



## **Societal impact – prevailing understandings and practices: evidence from survey and structured interviews**

### **Executive Summary**

The following summary is based on the results of an on-line survey among qualified representatives of higher education institutions and cultural organizations, which was carried out in Estonia, Finland and Spain by the Erasmus+ HEISE project in February and March, 2019. The aim of the survey was threefold: 1) to clarify prevailing understandings, and variations in the interpretation, of societal impact; 2) to learn about current practices for evaluation/assessment of societal impact (including the main drivers, methods and indicators used, as well as factors impeding the application of societal impact evaluation in practice); and 3) to learn about the extent of consideration of societal impact in the managerial decision-making process in higher education institutions and cultural organizations.

In total, there were 73 respondents to the survey from the countries studied, of which 31 were from Estonia, 29 from Spain and 13 from Finland. The majority (44) of respondents represented higher education institutions, of which 41 were the representatives of universities (scientific or vocational), of which 15 were from Spain, 14 from Estonia and 12 from Finland.

The responses to the survey reveal the following:

- The term “societal impact” has firmly rooted itself in the mindset of institutions of higher education, arts and culture in all the three countries studied, but especially in Finland. However, it is also evident that the term societal impact is subject to various and rather different interpretations. There exists a multitude of understandings of what constitute the relevant types of impact and the relevant boundaries of society, as well as how the terms “societal impact” and “social impact” are related. This conclusion holds across the countries and within the countries, as well as within and across the sectors studied. Hence, the evaluation of societal impact in practice is also characterized by heterogeneous approaches and the societal impact evaluations undertaken are not necessarily comparable with each other across the countries or within the countries, as well as within and across the sectors studied.
- Societal impact evaluation tends to be more common practice among HEIs than among cultural and arts organizations. This seems to be explained by the differences in regulatory requirements, which formally stipulate evaluation of societal impact for HEIs, but do not prescribe societal impact evaluation for cultural and arts organizations.
- Among the countries studied, Finland is the leader in application of societal impact evaluation, especially in HEIs, where the evaluation, reporting and disclosure of societal impact has become a fairly regular practice. Societal impact evaluation and reporting is also quite common practice among HEIs in Spain, but still rare among HEIs in Estonia. However, it is important to point out that the assessment of societal impact in Estonia and Spain is largely driven by internal needs, while the regular practice observable in Finland is largely externally driven (by funders’ requirements and regulations).
- Although the disclosure and reporting of societal impact is often prescribed externally, HEIs acknowledge that societal impact reports also serve as marketing tools. This view is particularly characteristic to HEIs in Estonia, where marketing is the main stated reason for disclosing and reporting societal impact by HEIs.

- There is a dominant view among HEIs (especially in Finland) that assessment and reporting of societal impact brings benefits, although the benefits associated with it are generally perceived to be non-monetary form.
- *Ex post* evaluation of societal impact vastly outweighs *ex ante* assessment. This suggests that societal impact evaluation is predominantly accountability-driven rather than undertaken for the purpose of decision-making. The forward-looking *ex ante* evaluation of societal impact seems to have gained an important role only among the HEIs in Finland.
- Well-established procedures/guidelines for the assessment of societal impact are missing in the majority of organizations participating in the survey. An *ad hoc* approach to evaluation of societal impact seems to prevail.
- To estimate societal impact, HEIs (as well as culture and arts organizations) mostly collect data via surveys among participants in activities, or by arranging interviews with the participants. Web-based methods like Google analytics are also applied, although their role in gathering data is smaller compared to surveys and interviews. Short-term focus tends to dominate over long-term focus in societal impact assessment. Hence, in general, the evaluation practices are subject to criticism due to their orientation on short-term impacts only.
- Although societal impact considerations have established their role, either as a formal or an informal decision-making criterion in HEIs, financial criteria (considerations) still dominate in the decision-making process in HEIs. The exception are the NGOs and public administrative organizations in charge of culture and/or arts in Spain, among which the majority of respondents assign a more important role to societal impact than to financial outcomes in the decision-making process. In general, societal impact as a decision-making criterion still receives only limited attention. It is not often addressed and discussed in organization's work meetings, and the evaluation of societal impact is predominantly *ex post* rather than *ex ante*.
- There are several obstacles for wider application of societal impact assessment in HEIs and organizations of culture and arts, of which the lack of sufficient knowledge in appropriate evaluation methods as well as issues related to data seem to be the most common.

The results from the survey suggest that there is a need for policies that promote in-depth understanding and harmonization of the concept of societal impact. Such policies could include elaboration of methodological guidelines applicable specifically to evaluation of societal impact in institutions of higher education, arts and culture, as well as designing and introducing specialized training courses, which would focus on the concept and assessment of societal impact in institutions of higher education, arts and culture.

Reference for quotation

Ateca-Amestoy, V.; Äyväri, A.; Eskelinen, A.; Johansson, T.; Jyrämä, A.; Kanervo, R.; Kein, A.; Kiitsak-Prikk, K.; Plaza, B.; Pusa, T.; Ranczakowska, A.; Sarlio-Siintola, S.; Sassi, M.; Simjanovska, V.; Tasser, C. (2019). Roadmap for Societal Engagement for Higher Education Institutions. *Higher Education Institution for Societal Engagement*. HEISE Project, Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership.