

Engaged scholarship at Erasmus University: obstacles & lessons for change

Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform

Highlights

- Universities are increasingly expected to contribute to tackling complex societal challenges through engaged scholarship
- To leverage the full potential of this type of academic work, universities need to fundamentally change their structures, culture and practices
- Lacking appreciation, time, support and career prospects are obstacles for engaged scholars at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)
- To remove obstacles to engaged scholarship, decisionmakers at the EUR should aim to develop a shared understanding of the role of the EUR in tackling societal challenges, create spaces for engaged scholars, facilitate new job profiles, and critically question the notions of impact and engagement

Introduction

Universities and researchers are increasingly being expected to play a significant role in tackling complex societal challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, digitalization or socio-economic inequality (Reed & Fazey, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021). Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) has responded to these calls by recently reorienting its mission towards “positive societal impact”, positioning itself as a “knowledge generator at the very heart of society, constantly in dialogue with others” (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2019, p. 2). This movement towards making positive societal impact corresponds with calls for *engaged scholarship*¹. This is an approach to academic work where scholars contribute to tackling societal challenges by involving stakeholders and bridging the gap between theory and practice, thereby simultaneously advancing knowledge for science and practice (Hoffman,

¹ We use *engaged scholarship* as a container term for different types of research and education that aim to contribute to tackling societal challenges. Other terms that are often used and that we assume to fall under engaged scholarship are: transformative, transdisciplinary, or impact-oriented research & education, action research, citizen science, responsible research, open science.

2021; Van de Ven, 2007; 2018). Engaged scholarship comprises both academic research and education and can consist of several activities: involving different stakeholder perspectives in research, connecting teaching to specific societal questions of stakeholders and co-creating research problems and approaches with stakeholders throughout the research process.

However, as many studies show, the academic system in general and universities in particular are not well-equipped to support this type of academic work (see e.g., Ferrer-Balas et al., 2008; Sauermann et al., 2020; Hoover & Harder, 2015). To leverage the full potential of engaged scholarship, universities would need to fundamentally change their structures, culture, and practices (Schneidewind et al., 2012). The EUR has started with implementing changes by setting up several strategic initiatives and projects that aim to support its new mission towards positive societal impact (see Attachment A). However, significant obstacles to engaged scholarship remain at the EUR. In this brief, we discuss the obstacles that scholars who (aim to) do engaged academic work at EUR face and provide conclusions and policy lessons.

Research approach & methods

This brief was written by Mayte Beekman and Dr Julia Wittmayer and is based on a study that was part of the objectives of the DIT platform to explore the obstacles that EUR scholars encounter when doing inter- or transdisciplinary work. The findings from the study are based on a qualitative analysis of 32 semi-structured interviews, conducted with EUR staff, between October 2021 and May 2022. This brief is an interpretation of the findings by the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of DIT. The results of the study have also been submitted as an academic article with a more detailed analysis.²

Interview participants were selected from all career levels and across EUR's seven Schools, the university college, several research institutes, and strategic projects. All interview participants were in some way involved in doing engaged research or education. In total, we interviewed 23 researchers (8 full professors, 8 associate professors, 2 assistant professors, 3 PhD candidates, 2 mid-career researchers) and 9 support and policy staff. Interview participants were asked about the engaged research or education they do or support, and the drivers and obstacles they face when doing engaged academic work. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed by the research team, using several rounds of qualitative coding.

² See: Kump, B., Wittmayer, J., Bogner, K. & Beekman, M. (2022). *Navigating force conflicts: Engaged researchers' agency in an academic system in transition*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Obstacles to engaged scholarship at EUR

The key obstacles that engaged scholars at EUR face are structured along different levels: the individual level of the scholar, the context of the EUR specifically and the (international) academic system more broadly (see Table 1 for a summary).

Obstacles experienced at the individual level of the scholar

Lacking knowledge and skills. Some scholars experience a lack of knowledge and skills that prevents them from doing more engaged research or education, such as knowledge of new research or teaching methods, or the social skills (e.g., building trust, managing expectations) necessary for engaging intensively with stakeholders. Scholars mention that engaged scholarship often requires moving out of one's comfort zone, since they are often not as experienced (yet) in engaging with stakeholders in their research or education.

Stakeholder management. Academics can face difficulties with stakeholders regarding their own role and expectation management. On the one hand, they need to uphold their integrity as independent academic researcher, and ensure that results can be published, while on the other hand, it may be difficult to meet stakeholder expectations (e.g., developing practical solutions that can be directly implemented).

Engaged research and education is inherently risky. Doing engaged research or education is seen by scholars as inherently riskier, because one depends on stakeholders' willingness to cooperate (e.g., availability issues, maintaining trusting stakeholder relations), it involves insecurities or unforeseen obstacles, or it may not be possible to publish or teach on certain data collected (e.g., due to confidentiality issues or because the data does not fit research goals).

Obstacles at the level of the EUR

Next to these obstacles on the individual level, engaged scholars face several barriers resulting from being based at the EUR.

Lack of time for engagement. Doing engaged research or education is inherently more time-consuming. Engaged scholars undertake traditional academic activities (e.g., reading, writing, publishing) but also additional activities linked to stakeholder relations (e.g., finding and contacting stakeholders, maintaining trustful relationships, organizing events and workshops, giving public talks, writing articles or opinion pieces). Scholars feel like they do not have adequate time for these engagement activities on top of their existing work package, leading to them doing engagement activities 'on the side'. But even for scholars that have engagement activities as part of their tasks (e.g., in research projects with engagement deliverables), the reserved time is often not enough for proper engagement, leading scholars

to conduct engagement activities on the side and in their own time. This makes engaged scholars especially prone to symptoms and consequences of stress that are already so prevalent in the academic system. For example, one participant remarked that engagement activities are not part of their official work week schedule, while another participant said that their engagement activities are wanted, but not valued unless it is of use to their faculty.

Lacking appreciation, recognition, and rewards. Engaged scholars at EUR feel a lack of appreciation, recognition and rewards, both, in specific incentives and reward structures (e.g., in yearly P&D conversations, contract renewals, career prospects), and more generally in conversations with colleagues and supervisors. This lack of appreciation can even go so far that scholars experience pushback from their own colleagues, research groups or supervisors when deviating from the current norm and doing more engaged work. Such 'penalizing' of engaged work continues in current incentives and reward structures, where scholars feel that their impact and engagement activities are also not formally valued. For example, several participants mentioned that adding a section on impact in the P&D evaluation is nice to have, but it does not feel as a real incentive to do more engaged work. Some interviewees also fear that introducing these new reporting requirements and metrics around impact might only result in ceremonial change, leading to scholars ticking off boxes without changing their work.

Lacking career prospects. Scholars doing engaged research or education at EUR experience a lack of serious career prospects, making it difficult for them to build a career upon engaged scholarship. In how 'Performance and Development' is set up currently, they experience severe pressure to comply with assessment criteria that are based on traditional metrics (e.g., including publications in a small set of highly ranked journals, or H-index scores) to be able to climb up the academic ladder and secure a promotion. Having to conform to these criteria leaves little time for engagement activities (see point above). Several participants remarked that it is difficult to advance your career based on engaged work, leading to some scholars being 'stuck' in their current positions. Scholars in the early stages of their academic career (e.g., PhDs, Postdocs, or early tenure trackers) are seen as an especially vulnerable group. One participant remarked that for tenure trackers, working too much on impact will only hinder your career.

These strict criteria lead to rigid career paths and job profiles that are still rooted in traditional academic standards, therefore not allowing 'alternative' forms of research or education careers. For example, participants remarked that they would like to have more flexibility in switching between different career paths (e.g., from research to education), without this damaging their career prospects. Moreover, job profiles often make rigid divisions between academic and supporting staff, or between researchers and teachers. Engaged scholarship instead needs people that can combine different skills in one role, or even completely new roles (e.g., facilitators, research developers or integration experts, see

Hoffmann, 2022), with the possibility of building an academic career on this. For one of our interviewees, hiring a scholar from another discipline turned out almost impossible since they could not offer that person an academic career within the School, because of promotion criteria. While some scholars saw that the Recognition & Rewards programme could lead to positive change, they often felt that this was not yet being realised.

Lacking support from key decisionmakers. Despite the changes in the EUR strategy towards engaged scholarship, academics experience lacking support from key decision-makers that are in the position to influence or implement actual organisational changes. Buy-in and support from the Deans and the Executive Board is considered crucial for organisational change. Some interviewees perceive that different interpretations of the EUR strategy by these key decisionmakers, as well as power imbalances between them, can impede necessary change. Next to this, scholars also see an important role for full professors when it comes to showing support for engaged scholarship, especially to their PhD students, since lacking support from their promotor is arguably the most crucial obstacle to developing themselves as engaged scholars.

Lacking support services. Engaged scholars notice recent advancements in supporting services at EUR, for example with the work of [Erasmus Research Services](#). However, interviewees mention that existing support services (e.g., Media & Communication, HR, IT and data maintenance) are not geared towards the different needs of engaged scholarship, such as expertise and support on organizing workshops and events, science communication towards a broad public, media and press relations or co-creation, design and facilitation methods. Moreover, they have difficulties finding out which support is available and how they can get it. For example, one interviewee who recently joined the EUR mentioned that it sometimes took them days to figure out who could help with a support request.

Obstacles at the level of the (inter)national academic system

Lastly, there are several obstacles to engaged scholarship that are present not only at EUR, but in the international academic system in general. Scholars find that **international competition** between universities is fierce and often based on **quantitative metrics** (e.g., publications in high-ranking journals, H-index scores) and deep-rooted **disciplinary standards and norms that scholars need to adhere to** (e.g., for publishing in certain journals or accessing conferences). Academic excellence is often defined based on these aspects, while engagement activities and inter- or transdisciplinary research have little to no international recognition. Even if EUR would fully support engaged scholarship, scholars could experience **difficulties when wanting to work at another (inter)national university** where engaged scholarship is not yet highly valued.

Table 1: Obstacles to engaged scholarship as experienced by academics at EUR

	Obstacle	Examples
Individual	Lacking knowledge and skills	New research methods, project management skills, social skills
	Stakeholder management	Difficulties in upholding their integrity as independent researcher, meeting stakeholder expectations
	Inherent risks in engaged scholarship	Stakeholder availability, insecurities in stakeholder relationships, difficulty to publish based on collected data due to confidentiality or mismatch with research goals
EUR		
EUR	Lack of time for engagement	Additional activities, such as maintaining trustful relationships, organizing events and workshops, giving public talks, writing newspaper articles or opinion pieces
	Lacking appreciation, recognition, and rewards	Lack of appreciation from colleagues and supervisors, no recognition and reward for engagement activities in P&D conversations
	Lacking career prospects	Promotion still based on traditional metrics; existence of a limited set of rigid job profiles and career paths
	Lacking support from key decisionmakers	EUR deans, Executive Board, Professors
	Lacking support services	Lacking current services (e.g., Media & Communication, HR, IT and data management), lack of expertise and support on specific needs (workshop organization, science communication, media relations, facilitation & co-creation methods), support services in general hard to find
Academic system		
Academic system	International competition	Fierce international competition between universities
	Quantitative metrics	Academic excellence is measured by e.g., H-index and publications in high-ranking journals
	Disciplinary standards and norms	Academic excellence is based on disciplinary standards of e.g., journals and conferences
	(Inter)national career prospects	Even if EUR supports engaged scholarship, scholars can lack career prospects at other universities that do not value engagement yet

Conclusion and policy lessons

With the reorientation of its mission, the EUR is aiming to become a university that creates positive societal impact and contributes to tackling the urgent societal challenges of our time. One important way to do so is to create space for engaged scholarship, for those academics wanting to involve stakeholders in research and education. From this analysis we derive several policy lessons³ for the EUR, especially its decisionmakers and research managers, to remove some of the obstacles and thereby support the mission of creating positive societal impact.

Develop a shared understanding of the role of the EUR in tackling societal challenges. Engaged scholarship requires an understanding of how universities relate to and act in the context of societal challenges. With the co-creative development of the Strategy 2024, the EUR-community already started to think together about this role, leading to a diversification of different ideas currently being present. Rethinking the role of the EUR is a long-term process, not a single intervention that can be done once without returning to it. Just as the strategy was developed in a co-creative way, the implementation, institutionalization, and evaluation of this strategy could also be a collective process allowing EUR staff to engage with one another. Importantly, public buy-in and support for this process from key decisionmakers, such as the Deans, Professors, and the Executive Board, are crucial for the institutionalization of engaged scholarship at EUR – an institutionalization that allows recognizing and rewarding scholars for engaged work. The intention of the EUR to [sign the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#) by the European University Association (EUA) is already a good step in this regard.

Build spaces and communities where engaged scholars can find mutual support. To overcome the lack of appreciation that engaged scholars feel for their work, it seems important to convene spaces, platforms, or communities where scholars can meet each other to exchange experiences and expertise, and where they find support for advancing their engaged work. Such spaces, which allow to do work that deviates from the norms of the academic system, also provide the opportunity to develop and test new norms, practices, and structures. With the establishment of the DIT platform in 2021 the EUR already made a step towards creating such spaces, but DIT – as well as other projects such as UNIC and the Erasmus initiatives – also experiences several organisational obstacles (e.g., lack of collaboration between Schools) to becoming a university-wide supportive platform. How we design these support spaces and ensure that they can fulfil their roles should therefore be part

³ These policy lessons are based on Kump et al. (2022), but adapted by the authors to the specific context of the EUR.

of the collective process and conversation on the implementation and institutionalization of the EUR strategy.

Rethink what an academic job profile and career look like. Engaged scholarship consists of several activities and skills that do not fit in traditional academic job profiles and career paths. Many scholars at EUR are already bending the rules and exploring the boundaries of their job profiles. They for example create their own 'hybrid' work environments, often at the expense of their free time and/or without a regular academic position at a School (e.g., by working in separate research institutes, by combining consultancy with academic work or by working closely with outside organisations and stakeholders). Engaged scholarship is a multi-faceted practice that requires different skills and job roles (think of for example research developers, facilitators, design experts, integration experts). The Recognition & Rewards programme at EUR is already a good step towards rethinking academic job profiles and career. However, rather than putting scientific job roles and careers in boxes (as with the current division between research, teaching, (impact) and management careers), the EUR should explore what different job roles and careers in engaged scholarship could look like.

Critically engage with the notion of impact and engagement. The EUR is already making progress with broadening academic metrics, so they include activities related to impact and engagement, for example with the Evaluating Societal Impact project. However, it is important to recognize that it is notoriously difficult to capture and measure engagement and impact (Reed et al., 2021). Engagement can take many different forms, from involving the perspective of different stakeholders in research and education to co-creating research questions and approaches together, making it difficult to grasp in one metric. Similarly, the societal impact of research and education is hard to capture, since impact often materializes later or cannot be strictly related to certain interventions that were done. If the EUR introduces new metrics, this might make impact and engagement just another hoop to jump through or box to tick in an evaluation form. Moreover, introducing more metrics that scholars must conform to on top of existing metrics, without reducing workload in other areas (e.g., less teaching, management tasks or A-level publications), will only increase work pressure further.

On its way to becoming an engaged university that contributes to positive societal impact, we hope the EUR community finds these policy lessons worthwhile. Most importantly, while the organizational change towards engaged scholarship requires coordinated decision making, it is above all a collective and collaborative process and challenge that the EUR community takes on together.

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