of thematic collaboration initiatives has given legitimacy to collaboration

The fact that it is the Vice-Chancellor and the management (through the External Engagement Council) that is behind TSI as an instrument has had great symbolic value and given the researchers legitimacy to "invest in collaboration". The funds have given the researchers the opportunity and support to run fast, agile processes and time to develop these processes. Having this type of instrument centrally at the university provides

transparency in the application and evaluation process, which is desirable. It also supports a process of shared learning that is made visible to and used within the entire organization.

4.2.2 Lessons from the strategic level – External Engagement Council and the Collaboration Office

To achieve solid collaboration between research fields and faculties, management and coordination are required

The objective of the thematic collaboration initiatives was ambitious. In order to mobilise researchers from all faculties, it was important that there was a clear direction and support from LU's management. Invested funds were crucial to free up time for the development of collaboration processes for the individual researchers. But an equally important success factor was the breadth and commitment of "non-financial support", which has been an integral part of the TSI as an instrument. Non-financial support has included: strategic anchoring with the faculties' managements, structured application processes with knowledgeable and experienced evaluators, continuous dialogue and follow-up, support for coordinators, communication and profiling.

To “capture the advancement of the field” requires new perspectives and a new approach to evaluation

The evaluation presented in this report has been based on documentation, interviews and workshops with the TSI coordinators. However, perspectives from external participating parties in the initiatives have only been obtained indirectly, i.e. via the coordinators.

The evaluation has a broad set of (both quantitative and qualitative) measures, which has been perceived to work well. But a challenge and difficulty has been to fairly capture and describe the various complex environments that the initiatives have built up through a limited selection of evaluation questions. As the starting positions of the individual TSIs have varied, the results and expected progression in the advancement of the field look are different. This requires a more nuanced approach to evaluation processes.

5 Conclusions and next steps

Universities need to constantly assess how they can best serve society. Although some countries have national frameworks to evaluate universities' societal impact, many HEIs around the world are still experimenting with new approaches to evidence and assess their pathway to societal impact. This paper has contributed to the evolving field of assessing societal collaboration and impact by presenting lessons from the evaluation of a new strategic instrument (thematic collaboration initiatives) at Lund university.

The evaluation has provided insights on both the university's strategic approach to foster external engagement, as well as the measures and approaches used to evaluate these efforts. The evaluation has resulted in a better understanding of the range of activities and outputs that one can expect from such collaborative initiatives – informing the selection

of measures to include in evaluation efforts. Traditional quantitative outcome measures (e.g. new research applications and funding) do not adequately capture the range of positive dynamics that were experienced. For this, it is important that evaluations include alternative indicators and qualitative descriptions of the development process (the pathway to societal impact).

The evaluation has also provided insights on the approach to evaluation. By applying developmental evaluation principles (Patton, 2016) such as participatory processes and facilitated reflection, the evaluation has provided information on not only the results and pathways to impact, but also the factors and frames (e.g. strategic mandate, anchoring across faculties, leadership/coordination capacity) that are needed to support changed mindset and working behaviours for collaborating with surrounding society.

Although this evaluation (measures and approach) has only included a limited set (of six) thematic collaboration initiatives (the first generation of the strategic instrument), the insights gained can be used to inform how LU (and other universities) can work with and use evaluation to guide the further development of the university's approach to fostering external engagement and evidencing societal impact.

Going forward, Lund University will continue to include alternative measures and means to track development over time, and will continue to build capacity in communicating impact stories. In addition, LU will explore new approaches to access external partners' perspectives on progress and involve them in participatory processes of reflection and strategic development.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.vinnova.se/m/universitet-och-hogskolors-strategiska-samverkan/program-for-okad-samverkan/>

² [Råd och nätverk | Lunds universitet](#)

³ [strategic_plan_2017-2026-updated030517.pdf \(lu.se\)](#)

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