

# Impact-driven education at Erasmus University Rotterdam

Impact at the Core, February 2023



## Colophon

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February 2023

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# Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. The Learning Landscape for Impact-driven education</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. The concept of impact capacity</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Changing roles and interactions in the impact learning environment</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5. Appropriate ways to assess impact-driven education</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6. Impact-driven education as a reflexive and academic process</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>7. A final note – about space for faculties to contextualise and differentiate</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>8. Appendix</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>17</b>



... 'Sometimes one sees in the school simply the instrument for transferring a certain maximum quantity of knowledge to the growing generation. But that is not right. Knowledge is dead; the school, however, serves the living'. (Einstein, 1973, p. 60)

## 1. Introduction

As a university, we take our public (or civic) role and responsibility seriously. Our society faces many complex and intricate challenges and struggles to find ways to approach them. As a university, we want to create positive societal impact (*Creating Positive Societal Impact, Strategy 2024*). We achieve positive impact if, through our teaching, research, and societal engagement, we make a (sustainable) contribution to a better understanding of societal issues, possible approaches to deal with these issues or the collective ability to develop and apply these approaches (*Defining Societal Impact at EUR, 2023*). This position paper further elaborates how we enhance the societal impact of our education.

With our education, we want to prepare our students for a world characterised by uncertainties, ambiguities and controversies. Our future academic professionals will be confronted with intricate challenges related to erratic and unpredictable changes: demographic, political, economic, social, environmental, ethical or otherwise. Students should be given the opportunity to learn how to approach them and how to contribute to a more sustainable and just world, increasing inclusiveness and reducing inequalities.

Therefore, we educate students to contribute meaningfully to a world that constantly surprises us and that requires us to continuously adjust our perspectives, by creating new academic knowledge, the ability to implement that knowledge and the ethical awareness of the ramifications that our actions have on our society.

Hence, a central aspect of our education is students acquiring knowledge, competences and the attitudes/mindset and values to identify and address societal urgencies in our society by entering into a reciprocal relationship with actors involved with a specific societal urgency, becoming aware of the ethical dimension of their actions. This we call **impact-driven education**. We explicitly refer to societal urgencies and not problems, thereby acknowledging the multi-layered and complex nature of societal issues. Refraining from using 'problems' and 'solutions' prevents the portrayal of situations as absolute. Impact-driven education enables students to approach these urgencies, utilising their capabilities and knowledge to contribute positively to society, including to address societal challenges, on different levels in different domains.

Different didactical and pedagogical approaches support impact-driven education: transformative learning, community service learning, problem-based learning and challenge-based learning.

This document defines our approach to impact-driven education at Erasmus University Rotterdam and its main characteristics. This definition allows for a variety of more concrete fill-ins.

Over the past years, all schools at Erasmus University have started to reassess their education, narrowing the distance between the complexities of our world and the classrooms. Together with the schools, the programme Impact at the Core has introduced projects that deal with societal urgencies and projects in which students were actively involved in issues by engaging with societal partners outside the university. Although we are still learning and finding out what makes the essence of impact-driven education and the competencies and skills related to that, e.g. what its learning outcomes are, what constitutes its learning environment and how to organise that effectively, right now, we can take stock of what we have already learned. This helps us to foster the transition we are in and to define our next steps.

In this document, we outline the foundational elements of impact-driven education. We can summarise them as follows:

1. Impact-driven education asks for a rich learning environment built around authentic urgencies, also referred to as the Learning Landscape of impact-driven education.

2. Impact-driven education aims to develop the ability of students to relate to and deal with urgencies, the *impact capacity* of students, fostering the ability to approach these urgencies critically and constructively.
3. Impact-driven education requires the active involvement of and collaboration between students, teachers and societal partners around societal urgencies. The ambition is to come to a jointly shared understanding of that specific urgency and to develop possible approaches to dealing with this urgency.
4. To develop the impact capacity of students, impact-driven education asks for new modes of assessment (i.e. integrative and/or portfolio assessment) that give students insight in their learning process, their mistakes and challenges and their development.
5. Impact-driven education presupposes applying approaches that are both reflexive and methodical in nature. Reflexivity is defined as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 62).

These elements are elaborated on in the remainder of this paper.

## 2. The Learning Landscape for Impact-driven education

Based on the experiences Impact at the Core has had with developing impact-driven education together with the faculties in the past two and a half years, we are applying and refining this knowledge into a framework that will help teachers, learning innovators and faculty leaders with thinking about their impact-driven education ambitions and what they need to achieve this.

**We have identified five design variables and three enablers as principles that guide how we conceptualise and operationalise this new way of designing, implementing and evaluating education.**

These different principles both complement and interact with each other. The five design variables are the engine that moves us from a strategic mission into an operational reality. They range from connecting with and involving external societal partners in our educational design to assessing our student's work. The three enablers allow for an effective and successful impact-driven learning journey and relate to the possible pedagogical approaches that can be taken. These three ingredients are our 'known unknowns' and require active piloting and intensive, careful work to figure out new (best) practices.

We arranged these eight principles in a framework that allows for a holistic approach to education, considering various influences that affect the learning process. This framework is inspired by the work of Backman et al. (2019), who propose using *learning landscapes* as a conceptual model through which students' learning experiences can be examined. This concept emphasises that there is a diversity of influences that impact how students learn in the context of complex societal challenges. Thus, one must consider the larger environment to identify the overlapping and dynamic ways different elements influence outcomes. The learning landscape for impact-driven education (see appendix) places the eight principles at the centre, allowing for a non-linear methodology for exploring learning and designing education. The learning landscape will be used as a framework to structure the work of Impact at the Core, to design and scale impact-driven education, train teaching staff, and evaluate courses and programs in a holistic, integrated manner.

While societal impact is not always foreseeable in advance, the ambition to create positive societal impact benefits from a conscious and purposeful approach (*Defining Societal Impact at EUR, 2023*). Impact-driven education provides the landscape for students to develop their impact capacity while addressing societal urgencies in an experiential setting, integrating 'learning/knowing how' with 'learning/knowing what' and reflecting on 'learning/knowing why'. In other words: we have to arrange a learning environment in which students are challenged to engage with authentic urgencies to develop the necessary skills and mindset to deal with them.

A concrete learning environment with authentic urgencies is needed to build competencies, engage students, and teach them to transfer knowledge into practice (Morris, 2018). Such an arena requires what is known in theory as a 'rich' learning environment. In creating such an environment, the following eight principles are pivotal:

### Design variables:

- **Authenticity**  
With impact-driven education, our starting point is always an urgency, as experienced by those living through it. We do this by engaging with people who have a genuine interest in an issue, feel the problem themselves, or are responsible for dealing with it.
- **Stakeholder involvement**  
With impact-driven education, we provide interaction and collaboration with societal partners to understand the situation better and move towards an appropriate (new) direction. To the most extent possible, societal partners and students work together to achieve value creation, guided by teachers.
- **Interdisciplinary cooperation**  
With impact-driven education, we foster collaboration across and beyond disciplinary backgrounds to work with complex societal urgencies. Students work together across and beyond disciplinary perspectives, enabling a synthesising collaborative process.

- **Navigating complexity**  
With impact-driven education, we allow students to meet the actual complexity of life and embrace uncertainty in the realisation that there is no single optimal solution nor a clear path to arrive at the destination. Students, teachers and community partners work with urgencies that are wicked by nature, navigating an open, flexible and ambiguous process together.
- **Multiple perspectives**  
With impact-driven education, we cherish the ability to identify, empathise and shift between multiple perspectives, integrating academic and situated knowledge. Students empathise with various interests, world views and needs. They also reflect on their own assumptions and values.

### Enablers:

- **The (Physical) Learning Environment**  
With impact-driven education, we rethink the learning spaces and the role of the physical campus in creating knowledge. We develop and use spaces in a new way to enable safe experimentation and creative learning in education. The learning and material spaces should stimulate, support and facilitate the (re)-creation, appreciation and experiences of new and different knowledges.
- **Learning Community**  
The relationship among students, teachers and societal partners is redeveloped with impact-driven education. Together they form a learning community. The Learning Community

addresses the implementation and scaling of initiatives and the creation of a sustainable network of societal partners involved in impact-driven education. This learning community helps to develop and sustain a shared ethos to further thrive our education into a more engaged, transformational and impact-driven direction. It allows for the emergence of new ideas and initiatives and should be accessible by other networks for cross-fertilization and mutual learning and reflection.

- **Pedagogy and Didactics**

This principle is about the actionable tools to deliver impact-driven education. It concerns the teachers' role(s) in the learning journey and methods for scaffolding and assessment for learning and growth. The didactics of impact-driven education should focus on developing the impact capacity practised in a co-created classroom culture, which allows for safe experimentation and personal growth. Autonomy, supportive teaching, building relationships and contributing to feelings of competence are at our pedagogy's core.

**We have to arrange a learning environment in which students are challenged to engage with authentic urgencies to develop the necessary skills and mindset to deal with them.**

### 3. The concept of impact capacity

In impact-driven education, we confront our students with authentic urgencies and connect them to societal issues and/or partners. They learn to reflect upon their own (normative) position and personal and professional values in the light of a societal issue. They are facilitated and challenged to develop the necessary skills and are stimulated to develop approaches for handling the matter at hand. By doing so, we contribute to developing and enhancing the **impact capacity** of our students: their capacity to have a positive societal impact during and after their study at EUR.

Based on our experiences gained over the past years, we define the four key elements of the impact capacity of our students as follows. This capacity consists of the following:

- **Reflexive capacity:** our students can reflect upon the normative components of urgencies and their personal and professional values of being an Erasmian. They are able to present their normative considerations and define their value position related to others.
- **Impact competencies:** our students possess the necessary values, skills and competencies to deal self-confidently, collaboratively and creatively with complex, ambiguous societal urgencies. Impact competencies contribute to:
  - The ability to participate in interdisciplinary cooperation processes.
  - The ability to take perspective.
  - The ability to navigate complexity.
  - The ability to participate with societal partners in the process of learning and development.
  - The ability to engage as a 'real person' (authentic being) in real-world urgencies and drive change for good.
- **An academic attitude:** students can analyse complex urgencies from their disciplinary perspective while acknowledging the value of other perspectives and sources of knowledge. When confronted with an issue, they know how to develop feasible approaches in a systematic and reproducible way.
- **A responsible, engaged and entrepreneurial mindset:** in line with our academic and Erasmian values, we teach our students to act responsibly and to proactively commit themselves to contribute to society's problems in a positive, entrepreneurial way, in other words, to care.<sup>1,2</sup>

1 This is in line with the principles identified in the EUR definition of social impact: "we strive for impact from an intrinsic motivation, thinking from the outside in" (see p. 9).

2 According to de la Bellacasa (2017), 'care' is a threefold concept that encompasses an ethical dimension, an affective dimension and the dimension of labour or work. In other words, to care means not only to be ethically and effectively engaged with a matter but also to enact that care through concrete material practices to do something about it.

## 4. Changing roles and interactions in the impact learning environment

In the traditional learning environment, teacher and student interaction takes centre stage. However, as illustrated above, impact-driven education necessitates a more open learning environment where interaction between students, teachers, and societal partners is organised. These societal partners are engaged in our education in the classroom. It also changes the role of students and teachers.

First of all, the role of the student evolves. Impact-driven education presupposes that students take the agency to navigate this more open and challenging learning environment, take responsibility for their own learning goals, and develop an entrepreneurial mindset. It asks for students' initiative-taking and authentic engagement, in line with the Erasmian values. This presupposes that students work on building a personal and professional identity, which includes for them to learn how to be reflexive, to know their strengths and weaknesses, and to build their resiliency in order to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Within impact-driven education – as in traditional forms of education – teachers provide relevant knowledge and insights for the students. At the same time, other roles become equally important: to guide students' learning process and help them develop their reflexive capacity, a more mentoring or coaching role becomes essential. Moreover, teachers also get a role as partners and coproducers of knowledge in the context of impact-driven education, together with societal partners and students. They will not be solely responsible for transferring knowledge to the new generation but also for creating the appropriate learning experiences and challenges. They will give room for students' agency and meaningful

participation in experiences and interactions with the outer world. In this sense, impact-driven education asks for multiple roles related to teaching, including roles that are aimed to coach, guide, support and redirect the students as required by the circumstances. These roles could be split from the expert role of the traditional teacher.

Given societal partners' unique knowledge and perspectives on the matters at hand, their engagement is crucial for students and teachers to empathise with the issue thoroughly and to jointly come up with meaningful insights that lead to a new understanding of the problem and to possible ways of dealing with it. Through this collaboration, societal partners learn from academic insights to recognise their own knowledge, get inspired and to be stimulated to reflect upon their own perceptions and assumptions. But they also enrich the students' learning experience and enhance the relevance of the results they achieve. Moreover, societal partners are able to give feedback on the skills students possess and how they organise the process of dealing with the matter at hand. This is valuable data for teachers to consider in their assessments.

### The impact and transformative dynamics of impact-driven education

Respecting our academic freedom and our own scientific agenda, impact-driven education thus fosters new interactions and dynamics among students, teachers and societal partners. These interactions can have a transformative effect. In dialogue, students, teachers and societal partners come to understand and redefine the urgencies at hand and ways to deal with them. In the words of Servant-Miklos and Noordegraaf-Eelens (2021, p. 158): "students, teachers and societal partners (...) jointly learn about and change the conditions of society". This makes impact-driven education

transformative. It changes the world views and perceptions of all involved actors regarding what they can and have to do about concrete societal urgencies. Students gradually learn what they can achieve with their own knowledge, its limits, and the possibilities and limitations of the knowledge of other participants. They learn to position these different sources of knowledge with each other, combine, recreate and reframe them to address the urgency at hand. In the above, they experience their interdependence upon (the knowledge of) others to act in a meaningful way when confronted with societal urgencies.

From this perspective, impact-driven education not 'only' impacts society through instrumental impact, but also affects the involved actors in changing their mindset and worldview (and thus contributes to transformational change). With our impact-driven education, we want to enhance the impact capacity of our students. But more broadly, we also want to contribute to the impact ambition of the EUR. This ambition distinguishes among six types of impact. In the following table we illustrate how impact-driven education contributes to all these types of impact.

Types of societal impact	Societal impact of impact-driven education	Enhanced impact capacity of students
<b>Conceptual impact:</b> our actions contribute to greater insight and understanding of societal issues and help reduce uncertainties by considering them from multiple perspectives, questioning assumptions, and, if relevant, offering reconceptualisation.	Impact-driven education helps societal partners to further understand their urgencies with the help of academic knowledge and methods.	Impact-driven education strengthens the capability of students to approach societal urgencies critically and constructively, to relate them to the academic body of knowledge and consider them from multiple perspectives.
<b>Cultural impact:</b> our actions help to reflect on and understand societal issues, contribute to making people want to question the assumptions and values they hold about themselves and others, help to dialogue about them and develop alternative problem definitions.	Impact-driven education brings to the forefront various interests, world views, and needs and makes people reflect on their own assumptions and values. This helps them to develop alternative problem definitions.	Impact-driven education cherishes the students' ability to identify, empathize and shift between multiple perspectives, integrating academic and situated knowledge and reflect upon their own and others' values.

Types of societal impact	Societal impact of impact-driven education	Enhanced impact capacity of students
<b>Instrumental impact:</b> our actions produce practically useful artefacts for dealing with societal issues or help others make choices (e.g., in policies, protocols, and guidelines).	Impact-driven education produces collaboratively developed artefacts (e.g., project reports, prototypes, creative outputs), that have the potential to contribute to society's challenges.	In impact driven education, students learn to apply specific tools and approaches for collaboration, problem analysis, designing interventions et cetera, allowing them to approach societal urgencies with a problem-solving attitude.
<b>Impact as (enhanced) connectivity:</b> our actions contribute to the formation and strengthening of networks of people and organisations and the quality of relationships within these networks, resulting in improved social cohesion and capacity for solving societal problems.	Impact-driven education contributes to the strength of networks between the university and societal partners, by initiating collaboration and interaction between students, partners and teachers.	Impact-driven education helps students to develop their own societal and professional networks and helps them to develop the necessary capabilities to interact with actors with different backgrounds and perspectives.
<b>Impact on capacity development:</b> our actions enhance the capacity of (groups of) individuals to take effective action on societal issues.	Impact-driven education enhances the capacity of societal partners to deal with their urgencies.	Impact-driven education enables students to approach societal urgencies, utilising their capabilities and knowledge, on different levels in different domains to take effective action on societal issues.
<b>Transformational change as impact:</b> with what we do, we contribute to or achieve fundamental shifts in society.	Impact-driven education fosters new interactions and dynamics among students, teachers and societal partners that can have a transformative effect. Together they learn about and transform the conditions of society.	While impact-driven education is a form of transformative learning, the impact capacity of students is also (potentially) transformative.

## 5. Appropriate ways to assess impact-driven education

Impact-driven education also calls for appropriate and effective ways of assessing students' learning. Assessment methods are fundamental because they can drive learning more than teaching activities. It has been noted that students are particularly adept at pinpointing what is required to do well in a course. They extract this information from the instructors, particularly when discussing tests, grades and assessments (Cropley, 2001). However, Cropley (2001) argues that the ability of students to discover the "hidden curriculum" may result in high grades that are poor reflections of problem-solving, critical thinking, or future success in many careers. Therefore, assessment should support and reveal the students' learning processes, helping them strengthen their weaknesses while providing the teachers with feedback on their progress. It is essential to privilege assessments that promote deep rather than surface learning approaches. One of the most powerful means to foster students' productive engagement with learning is by designing authentic assessments that students perceive as relevant and meaningful (Sambell et al., 2012). Authentic assessments are characterised by offering realistic challenges that engage students with matters pertinent to daily life beyond the classroom, are cognitively challenging, and provide students with opportunities to develop evaluative judgment and self-regulation (Villarroel et al., 2018).

Assessment of impact driven education is about the 'fit' between the level of learning/learning activities and the level of assessment. Challenge is, to develop summative assessment procedures that not only measure knowledge and insight, but measure the competency to synthesize and design, in co creation with others. Challenge is to design formative assessment procedures that provide students with insight into their development. Using various assessment methods allows us to holistically capture the complex qualities fostered by impact-driven education, focusing on qualities such as creativity, initiative, curiosity, imagination, judgement, irony, ethical reflection, critical thinking, etc. Ideally, self-assessment, along with feedback from peers and societal partners, plays a role in this.



## 6. Impact-driven education as a reflexive and academic process

In an impact-driven learning environment, students are challenged to empathise with an urgency voiced by various societal partners. As a first step, they need to deconstruct the issue and identify the underlying patterns, conceptualisations and understandings. By mapping these different perspectives and assumptions, they need to take a stance and develop a personal strategy. This requires a critical reflection on the usefulness of academic models and theories to understand the problem. In alignment with the perspectives of teachers and societal partners, students select an approach that will lead to a convergent and shared understanding and scenarios to approach the issue at hand.

Universities are spaces where new and different perspectives are created and re-created—where ideas are developed, critically analysed and challenged. Moreover, confronted with the complexity of societal urgencies, students are challenged to reflect upon the value of academic knowledge and methods. To do this in an explicable way, students learn to apply various methodologies derived from solution-oriented, engaged, critical or change-oriented research paradigms. They learn to build a theory of change that can guide their way towards impact. And they learn how to organise the “societal validation” of scientific knowledge and apply their knowledge to develop interventions, test and refine them in confrontation with the real context of an urgency.

There is a reciprocal relationship between impact-driven education and impact-driven research. Researchers and students work at similar thematic challenges in some research initiatives with different perspectives. Students support more comprehensive engagement with societal partners. They help disseminate approaches and knowledge and create outreach and engagement with societal partners. Academic staff members can collaborate with students on authentic urgencies and join forces to enhance their impact as an academic. They can use the results from their impact-driven educational programmes in their own impact-driven research.

As a first step, they need to deconstruct the issue and identify the underlying patterns, conceptualisations and understandings.

## 7. A final note – about space for faculties to contextualise and differentiate

Besides a common, university-wide understanding of impact-driven education, it is imperative to allow faculty, researchers, and teaching staff to develop their own vision of impact-driven education based on the general principles presented above and fitting in their own disciplinary and strategic context. The role of the project Impact at the Core, in close collaboration with the EUR community, is to facilitate this emergence of nuance and difference, allowing for new perspectives and viewpoints. This will enrich the university's comprehensive understanding of impact-driven education and give faculty members space to express their ideas and vision on learning.

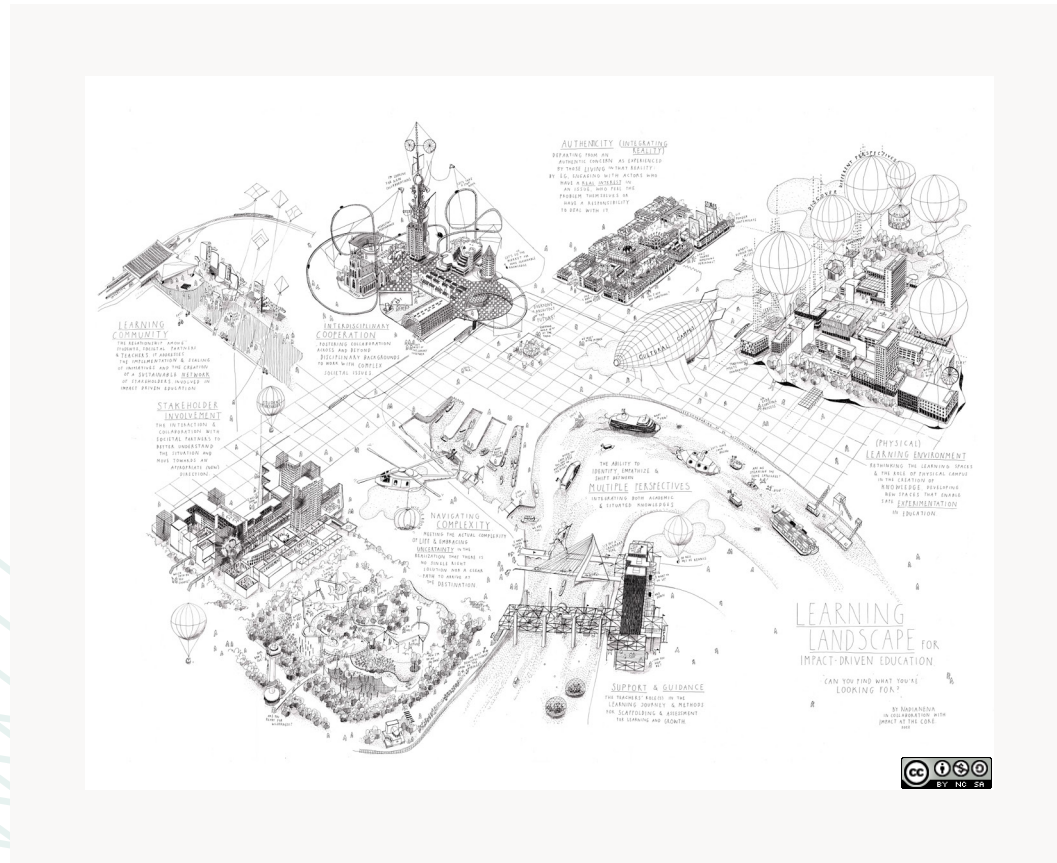
Once the core principles of impact-driven education are recognised, they can provide the keys to opening new gates and moving into new territories (Meyer & Land, 2003). In this sense, impact-driven education offers a shared ethos, a common ground, and new perspectives allowing room for changes and adjustment while clearly showing the direction we want

to move in. That direction is the direction we started this document with. As a university, we want to be truly engaged with the city and the wider region we are part of and take responsibility for the urgencies encountered there (*Defining Societal Impact at EUR, 2023, p.7*). Impact-driven research and impact-driven education are logically connected components of a sincere and convincing approach to shape and express that civic commitment.



## 8. Appendix

Download the landscape figure [here](#).



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