

# Defining Societal Impact at EUR

**A common framework for our impact strategy**

Team Evaluating Societal Impact  
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# Introduction

The many and vast challenges society is struggling with from the individual to the collective level underline the great importance of the university's public role and responsibility. These tough issues call for a university that does not remain aloof or develops solutions in splendid isolation, but takes responsibility and, embedded in and in dialogue with society, helps to co-create ways to tackle these challenges in sustainable relationships with its stakeholders. A university can only do this if it is deeply engaged with society, actively organizes its reciprocal relationship with society and sets itself the goal of being meaningful to society. This public responsibility places demands on how a university deals with its core tasks: how it shapes its societal or community engagement and how it organises and designs its education and research in line with this.

Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) takes this public role seriously and wants to contribute positively to the challenges society faces. Not by merely delivering students and producing excellent knowledge, but by taking responsibility for realising changes for the better, collaborating with others, seeking answers to the issues of our time and shifting its mindset from knowledge dissemination to exchange. In other words, EUR - in close consultation and cooperation with its environment - strives for positive societal impact. Understanding and addressing these issues properly often requires fundamental knowledge development. And at the same time, it requires us to increasingly work from the outside in, from the societal challenge as it is experienced in and raised by society. This means that we must become even better in learning from our stakeholders' experiences and knowledge.

We strive for (positive) societal impact as a scientific institution, leaving room for differences in contributions and responsibilities of individuals. At a time when the value of scientific knowledge is increasingly contested and trust in traditional institutions such as science is under pressure, it is of great importance for the university to invest in its own legitimacy, by being trustworthy, sensitive, respectful, independent, and transparent, and by showing society what science stands for and what

science means. This is a necessary precondition for it to have real societal impact.

In recent years, the forms of impact to which EUR already contributes and the ways in which it does so have been explored in depth. At the same time, there is a growing need for a clearer choice of what EUR sees as (positive) societal impact and its goals towards it. This should help individual academics (including but not limited to their role as managers, researchers, lecturers or mentors) and professional staff (including but not limited to roles including educational specialists, grant advisers and knowledge exchange officers) but also teams, departments, and faculties to define their ambitions regarding societal impact more clearly and to enter a dialogue with each other and their environment about how they can keep fulfilling and strengthening their societal responsibility (their impact strategy). This text serves as a framework, explicitly inviting faculties to make their own choices. It also provides tools for jointly determining the extent to which we realise this ambition, and what is needed to do so (supplementary or otherwise) in terms of collaborations between academics and professional staff, support, frameworks, expertise, or other resources.

In this note, we propose how we as a university can define our ambition regarding (positive) societal impact - in dialogue with our environment - and what this means for our three core activities: our education, our research and our societal engagement.

The focus of this document is on the societal impact we aim for with our core activities. At the same time we want to foster the positive impact and decrease the negative impact we have as an organization. For example when it comes to issues like the emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>, the use of raw materials, mobility, and accessibility. Our contribution as a partner, employer, investor and consumer to the regional economy, labor market, innovation and business opportunities resembles our ambition to realize positive and sustainable societal impact. All parts of the EUR are asked to think how they can strengthen this impact, in line with our sustainability ambitions.

## Our definition of societal impact

As EUR, we have positive societal impact if, through our teaching, research, or societal engagement, we make a (sustainable) contribution to a better understanding of societal issues, possible approaches to dealing with these issues or the collective ability to develop and apply these approaches.

This definition clarifies that the impact we aim for is diverse.

We distinguish between six types of impact we pursue:



Figure 1. Forms of impact at Erasmus University

It is important to note that one form of impact is not more valuable or more important than another. More and more, we as EUR - precisely also in response to the urgency of the questions society is grappling with - are striving to help realise (in co-creation with our environment) transformative change. However, the other forms of impact remain as relevant as ever and contribute just as much to society's ability to deal with the issues at hand.

When we speak of societal impact, we do not mean to say that it is only about impact on the collective, societal level. We speak of societal impact because we are talking about impact of our university on our non-academic environment. And in doing so - but more on this later - we consider the broader effects on society when we address specific parts of it, such as businesses or individuals.



# Impact and our core business

As a university, we have three core activities. Besides our education and research, in terms of the law, our third task is the valorisation of our knowledge. In line with how many other universities, and EUR itself, fulfil the latter task, we define this third task more broadly and much less instrumental. It is about our societal engagement in the broadest sense of the word: from our public role as a university, we are visibly present in society, we engage in - reciprocal - relationships with our community and let what we have to offer benefit society. Our three core activities, our teaching, research, and societal engagement, contribute - in themselves but certainly also in conjunction - to our societal impact and aim to increase this impact. Figure 2 illustrates these three portfolios at EUR.

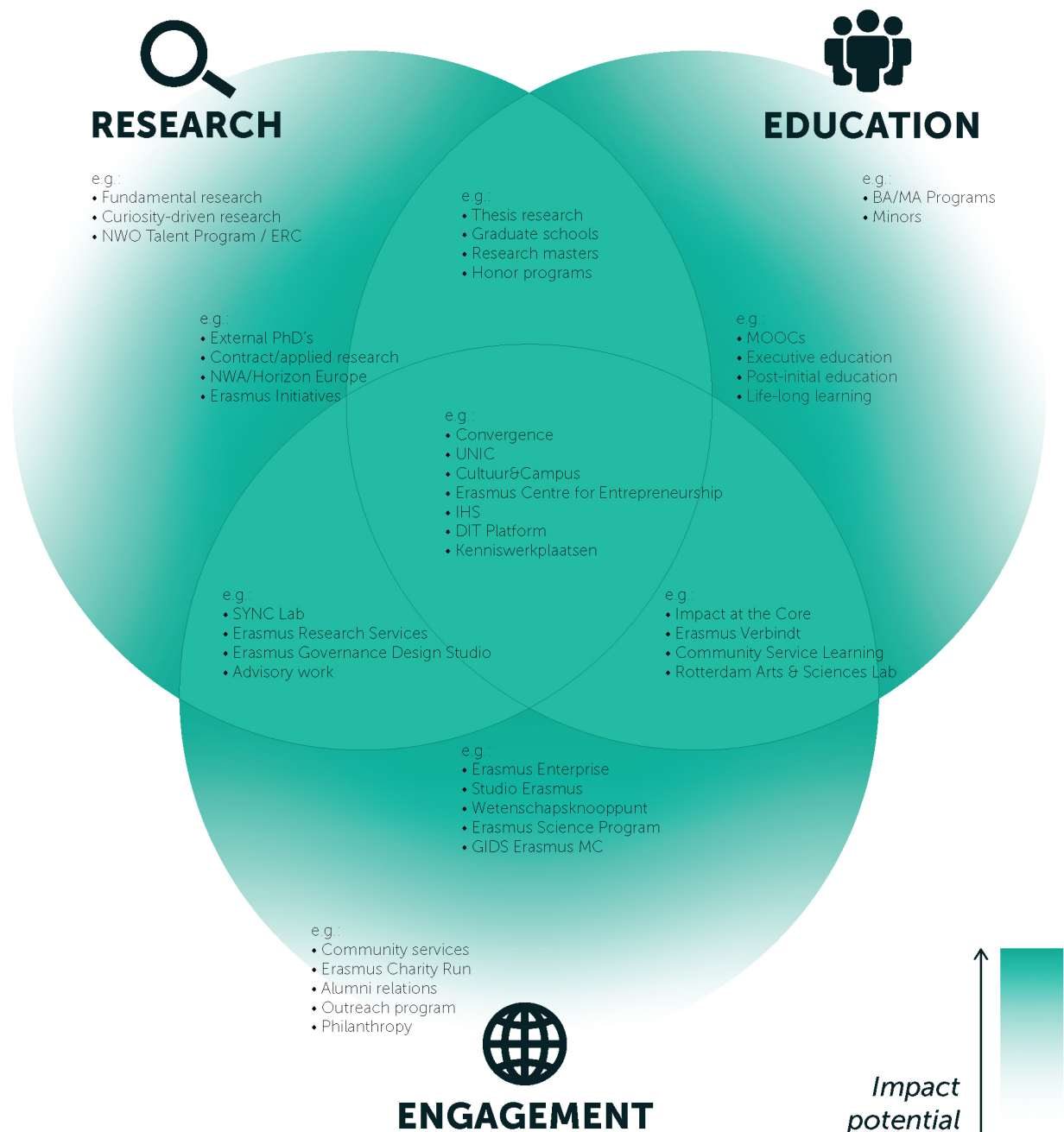


Figure 2. Our portfolios and their intersections illustrated



Our **education** has a positive societal impact if we deliver academically educated and skilled people who will find a place in the labour market and spread our knowledge and values in society. The Erasmus Alumni Portrait videos show how large and diverse the societal contribution of our alumni is. But we go beyond that. We want to make our students aware of the role they can play when faced with societal issues and teach them to critically reflect on it. We also teach them the skills and methods needed to contribute to mastering or solving these issues. We are committed to developing more impact-driven and transformative education. To this end, we integrate perspectives from different disciplines, and bring societal stakeholders and the challenges they experience into our education (with the aim of contributing to them) and increase the “impact capacity” of our students.

Our **research** has positive societal impact if it enables society to better understand (societal) problems and helps to arrive at ways of dealing with these problems and working towards solutions. For some forms of research this impact is more immediate and visible, for others it is more indirect and long-term. With the latter, we can think of our more fundamental/experimental research. But for that too, we are committed to making this research of value to the next links in the chain from knowledge development to application. We consciously manage the impact of our research by thinking about our impact ambition and goals and how best to realise them. In our research, we start from a clear theory of change (see paragraph 4) to work purposefully on impact while remaining open to unforeseen opportunities. We invest in thinking through and validating the impact-oriented methodology we apply in our research and intensify our cooperation with the outside world. We monitor whether we realise our ambitions to improve our efforts.

Our societal impact is supported, strengthened, and complemented by all activities through which we give substance to our **societal engagement**. In doing so, we deploy our resources as a university in the service of society. This can range from staff participating in advisory boards, stimulating knowledge valorisation through academic entrepreneurship to organising debates and lectures or all kinds of external outreach in our immediate environment. At the same time, engagement is also about reciprocity and learning together, involving our external community in what we do, listening to our partners and the societal groups within our community that we engage with, taking their knowledge and experiences seriously, and organising open, reciprocal, and sustainable relationships. All these forms of societal engagement can lead to forms of societal impact. Moreover, they help create a context in which the impact of our education and research is enhanced, because in this way we can build on a robust position rooted in society.



Figure 3. Impact and our core business

## Our ways to make an impact

There are numerous ways in which we (can) realise impact. We can illustrate this by taking a closer look at our core activities and the various ways of realising impact that can be discerned in them. Table 1 provides an initial and not exhaustive view.


 <b>EDUCATION</b>	 <b>RESEARCH</b>	 <b>ENGAGEMENT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial education</li> <li>• Executive education</li> <li>• Workshops, master classes</li> <li>• Online education (MOOCs)</li> <li>• Summer schools</li> <li>• Open education</li> <li>• Internships</li> <li>• Life-long learning</li> <li>• Impact-driven education</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publications for wider audiences</li> <li>• Science communication</li> <li>• Cooperation in consortia</li> <li>• Design research</li> <li>• Action research, cocreation</li> <li>• Applied / contract research</li> <li>• Innovations, licenses,</li> <li>• Patents</li> <li>• Open science</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneurship, spin-offs</li> <li>• Academic consultancy</li> <li>• Contributing to public debate</li> <li>• Policy advice/evaluations</li> <li>• Expert roles / consultations</li> <li>• Double appointments / ancillary positions / secondments</li> <li>• Media appearances</li> <li>• Outreach, events, and services</li> <li>• Community services</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

Table 1. Ways to realise societal impact

All our faculties have their own profile in terms of the ways they realise their societal impact. Some faculties have a stronger focus on entrepreneurship. Other faculties contribute more to public debate or have many staff members who are also active in the professional field of that discipline. These differences match the differences that exist in discipline and in scientific traditions. Psychological research can have instrumental impact by resulting in treatment protocols, while philosophical research is more likely to provide new perspectives for public debate. So, the form of impact we have is also related to the approach we take to achieving impact. Articles and blogs can lead to conceptual or cultural impact, while training professionals and forms of (post-initial) education contribute to capacity building.

More and more, we are consciously thinking about which of these ways best fit our core qualities and impact goals. This is important to further increase our impact. We can then also organise the necessary support and knowledge development around this more effectively.

## Impact as our mission - a purposeful and dialogical endeavour

Societal impact is not always foreseeable in advance. And regularly our actions have societal impact, although we were not aiming for that. Nevertheless, our impact ambition benefits from a more conscious and purposeful approach to impact, aimed at concrete and current societal challenges, in which conscious thought has been given to what impact or societal effect is intended, who is doing it and how best to achieve it. We therefore ask ourselves in everything we do what societal change our actions are aimed at and how we can organise our actions in such a way that this change is realised (or the chance of it being realised as much as possible). In doing so, we make explicit the relationship between what we do, the outputs we produce, the outcomes we achieve and the ultimate change that results. This is how we work on our impact in a targeted and traceable way. When we evaluate our impact, we reconstruct the change process we have contributed to and look for appropriate indicators (in terms of activities and outputs, and where possible also outcomes and impact) to substantiate this narrative.

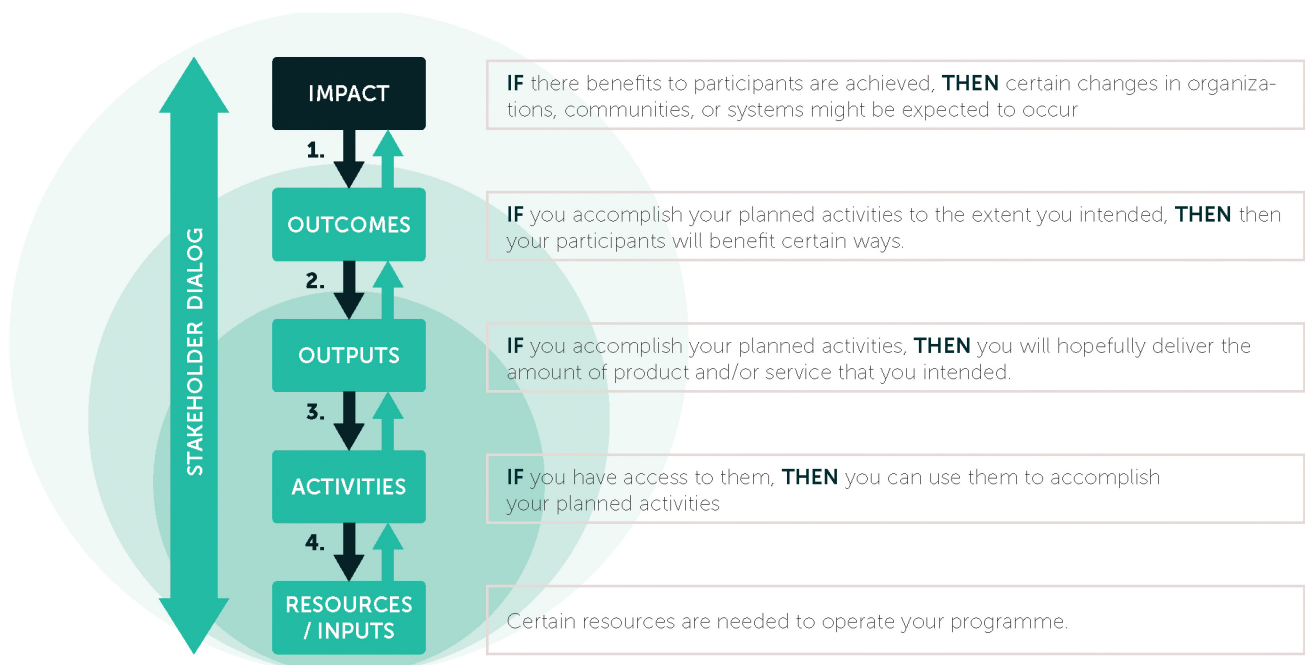


Figure 4. A logical model for impact – Theory of Change

Of fundamental importance here is that, to the most extent possible, we do not decide for ourselves what our impact can and should be, but that we do it from the start in consultation with our environment and perhaps even initiated by that environment. This applies to each of the steps we go through in the process of creating impact. We operate not so much from the inside out, but much more from the outside in.



## Impact as an ambition - the dot on the horizon

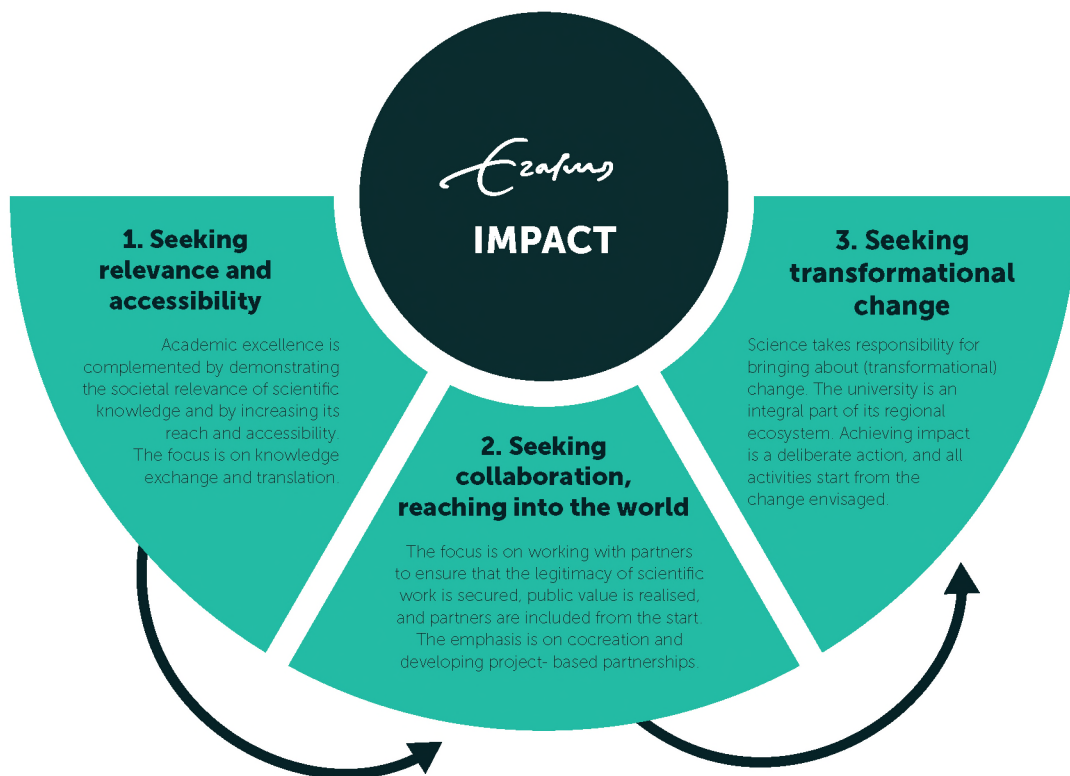


Figure 5. Different approaches to impact – impact generations

Our university is evolving. We can distinguish several approaches<sup>2</sup> to impact within our university (see Figure 5). By choosing to be “civically engaged and societally responsible” as a university, we are particularly committed to strengthening the third approach. In that perspective, we act as a ‘civic university’ that creates and adds value in a reciprocal connection with its environment. This does not make the other approaches less important or legitimate, but we do formulate an ambition that fits our mission.

## Our focus: substantively and geographically

The question can be asked on which societal issues our impact ambition focuses, to the extent that our impact can actually be consciously planned for. EUR has a broad portfolio of research themes and knowledge areas. We also do not want to place limits on this based on a strictly formulated impact mission. Our societal commitment is also diverse and multicoloured. And that is a strength, not a weakness. What is important is that we understand how our thematic focus can be chosen in dialogue with our environment and respond to the issues around us and do so as much as possible, respecting our academic freedom and our own scientific agenda. In the latter, we build on those themes where we as EUR are distinctive and strong.

Invited by our societal and political context to make a difference, but also fueled by our desire to act engaged, we focus our ambition on the regional context in which we operate: Rotterdam and its regional environment. This does not mean that we do not (want to) also have an impact at wider scales. Indeed, part of our impact is also and indeed national or even global. But we do see our immediate surroundings as an important focal point in our impact strategy, where we are anchored and where we also explicitly feel our responsibility to be meaningful and therefore focus on.

<sup>2</sup> See: Rickards, L., Steele, W., Kokshagina, O. and Morales, O. (2020) Research Impact as Ethos. RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. ISBN 978-1-922016-81-2.

# Positive societal impact

We strive for impact because we feel involved in and want to take responsibility for the issues our society struggles with. As a university, we make work of our societal commitment and that commitment characterises the impact we realise, with our research, education and our engagement. However, the societal impact of a university is not always positive. After all, not every change is a change for the better. For example, if our legal research helps private parties evade tax rules, that is not positive. The same is true if our public administration research contributes to public organisations losing sight of citizens' interests. We deliberately aim to avoid such instances of 'grimpact.'

In our pursuit of positive impact, we therefore apply a couple of principles or tenets.

1. EUR is genuinely committed to being an impact-driven university. We want to be involved and engaged as EUR - in line with our values. We strive for impact from an intrinsic motivation, thinking from the outside in. Together with our environment, we determine which issues we want to make an impact on.
2. Achieving societal impact requires a long haul. We therefore strive for continuity in our collaborative relationships and organize ongoing lines in our impact activities, aligning our efforts as much as possible.
3. Our impact contributes to a more sustainable and just world, increases inclusiveness, and reduces inequalities. We are aware of the power dynamics present within the relationships we are entangled in.
4. Our impact is not limited to the interests of an individual actor but is positive for the development of the wider system of which that actor is a part and therefore does not cause negative effects elsewhere or later.
5. Our impact has been made with integrity, in line with our academic and Erasmian values (see appendix).
6. We defend the academic freedom of and within our academic community as well its inclusiveness and open-mindedness. We protect the members of our community when their opinions are met with resistance or opposition. Our community is a free and safe space in which we have an ongoing dialogue about what we define as positive societal impact.
7. We are open and transparent about the impact we realise; we monitor and demonstrate this impact and engage in dialogue about it with our environment.

## The preconditions for impact

This text is not intended to go into detail about what is needed to realise (positive) societal impact. However, we do underline that several preconditions must be met to realise our impact ambition. First, it is important that we fully recognise and value the realisation of impact and shape career perspectives around impact. Second, creating positive impact asks for a joint effort of academics and professional staff. Therefore, it is important that we realise the necessary expertise and infrastructure, create opportunities for professionalisation and develop new roles close to the primary process. Our portfolio around engagement deserves more structural and strategic attention to achieve this. Finally, we need to think about the consequences of increasing our societal involvement, also in terms of the protection we offer our students and staff when their involvement meets resistance, and the guarantees we need to build in to guard our independence and critical distance.

## Follow-up actions

1. The definition document is formally adopted by the Executive Board as a general framework for how EUR views impact (including these follow-up actions) and serves as a guiding framework for how we approach our impact ambition and organize our impact strategy. In line with the recommendations of the midterm review, EUR will invest in engaging the wider internal (and external) community with the steps they take to become a more impact-driven University. Therefore a plan of action will be developed for an ongoing process of internal dialogue and communication with all relevant target groups within EUR and our external partners.
2. A more structural dialogue on impact will be organized with the EUR community in order to refine and sharpen our common vision on societal impact. This dialogue also will focus upon the ethical/normative aspects of our impact ambition and will promote awareness of what can be considered as positive and sustainable societal impact. In this dialogue also the crucial role of the support staff / services will be discussed.
3. Given the crucial of societal or public engagement for realizing societal impact, the EUR will organize its engagement portfolio in the same way as its portfolios on education and research. In cocreation with its community, the EUR will draft a strategy on engagement. This strategy is intended to achieve more synergy and impact within the current portfolio on engagement, and to organize this portfolio in such a way that our engagement helps the EUR realize more impact and support more engaged (and thus impactful) forms of both education and research.
4. All schools will define their own school-wide impact ambition and associated strategy and to shape their own impact governance (explicitly defining the responsibility for the portfolio on engagement and for the overall impact ambition).
5. The EUR will, based on the choices made in the definition document, develop an operational framework (tools, guidelines, templates) for the process around creating impact (setting goals, selecting strategies, and setting up governance) and monitoring and evaluating it. Important principles in the evaluation framework are:
  - a. The distinction between research, education and engagement and associated, responsible impact indicators.
  - b. The distinction in types of impact (e.g. cultural, conceptual, instrumental, connectivity, capacity building and transformative change) and associated accountable impact indicators.
  - c. A specific set of impact activities characteristic of the EUR (e.g. entrepreneurship, science communication, academic advising etc.) and associated accountable impact indicators.
  - d. A more elaborate framework of indicators to support the development and implementation of differentiated career paths under the umbrella of Recognizing and Rewarding.



## Appendix – impact and our Erasmian values

### Societally engaged

As EUR, we make an enduring commitment to societal issues and are dedicated to helping solve the complex problems of modern society. As EUR, we work with our environment to jointly prioritise urgent challenges. These challenges are complex and difficult to understand. By concretising these challenges together with our environment, understanding them and finding ways to deal with them together, we fulfil our responsibility as a knowledge institution.

### World Citizen

To understand the complexity of societal issues, it is necessary and natural to look beyond our own borders, as many challenges are global and manifest themselves differently at different scales. We are aware that solutions at one level of scale can create problems at another. We learn from examples elsewhere and share our knowledge in the broadest sense.

### Connecting

We can only have a positive impact if we are truly engaged with what goes on in our environment and if we want to invest in an open and reciprocal relationship with that environment. We therefore organise this connection, delve into what drives and needs our environment, build bridges, and engage in constant dialogue to calibrate what we do and bring others along with us.

### Entrepreneurial

We accept ownership and take responsibility to contribute to societal issues. We have an open eye for opportunities to realise impact, stepping outside the beaten academic path. We support entrepreneurship that strengthens our positive impact.

### Open-minded

We stand for independence and integrity and strive for mutual understanding. We dialogue about our differences and believe in the power of inclusion. We value the diverse roles and talents within the academic community needed to achieve real impact. We learn from others and recognise the value of other knowledge sources and perspectives.