DESIGN IMPACT TRANSITION PLATFORM

A university in transition – Executive summary

Analysis of Erasmus University Rotterdam in its struggles to respond to a society in transition and a way forward

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Erasmus University Rotterdam
Making Minds Matter

About DIT

The Design Impact Transition (DIT) Platform at Erasmus University Rotterdam aims to transform the university by empowering radically new ways to do research, education and engagement for a just and sustainable future.

As a platform, we bring together academics, students, non-academic staff and external stakeholders around complex and persistent societal challenges. We aim at building a strong and engaged community and a collaborative, experimental and design-based culture of transdisciplinarity. 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.

Our team consists of dedicated Erasmians that work on building the DIT platform and transforming the university from the ground up. The core team consists of three quartermasters, an organisational and an academic lead, complemented by affiliated academics from different Schools and Institutes. You can always contact the core team if you have questions, remarks, or want to contribute to the platform. For more information and contact details, please visit our website.

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Executive summary

What is the role of a university in a society that is in transition? How do we as academic researchers and teachers act upon or shape these transitions? How do we support our students and other community members in navigating the tensions and conflicts that these transitions bring?

Whether it concerns the transition to a renewable energy system, a circular economy, a food system that supports (or restores) biodiversity, an equal and just division of wealth and wellbeing, an inclusive and safe digital environment, a health system aimed at preventing instead of curing disease, we as academics are part of these fundamental changes in the fabric of our society. We impact them in positive or negative ways; locally in the communities where we live and work but also globally through our research, our education, and other exchanges of our ideas. How do we ensure that this impact is doing good and no harm? How do we ensure that our work supports the transition to a sustainable and just future and is not obstructing it? If society changes, do our academic practices, values, and norms also need to change?

Many universities are currently struggling to answer these questions and so is Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). Tensions are increasing in our academic communities as well as the sense of powerlessness in handling them. As individual academics, we feel a sense of duty and a sense of urgency to help society to tackle the challenges that are threatening its existence. At the same time, our contributions feel small and insignificant, unable to create the systemic change needed. As an institute, the university is struggling to set a course, torn between guarding the existing practices and norms that have shaped our identity as an academic institute, and opening up to new values and ideas that allow us to better support our communities. Furthermore, we have to come to terms with the uncomfortable truth that our past and current activities contribute to not just the solutions but also the causes of societal grand challenges. Can we change our academic ways without losing our legitimacy as knowledge creators and diffusers of society?

In their Midterm Review of EUR's Strategy 2024 – published in 2022 – the review panel observes the struggles of the EUR's leadership and asks them to take clear action to "clarify the strategic course and to adjust it where necessary" (1). While the Midterm Review report identifies some gaps in the strategy and recommends some rough outlines of what action could look like, the report does not provide insight into the origins of these gaps. Without identifying the underlying tensions and acknowledging how they are shaped by both EUR's organizational structure and changes in the wider academic landscape, EUR's leadership risks acting on these gaps in an ad hoc and ineffective way.

In this report, we support the review panel's call for action but also acknowledge the complex task ahead for the EUR's leadership. To support them in this task, we offer in the report a more in-depth analysis of the strategic gaps identified by the Midterm Review. To conduct this analysis, we build on our combined expertise as the team of the Design Impact Transition (DIT) platform at EUR. Using the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of our team, our analysis builds upon a broad spectrum of academic discourses that investigate the tensions in our academic system. We hope that this analysis will, thus, not only serve the EUR and its community but also provides guideposts for academics at other universities that are looking to facilitate the transformation of their institute and the academic environment at large.

To make sure that our analysis connects to the particular characteristics of the EUR university, we also draw upon many documents, conversations, and other exchanges of ideas within our university. We are, therefore, grateful to the EUR leadership for providing us with the mandate and resources to create the DIT platform but more importantly for having open conversations with us about their goals and struggles. Additionally, we want to emphasize that the ideas expressed in this report are built on the wealth of expertise of our EUR colleagues and the wider EUR community. As this expertise cannot always be captured in scientific references, we want to thank all people that have shared their thoughts in formal and informal conversations.

The results of our analysis

The results of our analysis have been captured in four sections:

Creating a long-term vision

Following the panel's recommendation to look beyond the current strategic period, we argue that a long-term vision is needed. This vision should explain how the university plans to be adaptive to the changes that the societal transitions bring (2), how the university provides spaces for research and education that supports or even accelerates transitions towards a sustainable and just society (3,4), and how the university will adjust its own norms, rules, and activities when they hinder such transitions (4–8).

Four barriers to creating positive societal impact

In aiming "to be a force for good", the university's leadership should tackle the barriers to creating societal impact:

a) The emphasis on academic integrity and relevance has snowed under the duty of an academic institute to create and teach socially robust knowledge, which considers how the knowledge is used, is oriented towards action on changes the existing systems, and is co-created with other actors in society (4-6) (9-15).
b) The focus on individual performance and providing a single pathway to success not only cause unhealthy work pressure and misconduct (16-19), but it also ignores the fact that academic work is teamwork and places its trust in unreliable and incomplete evaluation metrics that disconnect effort from performance and outcome (20–25).
c) The marginalization of our education activities compared to our research activities leads to diminishing our role as providers of academically educated members of society (9). In this role, universities should consider the changing educational needs of a transitioning society, both in the content of our education (26–29) as well as how we evaluate it (30–33).
d) The other roles of the university in society – e.g., an employer, a consumer of resources, an ecological space for flora and fauna – are easily forgotten and not acted upon when the university aims to have a positive impact.

Competencies for socially robust knowledge

Creating and teaching socially robust knowledge requires specific academic competencies that currently do not receive enough support in the EUR:

a) Cross-disciplinarity = to tackle the complex, interconnected grand challenges of society, cross-disciplinary knowledge creation and education with a systems perspective should be facilitated (6,13,34–36);
b) Anticipation = to create a positive impact and to detect unintended, negative consequences of our work – i.e., do good and do not harm – anticipatory techniques should be included in our research and education (37,38);
c) Reflexivity = to become aware of how our academic activities influence and are influenced by values, norms, and emotions, a reflexive attitude and reflexivity exercises should be included in our research and education (39-42);
d) Engagement = to create a common understanding of grand challenges and ensure science for society, with society, engagement with societal actors should be included in our research and education (43-48).

Enable all modes of cross-disciplinarity

In cross-disciplinary research and education, there are three modes: a) in multi-disciplinarity the disciplinary scientists complement each other but their methods and discourses remain separated; b) in inter-disciplinarity the scientists create cross-disciplinary discourses and methodologies; c) in post-disciplinarity (or trans-disciplinarity) the scientists choose methods and discourses from the full scientific spectrum without claiming disciplinary

ownership (49). The ability of the university to enable all three modes depends on the flexibility of disciplinary practices and procedures, whether performance indicators are purely disciplinary, and the existence of spaces for post-disciplinary research and education (12).

Two steps towards the governance of social robustness

Besides the results of our analysis, we would like to also offer the EUR leadership support in taking clear action. This report, therefore, concludes with two concrete steps to tackle the barriers and tensions that we identified for governing the creation and teaching of socially robust knowledge:

Step 1. Set up a cross-school working group on evaluating academic excellence.

The working group - consisting of academics in relevant fields from each of the EUR's schools - will develop policy recommendations a) for assessing the competencies at the team level; b) for evaluating the performance of an individual in a team setting; c) for recognizing and rewarding teamwork within and between departments and schools. This working group will not only revitalise the implementation of the Dutch national Recognition & Reward programme but ensure that the implementation leads to the development of bottom-up initiated, evidence-based policies that account for the EUR's governance structures.

Step 2. Set up a Cross-school Institute for Social Robustness.

The DIT platform was given by EUR's leadership the strategic assignment to investigate and initiate new institutional structures for creating and teaching socially robust knowledge. With the lessons learned, we recommend that the EUR leadership develop a Cross-school Institute for Socially Robustness to serve four purposes:

i. Facilitate reflexive dialogues and strategies on social robustness;

While our university acknowledges the need for socially robust knowledge, tensions are perceived between the requirements for creating and teaching such knowledge and the traditional ways we conduct academic research and education. For example, the desired neutrality of science in the political arena conflicts with research calling for specific policy action. To create awareness among the academic and non-academic staff about these tensions and the strategies to handle them, dialogues between EUR's leadership and the staff of the ten schools and the professional services. The Cross-school Institute could provide a safe and neutral space for such dialogues.

ii. Coordinate cross-school collaborations in research and education;

While in its activities the DIT platform enabled sharing of best practices and creating collaborations between the EUR's schools (e.g., in the new interdisciplinary master's Societal Transition), differences between the policies, structures, and services at the school level hampered the DIT team in their cross-school education and research activities. A central institute in which governance is shared among schools and cross-school structures - such as an examination board and an ethical committee - will streamline the collaborations between schools for socially robust knowledge creation and teaching.

iii. Develop training and innovation platforms for the competencies for social robustness;

While training and innovation in multiple scientific competencies are covered by the EUR's professional services, the four competencies for socially robust knowledge are not structurally supported. To stimulate cross-disciplinarity, two portfolios would be developed for cross-school collaborations on research and education, both for existing projects (e.g., Convergence Alliance projects and the Erasmus Initiatives) and new projects. Each of the other three competencies – Anticipation, Reflexivity, and Engagement – would have its own training programme for staff, and an innovation platform would allow experimentation with new tools, instruments, and configurations for these competencies in research and education.

iv. Set up a transformational, cross-disciplinary program on sustainability for students.

In contributing to sustainable development, we should also support our students in becoming the changemakers needed for a sustainable and just future. To provide them with the knowledge and skills to do so, a cross-school programme would be developed for education on sustainable development and transformational skills, both at the bachelor's as well as master's levels.

Although we tried to be as concrete as possible in describing these steps, action is easier said than done. We, therefore, offer the EUR leadership both our minds and our hands as the DIT team to further develop and implement these steps. Furthermore, in the spirit of our analysis, this action requires cross-school collaboration. Thus, this report is also an invitation to our EUR colleagues and the wider community to share their expertise and capabilities in acting upon these steps and support the EUR leadership in shaping our institute to contribute to a just and sustainable future.

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