Social Impact Framework opens university doors for the public good

1. Summary of Impact

Many universities argue that they exist for public benefit, yet their internal incentives and reward systems don't align with a focus on socially impactful research, teaching and practice.

To address this issue UTS launched its Social Impact Framework in October 2017. The framework was developed in collaboration with UTS staff and students, and outlines strategic and systemic steps that must be implemented across UTS to harness the university's resources and expertise for the public good.

2. The Problem

According to UTS Executive Director for Social Justice, Verity Firth, the purpose of universities in the 21st century is not only delivering high quality research and teaching, but also about accepting that universities have a moral responsibility to help drive positive social change.

However, it has become more and more difficult for universities to focus on public benefit because until recently in international ranking schemes, social impact was not among the metrics measured.

Until the introduction of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Engagement and Impact (EI), most ranking bodies used performance indicators which generally only considered the academic context, such as academic and industry reputation, faculty to student ratios, research and publication volume, number of

citations and international outlook. With this also comes funding constraints as funding allocations are based on meeting such externally generated metrics.

Whilst these metrics are important within the university, they do not have much relevance to the outside world.

The implications of this are concerning as universities are at risk of neglecting their public purpose mission in order to focus on becoming highly ranked universities. As a result, staff are less supported in their social justice oriented endeavours, and students have a lesser sense of their social responsibility when entering their respective professional fields.

This is particularly problematic when considering that universities are in a unique position of authority and power, and have the ability to improve the social status quo through their wealth of resources, knowledge and research.

3. Beneficiaries

One of the key goals of the Social Impact Framework is to open up the university's resources to as many people and organisations as possible. In addition, it aims to support people and activities that focus on social impact and social justice.

The framework is set to benefit staff and students around UTS by supporting their social justice work and providing assistance. In addition, the immediate neighbourhood surrounding the university campus has also been able to benefit from this framework. For instance, UTS is collaborating with community organisations in neighbouring Glebe, supporting them through research and resources.

It will also benefit the university as an institution as it will be better placed to communicate and measure its impact, and to demonstrate and justify its agenda to external bodies which allocate funding.

4. Approach to impact

According to Ms Firth, quality and accessible education is critical to tackling social injustice and inequality in Australia. As former NSW Minster for Education, she feels that due to the changing role of the state, the levers that government used to be able to pull to tackle inequality have significantly decreased. However, she firmly believes in the transformative power of education and asserts that universities have a critical responsibility to contribute to the community through research, education and practice.

While UTS strives to be a world-leading institution, it aims to do so without losing sight of its social justice focus. In order to formalise this social justice agenda, and make a genuine and strategic commitment to the endeavours in this space, Ms Firth began leading the development of the UTS Social Impact Framework in 2016.

As a first step, Ms Firth says she wanted to ensure that the social impact team had support and enthusiasm from the university community as a whole, and invited input from as many people and faculties as possible. To do so, the team sent out an expression of interest, and over 130 staff and students applied to become part of the process.

To capture all their voices, the team first used an 'Appreciative Inquiry' methodology to map the many social justice programs which are already in place at UTS. This also involved nominating social justice champions around campus, which included academic and non-academic staff as well as students. Not only was this an important first step to get a snapshot of UTS's strengths and weaknesses in this area, but also to connect people and facilitate collaboration.

In collaboration with these UTS staff and students, the team then adopted a 'Theory of Change' approach to outline the ultimate goals of the framework, and also to identify what processes, resources and tools would be necessary to achieve these goals.

Through this process, the goal of the framework emerged: to positively impact the public, the individual and systemic forces that shape justice. In addition, the framework aims to support initiatives and environments that increase public good, social mobility and equity.

In order to achieve these ambitious goals, the team brought UTS students and staff back to the roundtable and formalised the steps which must be taken to achieve these objectives.

In this process, six focus areas were identified in which UTS must take action:

1. Increasing the number of equity target groups successfully completing a higher education degree at UTS
2. Giving students the agency to enact personal and social responsibility
3. Supporting staff to maximise their social impact
4. Producing targeted research, teaching and program outcomes that have social impact and actively contribute to communities
5. Being an advocate, critical voice and thought leader on issues that concern and impact communities
6. Developing business operations and strategies that reflect a long-term independent commitment to social impact

Each domain is underpinned by a series of conditions that are vital to its success. In some cases, these conditions can be met by internal UTS activity while others require engagement with alumni, partners or community stakeholders in order to be achieved.

It is important to acknowledge that social change does not happen in isolation. According to Ms Firth, collaboration and trust – both within UTS and with external stakeholders – are necessary foundations of success in these domains. The framework process also highlighted the importance of a supportive and inclusive cross-level leadership and institutional culture to ensure that social justice is a priority in all units and faculties on campus.

Moreover, the framework recognises that UTS operates in a broad context and is impacted by local and global forces. Government policies and practices, international frameworks, industry and media representations are among the many influencing factors which interplay with the six domains of change. Ms Firth believes that universities hold a unique position of power and authority, which means that they can engage with these external influences to ensure that key decisions support the public good.

One final but important part of the Social Impact Framework is the university's ability to measure, evaluate and report on social impact, which will become increasingly important with the introduction of government funding changes.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

One of the first great outcomes of the Social Impact Framework launch is a project called 'Glebe Connected'. Glebe community organisations reached out to UTS to help them interrogate council data and better understand how they can address the needs of the community.

Under the Social Impact Framework, the team has been able to provide grants and bring together different people who can help these organisations analyse their data in a participatory manner. This included UTS academics and researchers who shared their expertise to help develop an agenda for change in the community.

Similarly, UTS has been able to open up its resources to State Government agencies. As a neutral research partner, UTS is providing a safe space in which such agencies can interrogate their own data, utilise other people's data and tackle complex issues using an evidence base.

UTS has also been able to establish the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion which serves as the main body that will drive the Social Impact Framework across the university. The centre is unique in that it combines UTS's student low SES access and staff diversity and inclusion programs with its community engaged learning and research programs. It also brings on board a social impact evaluation team to support impact focused programs across UTS.

5.2. Impact

The Social Impact Framework celebrated its official launch in October 2017 and marked the beginning of a journey towards improved community wellbeing and greater access to university resources for all.

Ms Firth says that no one sector – whether government, industry, academic or not-for-profit – can solve the wicked problems of the world alone. She considers her work to be successful once improved community wellbeing is visible as a direct result of collaboration between these sectors.

In particular, she hopes that the framework will enable UTS to be the centre that brings people of goodwill together and be the driver of social justice oriented projects.

She hopes that through the many initiatives under the framework, students will build confidence in the fact that they have power to make an impact through their actions.

Finally, she hopes to be able to make staff feel more supported through grants, partnerships and genuine appreciation and celebration of the social impact work they do.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Ms Firth comes from a politically and socially active family and says the drive to make the world a better place is simply in her blood.

This drive has seen her gain experience at the highest levels of government and the not-for-profit sector in Australia. Before joining UTS, she worked as Minister for Education and Training in NSW (2008-2011) and then as the Chief Executive of the Public Education Foundation.

Ms Firth particularly prides herself in her achievements relating to equity in education and how to best address educational disadvantage in low socio-economic communities, including rural and remote Indigenous communities.

She believes that it is her genuine care and interest for other people that has enabled her to appreciate the value of what each person has to offer. It has also helped her bring likeminded people together, harness their skills and expertise, and implement tangible steps that can be followed to reach a common goal.

6.2. External enabling factors

Ms Firth considers the UTS Social Impact Framework to be particularly powerful due to the fact that its process genuinely started from the grassroots up and involved extensive consultation with the university community. What is more, it has been adopted and driven by senior executives.

The UTS Vice Chancellor Attila Brungs in particular has been extremely supportive of this process, and created the role of Executive Director for Social Justice in the first instance to further UTS's endeavours towards social impact.

As such, Ms Firth credits the success of the framework thus far to the perfect balance of on-the-ground-development and senior executive support.

7. Challenges

As large and independent institutions, Ms Firth argues that universities can have a powerful impact due to their resources and capacity.

Partly because of the university's power and responsibility, there is a strong need for collaboration in diverse groups and for people to agree on the best way to reach a common goal. Unsurprisingly, coordinating teamwork in such an enormous institution is a key challenge, and so is reaching agreements.

However, Mr Firth says this is a challenge which also has its benefits. While collaboration with such vast numbers of people is no small feat, it is precisely the reason why UTS has the power and resources to make positive changes.

8. References

https://socialimpact.uts.edu.au/

https://www.uts.edu.au/partners-and-community/initiatives/social-justice-uts/social-impact-framework

https://www.uts.edu.au/about/equity-and-diversity/welcome

https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/article/downloads/2016%20Social%20Justice%20Report_0.pdf

https://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings/methodology