


**DESIGN**  
**IMPACT**  
**TRANSITION**  
PLATFORM

Our narrative for change



The Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform aims to empower radically new ways to do research, education and engagement at Erasmus University Rotterdam for a just and sustainable future.

## Who we are

The Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) brings together academics, students, non-academic staff and external stakeholders who are working on addressing complex and persistent societal challenges. We aim to build a strong and engaged community to develop a new collaborative, experimental and design-based culture of transdisciplinarity. This means working beyond and across disciplines, together with stakeholders and extending beyond what might be considered 'business as usual'. Building DIT together is an action research experiment in itself: we try to find out the best ways to organise and institutionalise transdisciplinary and engaged academic work for just, sustainable futures. DIT is at the heart of the EUR Strategy, living the [Erasmian values](#) of global citizenship, social commitment, an open and critical mindset, cooperation and entrepreneurial spirit.

We work towards this transformation by:

**Challenging and confronting** existing disciplines and dogmas that are inherently part of complex societal challenges. The goal of this is not conflict, but critical discussion and fundamental reflections on the future of disciplines.

**Signaling and showing** that another way of working in academia is possible. We are setting the direction for where we should or need to go, but we are not entirely sure how to get there or what it looks like in detail. That is something that we need to figure out with others.

**Attracting and connecting** people from all corners of the academic world and beyond; those who underwrite our values and principles and are excited to work with us towards transforming the university. We are fostering the creation of a DIT community, building coalitions without diminishing the diversity and richness that collaborators bring. After all, discussion and productive disagreement are central in transforming any system.

**Facilitating and supporting** everyone who wishes to be a part of this transformative journey. We do this by offering a physical and online platform where interested parties from across the university and beyond can co-create and find support for ground-breaking projects.

**Creating and developing/sharing** concepts, theories, approaches, methods and practices about transformative ways of researching, educating and engaging with society.

## **Our starting points and working definitions**

Through these activities we work to create space and support for research, education and engagement to transform our university and to contribute to just sustainability transitions. Our starting points and working definitions are as follows:

### **1. Transformative research**

Transformative research aims to address the grand challenges of our time by creating and deploying new ideas, methods, and tools to challenge, alter and replace current unsustainable formal and informal institutions. It is based on systems thinking and includes transdisciplinary research endeavours that allow for creating scientifically valid and socially robust knowledge, with the mission of fostering sustainability transitions.

### **2. Transformative education**

Transformative education aims to enable and empower students to become lifelong learners who are capable of understanding and shaping their environments in just and sustainable ways. This includes giving students more responsibility for choosing for what and how they learn, and involving them in co-creating new education formats with us.

### **3. Transformative engagement for impact**

Transformative engagement at universities aims to make society a partner in research and education, provide support for stakeholders' transformative journeys, and create a creative context for addressing societal challenges that will, we hope, generate new action. This implies linking to existing interests and movements, offering collaborative spaces and different perspectives and tools for spurring fresh dialogue and action, discussing problem ownership and existing power structures, and debating desirable future states.

## Why is this important?

The way the EUR and the broader academic system is organised and operates creates unnecessary barriers against collaborative, engaged and explorative academic work in support of societal transitions. Our academic environment is often dominated by incentives that foster competition over collaboration, individual performance over team efforts, and traditional knowledge output over societal impact. This has an effect on several different levels: on the education that we provide, on the research that we do, and on the institutional structures that we maintain.

### Education

Education at EUR, as elsewhere, has become more focused on efficiency, qualitative targets and growth. It is creating an educational context in which curiosity, debate and individuals' capacity for development are marginalised. Students are normally put into the role of consumers and reproducers of knowledge, disempowered from taking responsibility for their education. Content that is taught – and the way in which it is taught – rarely prepares students to play a role in achieving a more just and sustainable future.

*DIT is committed to guiding students to become active, engaged, respectful changemakers, and to supporting educators in achieving this. We are therefore developing our philosophy of transformative education in which staff, students and society can all learn through experience, co-creation and experimentation.*

### Research

In academic environments such as the EUR, researchers are usually expected to work within their disciplines and focus on academic output, publications and citation scores. Societal impact often remains an afterthought or additional burden. The linear way of producing knowledge within disciplines leads to narrow insights that are then presented through recommendations or some form of popularisation to an 'outside' world. In fact, the way knowledge is produced through research is an inherent part of the complex societal challenges that societies are facing. Research therefore needs to re-examine which practices and approaches it can use to tackle knowledge uncertainty and the value preferences that are intrinsic to such challenges.

*DIT is committed to trying out new research practices that question the status quo. Working with different types of knowledge and stakeholders, we collectively seek to understand, influence, guide and accelerate desired societal transitions – so that societal impact is not an afterthought but an inherent part of doing research that leads to scientifically valid and socially robust insights.*



### **Organisational**

Universities such as the EUR are large organisations that have not escaped being governed by market-based premises. One result of that is a separation between support, management and academic staff, each judged according to respective values and norms. Another result is management by hierarchies that foster competition and discourage collaboration between and within silos, faculties or departments. Striving to accomplish their third mission, as expressed through EUR's 'Creating positive social impact' strategy, universities face reforms and cut-backs while university staff is overtasked, under-resourced and overworked.

*DIT is committed to rethinking institutional structures. The success of universities in addressing societal challenges requires collaboration and institutional structures that foster it. It requires valuing each other's contributions and developing structures and incentives to realise our potential for change. This implies a very integrated and professional organisational context in which all staff work closely together.*

In our effort to transform the university system, DIT is experimental itself: flexible in finding out the right ways to proceed, but also leading to lessons that can be learned and new generalisable insights for others striving to do the same. We are constantly testing, analysing and evaluating how we can transform the university system, and for this to succeed, we must include – and therefore invite – partners and stakeholders to join the DIT community to be part of this process.

## Our Activities

We strive to connect education with research, and our engagement and institutional development activities support educational and research goals. Some of our current and planned activities are:

- a new [MA Sustainability Transitions programme](#)
- new minors on New [Economic Thinking](#) and [Science and Practice for Transformative Change](#)
- a university-wide extra-curricular sustainability course for students
- an external PhD programme
- a summer school for design and transition
- a series of international academic workshops, currently including a series dedicated to Design & Transition in 2021, an academic workshop on Transformative Education in 2021 and an Eye-Opener Workshop on Institutionalising Transformative Research in 2022
- student-centred impact projects for doctoral, master and bachelor students such as innovation challenges, and design challenge workshops that are run with university partners.

## Our values and principles

In putting our mission into action, the following values and principles guide our activities:

**Bold:** We are not afraid to challenge the status quo. We take an informed position and re-imagine universities as places that take on their role in tackling societal challenges and provide appreciative, open and collaborative working environments for their staff.

**Experimental:** We learn by doing. While we do know the direction, there is no blueprint for the future. As an experiment, we are figuring out which – new or established – ways and mechanisms will bring us there. This is how we learn and find generalisable insights for others striving to do the same.

**Reflexive and self-reflexive:** We challenge and question ourselves and others. We stir debate, and we also create room for sharing and learning within and beyond DIT.

**Together:** We are not alone on this journey. We provide safe spaces for fellow travellers to connect, collaborate and exchange – their insights and milestones, their fears and struggles – to learn from each other.

**Profound:** We value and apply academic rigor and systematically research and develop new ways of thinking, doing, framing and organising. We rely on the [Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) and base our academic work on the five research principles of honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility.

**Appreciative and respectful:** We value you. We create a working and learning environment in which we consciously value other human beings, their backgrounds, and their ideas. We treat ourselves and each other in an appreciative and respectful way, being inclusive, drawing on different ways of doing and thinking, honouring different points of view, and deliberately looking for otherwise overlooked opinions.



## The DIT Community

We are building a community of forward thinking and collaboratively minded people at EUR for working together on sustainability transitions, transformative and action research, transformative education, and transdisciplinarity and design methods. In it, we will share opportunities and ideas, start new collaborations and develop best practices for new ways of doing research, education and engagement. This community is connected to all of the activities and events taking place on the DIT platform. Anyone at EUR who is working on related topics and who is interested in making a change at our university is invited to join the conversation with the DIT community. Please have a look at our [website](#) to get in touch with us.

## Our learning questions

By 2024, we hope to be closer to answering the following learning questions:

What institutional environments do individuals need to be able to work towards just and sustainable futures in terms of skills, competences and mindset?

How can people collaborate for just and sustainable futures from different disciplines, across research

and education, theory and practice, and not only within the university but also externally with stakeholders in society?

Which cultures, structures and practices of university life do we have to transform or replace to allow for working more collaboratively, across disciplines and with an action-orientation for just and sustainable futures?

**And now?**

As the EUR community, we need to collaboratively discuss, debate, and design desired futures and co-creatively work on laying the path. We invite you to be involved and go on this journey together with us.

**Want to be involved?**

You can have a look at our events, activities or just come for a drink with one of us. For contact details, please see our [website](#). We look forward to seeing you!

This narrative was written by Mayte Beekman, Kristina Bogner, Marieke de Wal, and Julia Wittmayer.

It is a collaborative result of the staff of DIT platform, including Femke Coops, Yogi Hendlin, Mariangela Lavanga, Derk Loorbach, Aniek Menten, Boris Pulskens, Roel van Raak, Neel van Roessel, and Ana Vasques. We are aiming to make this narrative the narrative of the whole DIT community and welcome your participation.

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# DESIGN IMPACT TRANSITION PLATFORM

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