

Academic engagement in social innovation for sustainable transition

THE ROLE OF POLICY SUPPORT AT SWEDISH UNIVERSITIES

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Several Swedish universities are currently reorienting themselves towards broader and deeper societal engagement. As a result, institutional support for impact and innovation is expanding beyond technology transfer and commercialization to include social innovation and multi-sector collaboration aimed at addressing societal challenges and sustainable development.

To shed further light on this trend, a document study of policy documents from six Swedish universities was conducted, followed by policy labs at each university where managers, support staff, researchers, and other stakeholders discussed and elaborated on the findings. In addition, societally engaged universities in other European countries were mapped to provide comparative inspiration. To broaden the perspective further, a re-imaginatorium was organized in which participants from all studied universities came together to envision what societally engaged universities of the future might look like. The study was conducted by Forum for Social Innovation Sweden (Mötesplats Social Innovation) with funding from the Swedish innovation agency VINNOVA.

The document study and policy labs show that universities are obliged by legislation and governmental directives to support innovation, sustainability, societal impact, and external collaboration. The communicated ambitions are quite high in the three last areas, while lower regarding innovation by simply stating that the universities shall report back on their innovation office operations. However, parallel governmental steering of universities' innovation support prioritizes commercial and technological innovation over social innovation. The universities' own policies convey similar ambitions regarding sustainability, societal impact, and external collaboration – while also emphasizing innovation as a means for addressing societal challenges. There are however few accounts of how to turn these ambitions into practice, creating a vacuum in steering, responsibilities, resource allocation, and monitoring.

The international mapping identified 18 examples of societally engaged universities in Europe that could serve as inspiration for Swedish universities. One

example is Politecnico di Milano in Italy, whose strategic plan describes the university as a laboratory for ideas, solutions, and visions that address societal challenges. As part of this, they have mapped their internal expertise on social innovation in relation to UN's sustainable development goals and established a collaboration platform for jointly addressing social innovation and sustainable development by academia and civil society. The re-imaginatorium resulted, in turn, in four visions of the societally engaged university of the future. One of these is "The Relations University" that embodies and practices the relations between academia and other societal sectors, as well as between humans, animals and nature. This permeates strategic priorities and everyday practices in research, education and collaboration, and the physical design of the campus.

The findings shed light on the impact of policies on the current reorientation among Swedish universities towards a wider and deeper societal engagement, where the perceived impact varies from mere shelf warmers to catalysts for cultural change in academia. Vague and positive accounts of innovation, sustainability, societal impact and external collaboration allow for inclusive interpretations while concealing conflicting objectives and continued



priority of commercial and technological innovation in policy and practice. The high ambitions of the studied policies thus provide arguments, but few practical means, for supporting and pursuing academic engagement in social innovation for sustainable transition. The international mapping and the re-imaginatorium expose the importance of external inspiration and reflective imagination to reach beyond established norms and practices.

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR POLICY

- Clarify the chain of command between policy and practice by allocating adequate resources and responsibilities to realize the high ambitions of academic engagement in innovation to address societal challenges and sustainable development.
- Provide forums for continuous reflections on the development, contents and implementation of university policies, with managers, support staff, researchers, and other stakeholders from within and outside academia.
- Make use of external inspiration and reflective imagination to reach beyond established norms and practices in academic innovation policy and support.

POLICY BRIEF AUTHORS



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KEY POINTS FOR POLICY

- Studied policy documents from six Swedish universities show high ambitions in promoting academic engagement in innovation that addresses societal challenges and sustainable development, but contain few descriptions on concrete measures to realize these.
- Studied governmental policies support these ambitions in terms of sustainability, societal impact, and external collaboration, but are less clear when it comes to innovation and prioritizes commercial and technological innovation in parallel steering.
- The mapping of 18 examples of societally engaged universities in other European countries shows that UN's sustainable development goals are used as guidance, and highlight the importance of allocating sufficient time and resources, and enabling multi-sectoral collaboration, to address social innovation and sustainable development.
- The resulting visions from the re-imaginatorium show the importance of imagination and continuous reflection to inspire future policies and practices for academic engagement in social innovation for sustainable transition.

PUBLICATIONS

- Public report:
"Framtidens samhällsengagerade lärosäten",
<https://socialinnovation.se/publikationer/>
- Research article:
Lindberg, M., Haskell, L., Wolmesjö, M., Hillgren, P-A. (forthcoming). Academic engagement in social innovation for sustainable transition – the impact of policy discourse on professional support. Journal of Praxis in Higher Education.

SIRI is a transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral platform, connecting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the design and implementation of transformative innovation policies. SIRI facilitates networking, community building, and joint initiatives to co-create and exchange knowledge and best practices for systems transformation.



This project was conducted by Forum Social Innovation Sweden.



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