

# Reimagining health sciences faculties through the lens of social impact

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## Abstract

Universities worldwide are being called to re-examine their fundamental purpose, to decolonise curricula, enact social justice, and respond to societal issues. Health sciences faculties are challenged to align their core missions of teaching, research, and community engagement with these evolving demands. In South Africa, movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and the COVID-19 pandemic have once again amplified the need for universities to act not only as knowledge producers but as agents of meaningful change. Drawing on the example of Stellenbosch University (SU) and its Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS), we outline a Social Impact Framework that foregrounds

embedded, specific, and systemic impact. We propose that five domains: curriculum, research, leadership, partnerships, and systems, must be recalibrated so that social impact becomes the guiding principle of academic work. When social impact becomes the compass guiding universities, institutions shift from being good at producing knowledge to being good for society. This transformation demands a move from outputs to outcomes, from competition to collaboration, and from prestige to purpose.

**Keywords:** social impact, higher education, health sciences faculties, curriculum reform; leadership, partnerships

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## Introduction: Rethinking the Purpose of Universities

Across the world, universities are being called to re-examine their fundamental purpose. Higher education may be considered a contested space, as well as a microcosm of society because the prevailing social inequalities of society are found within higher educational spaces.<sup>1,2</sup> There is growing recognition that higher education must do more than transmit knowledge. It must decolonise curricula, foster social justice, and respond to societal issues.<sup>3</sup> Many health sciences faculties still struggle to integrate these ideals into their core missions of teaching, research, and engagement.<sup>4</sup>

In South Africa, student movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed enduring inequities in access to higher education, and to healthcare amongst others.<sup>5</sup> These experiences emphasise that universities must move beyond simply generating knowledge and intentionally apply their scientific work to serve society. Skyrme<sup>6</sup> captures this imperative by asking whether universities should focus on what they are ‘good at’ or on what they are ‘good for’.

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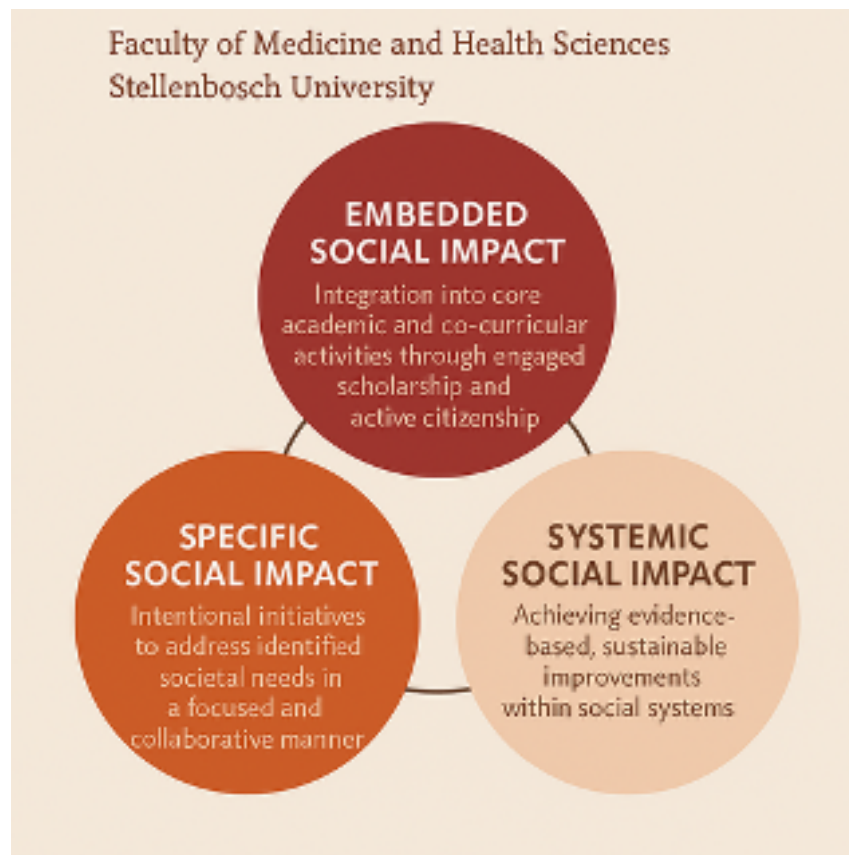
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In this commentary, we argue that reimagining health sciences faculties through the lens of social impact is essential for authentic transformation, sustainable relevance, and a more equitable future. Embedding social impact as a guiding principle requires universities to ask not only what knowledge do we instil, but also whose lives are improved because we exist?

## From Policy to Practice: The Stellenbosch University Example

In South Africa, the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) at Stellenbosch University (SU) developed a Social Impact Framework<sup>7</sup> incorporating three interconnected approaches: embedded, specific, and systemic impact (Fig. 1). Many universities including SU, continue to treat social impact as a “third stream/arm” an optional extension to teaching and research.<sup>8,9</sup> This framing is outdated and counterproductive. Social impact should instead serve as the foundation upon which all academic activity rests. At SU, social impact has been elevated from a peripheral activity to a core institutional function through the

**Figure 1: FMHS Social Impact Framework (2021)**



development of a policy. The Social Impact Policy<sup>1</sup> (2025–2029) positions social impact as an institutional imperative integrated through citizenship, teaching and learning, and research.<sup>10</sup>

### Embedding Purpose into the Academic DNA

Every university possesses what might be called an academic DNA: the deeply ingrained values, systems, and behaviours that shape how it teaches, researches, and engages. If social purpose is not embedded within this DNA, efforts for social impact risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.<sup>9,11,12</sup> To move beyond mere rhetoric, health sciences faculties should consider re-engineering five interrelated domains: curriculum, research, leadership, partnerships, and systems, such that social impact becomes the organising principle of academic life.<sup>4</sup>

### Curriculum: Learning for Social Accountability

Purpose-driven curricula cultivate graduates who are agents of change rather than passive recipients of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Embedding social impact into teaching requires aligning learning outcomes and assessment strategies with equity, community partnership, and critical consciousness.<sup>14</sup> This involves pedagogies that expose students to real-world contexts, value lived

experiences, and encourage reflexivity about privilege and power. Such approaches connect classroom learning to public service and public good, preparing future health professionals to act with compassion and accountability.

### Research for Impact

If teaching shapes graduates, research shapes the knowledge ecosystem within which they operate. Academic success is too often measured by citation counts and impact factors. These metrics reward visibility over value. A socially responsive research agenda asks not merely “What do we publish?” but “Who *benefits* from what we publish?” In contexts marked by historical inequities and critical health challenges, embedding social impact into research shows both ethical and strategic strength.<sup>15,16</sup> Ubuntu-inspired principles of interconnectedness and collective well-being expand the definition of excellence to include responsiveness, inclusivity, and transformation.<sup>17-19</sup> To structurally embed this ethos, universities must broaden their measures of excellence to include policy uptake, community benefit, and systemic change alongside bibliometrics. Reward systems should recognise the collaborative and time-intensive nature of participatory inquiry.<sup>20,21</sup> Moreover, strengthening research capacity

must involve not only developing academic skillsets but also empowering communities to participate as co-creators of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

### **Leadership: From Individual Champions to Distributed Purpose**

Transforming universities to make a social impact is not a matter of isolated projects but of systemic, purpose-driven leadership. Effective leaders model equity, responsiveness, and accountability; they create enabling environments where academics can align scholarship with societal priorities.

Significantly, leadership must be distributed. Transformation should originate not only from executive offices but also from faculties, departments, and student groups, promoting the integration of social impact throughout the institution rather than reliant on a few advocates.<sup>23,24</sup> Purpose-driven leadership prioritises participation and amplifies the voice of those historically under-represented, as core elements of socially just universities.<sup>25</sup> A systematic review in 2025 shows that leadership grounded in equity and moral purpose tends to yield sustainable institutional change.<sup>26</sup>

### **Partnerships: Co-Learning for Change**

Complex health and social challenges cannot be solved by universities alone. Meaningful partnerships with communities,<sup>27</sup> government, industry, and civil society reposition universities as co-learners within broader ecosystems of change rather than as top-down knowledge providers. Reciprocal partnerships expand the reach and legitimacy of academic work, ensuring that evidence translates into practice and that practice, in turn, shapes inquiry.

### **Systemic Change: Aligning Structures with Purpose**

Leadership and partnerships will falter if they are not supported by systemic reform. Universities must

reconfigure policies, incentives, and evaluation systems to reward socially impactful work. Promotion and tenure criteria should value collaboration, long-term engagement, and demonstrable benefit to society. Teaching evaluations should recognise pedagogies that foreground community relevance and transformative learning.

Systemic transformation also involves dismantling entrenched hierarchies, fostering inter- and trans-disciplinarity, and embedding accountability for social impact at every level. When leadership, partnership, and structural change intersect, universities become anchor institutions that are responsive, engaged, and indispensable to shaping a more just society.

### **Conclusion**

If universities are to remain relevant in an era defined by social inequality, climate crisis, and rapid technological change, they must move beyond token gestures of engagement. *Reimagining higher education through the lens of social impact* demands a fundamental recalibration of and within academic ecosystems.

Research must be redefined not by the number of outputs but by the depth of social change it enables. Leadership must be courageous, distributed, and purpose-driven. Partnerships must be authentic, reciprocal, and rooted in trust. Systems must embed equity, compassion, and accountability as firm operational realities rather than as clichéd aspirational slogans.

When social impact guides academic efforts, universities evolve from being good at knowledge production, to actually serving society. This transformation demands a move from outputs to outcomes, from competition to collaboration, and from prestige to purpose.

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