THINK TANK
SOCIAL MISSION
OF UNIVERSITIES

A Report by the SGroup Think Tank on the Social Mission of Universities (TTSMU)

CONTENTS

Table of Figures

List of Abbreviations

EDI: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

IHES: Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society

SMU: Social Mission of Universities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present report provides an overview of the survey on the Social Mission of Universities (SMU) launched in Spring 2023 by the SGroup Think Tank on the Social Mission of Universities (TTSMU). It identifies key learning points highlighted by survey responses and outlines the future work plan of the TTSMU, which will be grounded in collaborative and co-creative activities within and beyond the SGroup. It is intended to stimulate further dialogue and learning around and engagement with Social Mission (SM) in Higher Education (HE) within the SGroup and the wider HE sphere. The report acknowledges the invaluable contribution made by SGroup member institutions that responded to the survey.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of, and draws learning points from, the survey on the Social Mission of Universities (SMU) launched in Spring 2023 by the SGroup Think Tank on the Social Mission of Universities (TTSMU). The survey (see Appendix 1) was constructed in order to gain and disseminate information on initiatives and good practice related to Social Mission (SM) activity across the SGroup, and to support future SGroup and TTSMU project work. It was built on and extends the scope of an earlier SGroup SMU survey on "Engaging with Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in Higher Education" undertaken in 2021.

The report highlights the wide-ranging nature of Social Mission work in Higher Education (HE), as evidenced by the survey feedback, and provides a framework for the future plans and practice of the SGroup TTSMU. The TTSMU intends to use insights provided by the survey to map key SM concepts, demonstrate the scope of SM activity, and capture SM priorities for SGroup institutions, in order to develop learning and produce resources that support members'

engagement with SM practice. The task will be comprehensive and the approach taken to by the TTSMU will be highly collaborative. It begins with this report.

As the survey on which the report is based confirms, the development and delivery of Social Mission work by Higher Education institutions (HEIs) is driven by a commitment to social engagement, responsibility, and responsiveness. SM work is not limited to practices of equality and diversity, although these are often central to it. SM work in HE is typically grounded in inclusion, in its many guises, and can take the form of attention to the inclusive curriculum; the inclusive campus; and/or practices of inclusive education, research, and knowledge exchange. It is frequently characterised by social impact, entailing activities such as social and community engagement; social enterprise and service-learning projects; and widening access, participation, and outreach work. As the recent [Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society (IHES)](#) project attests, SM work in HE can draw productively on international connections and internationalisation programmes to deliver its objectives.

SM activity in individual HEIs, survey feedback suggests, habitually reflects the local/regional/national and cultural contexts of those institutions, demonstrating context-specific perspectives, practices, and designs. However, all such activity, regardless of context, typically produces new forms of learning, including learning guided by "real world" challenges linked to social disparity and discrimination. It is driven by an imperative to make a meaningful difference to the lived experiences of the students, staff, communities and stakeholders with which HEIs interact. It often entails collaborative engagement with bodies, groups, and agendas, whether local, regional, national, or international, located outside the HE space. Such engagement is most effective when it is two-way, dialogic, and grounded in respect for difference and the common good.

The survey on which this report is based has enabled the TTSMU to:

- gather data on SM policies and practices across SGroup institutions;

- better understand what SM practice means and achieves within the institutions in our network;

- better understand how SM practice is implemented and as- sessed across our member institutions;

- identify SM good practice within the SGroup;

- better understand the challenges and obstacles encountered in SM work;

- identify some of the ways in which the impact of SM policies and practices is measured;

- recognise that SM work looks and feels different in different national-cultural contexts and in different types of HEI;

- initiate work on the creation of guidance materials and resources, to be disseminated within and beyond the SGroup community;

- initiate work on the construction of a programme of seminar, webinar, workshop, and training event activity focused on diverse aspects of SM in HE, recognising the key role collaboration and co-creation will play in that process.

We should like to express our deepest gratitude to the institutions and colleagues who responded to the survey and to share here our commitment to working with you in the future on this critical project.

The TTSMU Coordinators

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SOCIAL MISSION OF UNIVERSITIES: KEYWORDS, QUESTIONS, CHALLENGES

Key words related to Social Mission in Higher Education, displayed in the graphic below and taken from the TTSMU survey feedback, provide a snapshot of core elements of the terrain addressed in this report.

Figure 1. SMU Keywords

In order to explore and better understand the conceptualisation and implementation, in SGroup member institutions, of the primary features of SM in HE, the TTSMU formulated a survey grounded in a targeted set of key questions and challenges (see Appendix 1). These are illustrated below:

CONCEPTS

What are the offical termos or concepts in your University that are used to describe its engagement with Social Mission work?

1

STRATEGIES

Does your University have strategies related directly and specifically to Social Mission work?

2

PLANS

Are Social Mission imperatives present in other institutional plans?

3

TARGETS

Age; Disability; Gender; Race; Religion & Beliefs; Sexual orientation; Social-economic background; 1ª generation students; Access, participation and graduation; Counselling & Support; Learning & Teaching?

4

IMPACT

On Staff and Students, Education, Research, Cooperation, and Society?

1

MONITORING

Who is responsible for the evaluation of the Social Mission agenda? Does your University have a monitoring system for assessing the impact of its Social Mission policies?

2

CHALLENGES

What are the main challenges entailed in delivering the Social Mission work of your institution?

3

INNOVATION

What innovative practices has your University introduced to assess the impact of its Social Mission policies?

4

Figure 2. SMU Survey Questions and Challenges

OVERVIEW OF
SURVEY RESPONSES

Responses to the survey came from 23 SGroup member institu-
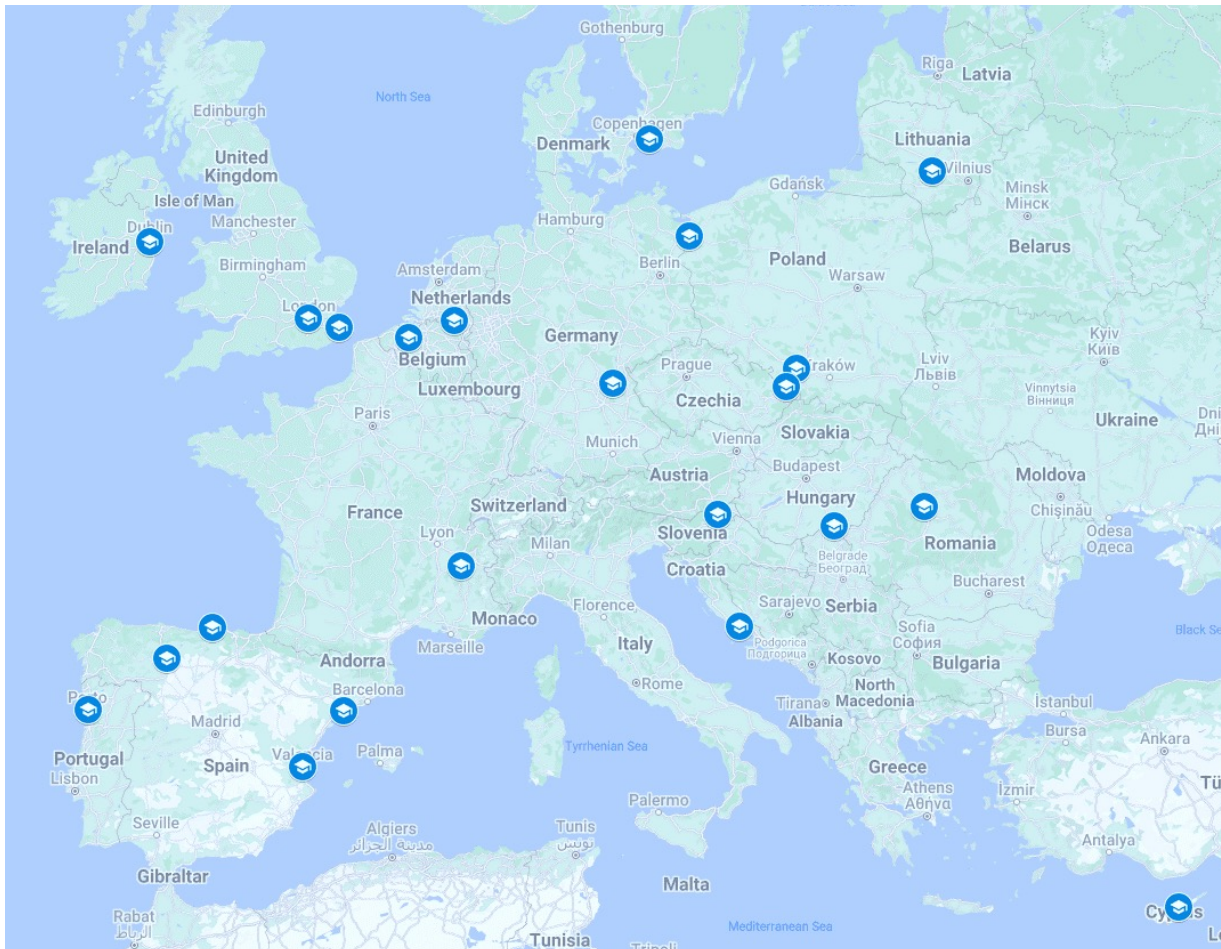tions, located across Europe and in South Africa.

Figure 3. Map of SMU Survey Respondents (Europe)

YEAR	RESPONDENTS	DEADLINE	MEMBERS
2021	EDI survey 22 members	17 March	Adam Mickiewicz; Babeș-Bolyai; Cantabria; Cyprus; Eindhoven; Ghent; Giessen; Gothenburg; Kent; León; Liège; Lille; Los Andes; Malmö; Messina; Ostrava; Porto; Sarajevo; Silesian; Trieste; Valencia; Westminster.
2023	SMU survey 23 members	26 April	Babeș-Bolyai; Bayreuth; Cantabria; Cyprus; Dublin; Eindhoven; Ghent; Grenoble; Kaunas; Kent; León; Malmö; Maribor; Ostrava; Porto; Rovira i Virgili; Silesian; Split; Stellenbosch; Szczecin; Szeged; Valencia; Westminster.

Figure 4. Table of SMU Survey Responding Institutions

Institutional respondents were, in the main, international officers and vice-rectors for international or social engagement. Responses also came from units related to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and alumni relations. Information provided reflected activity in a variety of areas within responding institutions, given the encompassing nature and scope of SM in HE.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS -12	HIGHER MANAGEMENT - 8	OTHER - 3
Institutional Erasmus Coordinator Head of IRO Director International Cooperation Director of International Academic Exchanges Senior International Partnerships Officer International Officer Strategic Partnerships and Alliances Manager Outgoing Student Mobility Manager Head of IRO Deputy Head of IRO	Rector's Plenipotentiary for Social Responsibility Vice-Dean for Cooperation & Development Vice-Rector DVC Global Engagement Vice-Rector for Social Engagement and Sustainability Senior University Officer - Head of Diversity, Inclusivity and Equality Office, Rector's Office Senior Director: Social Impact and Transformation Secretaria del vicerrectorado de responsabilidad social, cultura y deportes Deputy Director for Strategic Management	Officer for Widening Access and Participation Professional assistant Head of Welcome and Alumni Services

Figure 5. Roles and Responsibilities of SMU Survey Institutional Respondents

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY OUTCOMES

This section of the report captures insights derived from the survey responses. The material it contains provides the basis for the Learning Points section and will inform the future work plans of the TTSMU.

Social Mission Strategy and Policy

The majority of respondents to the survey confirmed that Social Mission strategies were in place in their institutions, as single entities and/or as embedded elements within wider strategy and policy material, including those related to teaching and learning, student experience/support, research, knowledge exchange, global engagement, and access and participation. These strategies, or sub strategies, take however different forms, reflective of the contexts, values, priorities, and organisational and governance arrangements of their home institutions. Key thematic focuses include equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); anti-discrimination practice; social engagement and responsibility; community engagement; sustainability and sustainable development; and ethics. There are significant commonalities and disparities across the articulations of SM strategy highlighted by the survey, which attest to the range and scope of SM practice across SGroup institutions.

Responses indicated that responsibility for the evaluation of the Social Mission agenda most usually sits with senior leadership and management, with Senate and Faculty bodies and teams/committees responsible for EDI also playing a key role.

Social Mission Target Areas and Groups

Survey responses indicated that, in terms of stakeholder targeting, HEIs tend either to develop dedicated SM strategies, plans, and guidelines for individual stakeholder groups (specifically, students and staff) or to adopt a more holistic approach, considering all SM stakeholders together.

Underrepresented or disadvantaged characteristics targeted by SM policy and/or initiatives in the institutions that responded to our survey were, in order of priority, gender; disability; socioeconomic background; first generation students; sexual orientation; race and ethnicity; age; religion and belief.

Practice in the above areas is likely to reflect the specificity of institutional strategic priorities, organisational and governance arrangements, and the ways in which SM is incorporated into wider strategy and policy.

Social Mission Terms and Concepts

Survey responses identified as key SM terms and concepts equality, diversity, and inclusion; civic mission; social engagement and responsibility; community engagement; sustainability; access and widening participation; ethics and deontology. A number of responses referenced the umbrella notion of "Third Mission". This notion, although non-specific, is widely recognised as capturing HE responses to societal challenges. However, its formulation arguable downplays the centrality of Social Mission work to HE in the 21st century.

Social Mission Support Structures and Patterns of Engagement

Models of support for SM work vary considerably across responding institutions and reflect the different ways in which SM is managed and delivered in individual HEIs. In some, dedicated SM support structures are in place, in the form of mission-specific Directorates, committees, or staff resources. In others, a range of units, committees, and individuals, academic and administrative, are engaged with supporting SM activity, in the context of broader institutional agendas and objectives.

Survey responses indicated that, in terms of the wider development and delivery of SM strategy and operational work, a comprehensive range of individuals and teams are typically involved in HEIs, including university leadership and management; academic and research staff; administrative staff; students; alumni; and other internal and societal stakeholders. The latter may include employer and industry partners; service learning partners; community groups; and local and regional bodies and agencies with civic or social functions.

Social Mission and External Agendas

A number of survey responses invoked the role played by local, regional, national, or European/international frameworks and imperatives - specifically, those related to educational quality; societal relevance and responsibility; EDI; and environmental issues - in the SM work of their HEI. Almost all responses identified the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a key driver of that work, and SDG 4 (Quality Education) was singled out by several respondents.

Social Mission, Student Learning, Student Outcomes

Survey responses pointed towards key areas in which Social Mission practice intersects with and impacts positively upon the student experience. These can be curricular, extracurricular, or pastoral, and represent a powerful instance of SM in HE. They include:

- The development of inclusive, relevant, and meaningful curricula, cognisant of the different circumstances, competencies, and experiences that students bring to HE;

- The development of socially responsive curricular and extracurricular elements - including service learning, challenge-based learning, and volunteering - engaged with "real world" issues linked to social disparity and discrimination and/or with employer and industry partners and community and social groups;

- The inclusion in the curriculum of learning related to societally relevant issues such as equality, diversity, and inclusion; sustainability; environmentalism; human rights; and colonialism and decolonisation;

- The inclusion in curriculum development and learning outcomes frameworks of attention to the integration of SM issues;

- The provision of student/learning support services and facilities that prioritise inclusion, allowing universities to combat discrimination, challenge barriers to student wellbeing, access, and participation, and enable all students to participate fully in the educational and social life of the university.

Innovative Practice and Social Mission

Survey responses illuminated a wide spectrum of good practice in place or in development in the SGroup institutions that engaged with the survey. Instances of SM good practice, which will feed into the future work of the TTSMU and into the repository of materials the TTSMU will create include:

- Enhancement of institutional SM work through key internal and societal stakeholder engagement;

- Enhancement of institutional SM work through new learning and teaching approaches and practices of student partnership and co-creation;

- Enhancement of institutional SM work through the dissemination of SM good practice;

- Engagement with staff and student EDI networks, groups, and representatives to ensure that the development and delivery of SM activity fully addresses issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion;

- Development of targeted support provision and tailored activities and arrangements for students and staff from marginalised and disadvantaged groups and/or with special needs;

- Development of rigorous systems of student and staff representation; advocacy; reporting; and complaint;

- Collaboration and co-creation with societal stakeholders such as employer and civic partners and community groups to enhance SM activity (service learning; volunteering; knowledge alliance; technology transfer), ensuring that liaison, communication, and follow-up is carefully planned and managed;

- Development of green action planning, including processes of carbon footprint measuring;

- Development of processes to track the impact of SM initiatives;

- Use of internal self-evaluation tools and/or external evaluation and benchmarking mechanisms to support the development, delivery, and assessment of SM work.

Challenges and Barriers to the Delivery of Social Mission

Survey responses identified a range of challenges to the implementation of SM in HE, some of which can be addressed through the good practice initiatives outlined above. Chief amongst the challenges cited in survey responses were the following:

- Lack of resources (financial and staff) and time to devote to/support SM projects and programmes;

- Unclear delineation of the nature and scope of SM work;

- Insufficient embedding and coordination of SM work and priorities in and across diverse institutional strategies and plans;

- Poor internal and external communication around the importance and relevance of SM activity;

- Lack of staff engagement;

- Difficulties in engaging societal partners and stakeholders in HE SM projects;

- Difficulties in ascertaining and understanding the needs of potential societal partners and stakeholders;

- Absence of effective processes or indicators to track the impact of SM initiatives.

Establishing Social Mission Objectives and Monitoring Impact

The majority of survey respondents confirmed that Social Mission objectives were set on a regular basis in their institutions, as Figure 6 demonstrates. SM objectives are typically forged through strategy development and planning processes and are disseminated through institutional and local action plans; annual reports; and academic and corporate communications channels.
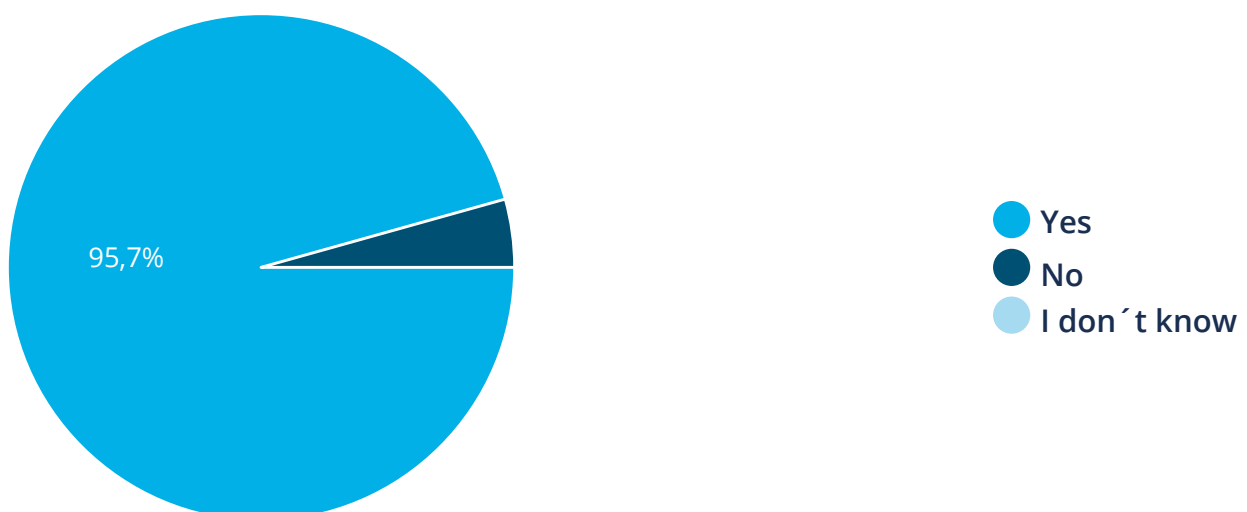

95,7%

- Yes
- No
- I don´t know

Figure 6. Social Mission Objective Setting

Survey responses also illuminated a) the important role played with regard to SM in HE by processes of impact monitoring, as well as b) the challenges occasioned by the absence or complexity of these processes. Asked whether their HEI had a monitoring system for assessing the impact of its Social Mission policies, and whether that system relied chiefly on quantitative or qualitative data, respondents answered as follows, suggesting a significant degree of variation in practice:
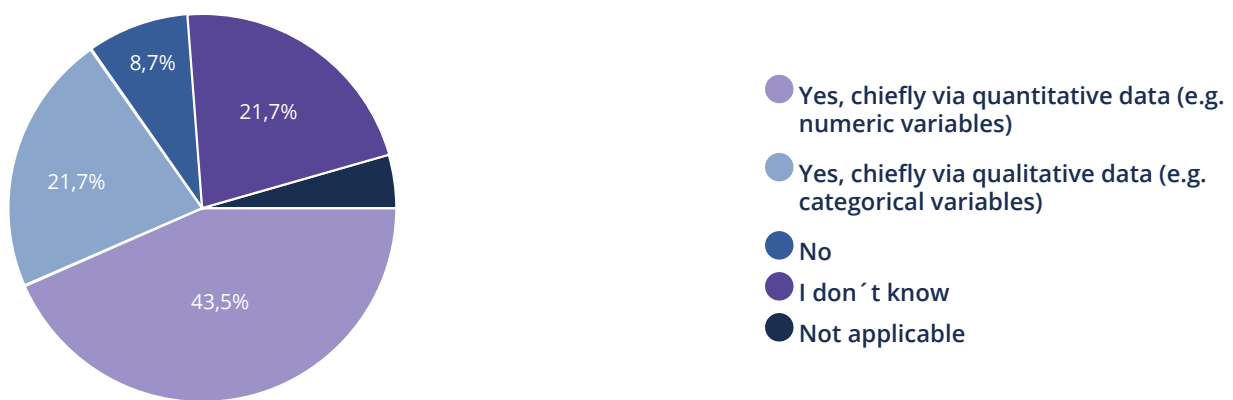

- **Yes, chiefly via quantitative data (e.g. numeric variables)**
- **Yes, chiefly via qualitative data (e.g. categorical variables)**
- **No**
- **I don´t know**
- **Not applicable**

Figure 7. Social Mission Impact Monitoring

There was also significant variation in responses to a question on the uses made of the results of assessments of the impact of SM activity. That variation partly reflects the fact that SM work is fre- quently located within broader endeavours related to teaching and learning, student experience/support, research, knowledge exchange, global engagement, and access and participation, each of which typically has its own monitoring and evaluation models. Where SM work is not contained and articulated within a discrete strategic 'home', or at least within a set of allied and coordinated environments, tracking its impact and using the outcomes of tracking to enhance SM strategy, policy, and practice represents a very significant challenge.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

The material provided by the SMU survey illustrates a number of elements that are critical to the successful development and delivery of Social Mission in HEIs. These are as follows:

- Clarity around the parameters of the SM project or projects embraced by individual HEIs is essential. These parameters typically vary across different institutions, and frequently derive from the situation and context (geographical, cultural, sectoral, legislative) of individual HEIs;

- Clarity as to how and where SM work sits within the portfolio of institutional strategies, planning processes, and operational plans is likewise key. SM strategy and planning may be discrete or may be embedded in wider portfolio areas such as teaching and learning; widening participation; research and knowledge exchange; and/or internationalisation. Either way, clarity around location and responsibilities attached to development and delivery is vital;

- Processes for tracking and evaluating the impact of SM work are a necessary element of its further and ongoing develop- ment and should ideally be subtended by quantitative and qualitative measures;

- SM work requires effective and ongoing resourcing, financial and staff, if it is to operate and grow successfully and meaningfully;

- Good communication is critical. The nature and value of SM activity should be a regular and standard element of corporate and academic communications, and communications to alumni, institutional partners, and societal stakeholders. Institutional leaders and managers are key to SM communications;

- Effective processes for engagement with societal stakehold- ers are a core part of socially impactful SM work: ownership of those processes should be clear and they should be kept under review. SM work evolved through a clear understanding of the needs of, and through focused collaboration, co-creation, and ongoing dialogue with, societal partners is an enriching and es- sential component of higher education: for students and staff, for the purposes of social innovation, and for the future;

- Teaching and learning provision is significantly enhanced by at- tention to SM. This can take the form of the development of in- clusive curricula that recognise the different competencies and experiences students bring to HE; the development of so- cial- ly responsive curricular and extracurricular elements (service learning, challenge-based learning, volunteering) engaged with "real world" challenges; and the inclusion of learning related to societally relevant issues such as equality, diversity, and inclu- sion, sustainability, environmentalism, human rights, and colo- nialism and decolonisation. Curriculum development processes and learning outcomes frameworks should include attention to the integration of SM issues;

- Research, knowledge acquisition and exchange, and interna- tionalisation activity can likewise be significantly enhanced by attention to SM, most especially through alliances with societal, civic, and community partner organisations;

- Inclusive student support provision, enabling the full access and participation of all students, regardless of circumstances and background, and including targeted support arrangements for students from marginalised and disadvantaged groups and/or with special needs, is a critical component of SM work in HE;

- Projects grounded in environmentalism and sustainability are an essential element of SM in HE, and benefit significantly from collaborative working with staff, students, institutional partners, and societal stakeholders and partners. External benchmarking mechanisms allied to these areas provide useful tools to reflect on and further develop SM work;

- Work on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is likewise an essential element of SM in HE, and benefits significantly from engagement with staff and student EDI groups, networks, and representatives, societal stakeholders and partners, and specialist bodies. External benchmarking mechanisms allied to this area provide useful tools to reflect on and further develop SM work.

SMU THINK TANK PROPOSALS, PROJECTS, AND PLANS

The material and learning provided by the SMU survey, outlined in this report, constitutes an invaluable resource. That resource is the starting point for a journey towards a richer understanding of the nature, benefits, impact, and implementation routes of Social Mission in Higher Education. The journey will be undertaken by the TTSMU, in close collaboration with SGroup member institutions and stakeholders inside and outside the SGroup network. Our navigation of the terrain of SM in HE will have three interconnected strands:

Raising awareness

Sharing best practices

Dedicated Workshops Training & Projects

Figure 8. Key Facets of the TTSMU Project

Our work will acknowledge and address the need for greater awareness of and clarity around the multifaceted nature of Social Mission practice: its purpose; its scope; its stakeholders; its target groups and beneficiaries; its impact. It will reckon with the fact that SM work takes different forms in different national-cultural contexts and in different types of HEI. Following survey feedback from SGroup members, the TTSMU project will identify and disseminate best SM practice within and outside the SGroup, establishing a programme of activity that will support and enhance engagement with and learning around Social Mission. Elements of the programme will include:

- The construction of a seminar, webinar, workshop, and training event series focused on diverse aspects of SM work in HE, and grounded in collaboration and co-creation;

- The creation of a TTSMU repository of key materials relevant to SM work in HE;

- Ongoing engagement with external projects and networks focused on SM work in HE, such as the Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society (IHES) project;

- The identification of future opportunities for SGroup participation in such projects and networks and in relevant external conference events;

- The production of an innovative, dynamic, updateable guidance resource that will stimulate learning, thinking, and action around SM in HE. The resource will draw on good practice identified in the TTSMU survey, enable the further development of such practice, and support SM project development and project applications.

Collaborative, inclusive, focused, and carefully planned, the work of the TTSMU will follow the four steps outlined below. We hope and envisage that it will make an invaluable contribution not only to the SGroup but also to wider reflection on the function and purpose of Higher Education in the 21st century.

1 Clarification of concepts, identification of activities linked to Social Mission.

2 Comprehensive approach, internal and external, centered in partnership with many stakeholders.

3 Workshops & online events co-created together with leadership, teachers and students, researchers, citizens, and societal partners.

4 SGroup guidelines for investment in the Social Mission of Universities and follow-ups, research, and impact.

Figure 9. TTSMU SMU Project Workplan

APPENDIX 1.
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Question: 1.

Does your institution have strategies related directly and specifically to Social Mission Work?

Question: 2.

What are the official terms or concepts in your University that are used to describe its engagement with Social Mission work?

Question: 3.

Does your university have:
- a directorate or directorates tasked with the delivery of Social Mission work?
- an SM officer
- a SM board/committee
- other

Question: 4.

Are Social Mission imperatives present in other institutional strategies/plans? Please provide details.

Question: 5.

How, specifically, has your institution's commitment to Social Mission work enhanced the learning and outcomes of your institution's students?

Question: 6.

Are there specific local, national, or international agendas that guide or determine the nature of your institution's Social Mission work?

Question: 7.

Which groups are engaged with regard to the development of your institution's Social Mission strategy or strategies?

Question: 8.

Which groups are engaged or involved with the delivery of your institution's Social Mission strategies?

- University leadership and management
- Academics and research staff
- Administrative staff
- Students
- Other internal stakeholders
- Alumni
- Other external stakeholders, for example feeder schools and colleges; community groups; local, regional, national and international bodies; business, industry and employer partners

Question: 9.

Which underrepresented/disadvantaged characteristics are most targeted by your institution's Social Mission policies and initiatives?

- Age
- Disability
- Gender (including in relation to trans and non-binary staff and students)

- Race
- Religion and belief
- Sexual orientation
- Socio-economic background
- First generation students

Question: 10.

Do you have specific Social Mission strategies/plans/guidelines ded- icated to:

- Staff
- Students
- External stakeholders
- No, all stakeholder groups are considered together
- I do not know
- Other option

Question: 11.

Does your University set and review Social Mission objectives on a regular basis?

Question: 12.

Does your University have a monitoring system for assessing the impact of its Social Mission policies?

- Yes, chiefly via quantitative data (e.g. numeric variables)
- Yes, chiefly via qualitative data (e.g. categorical variables)
- No
- I don't know
- Not applicable
- Other

Question: 13.

Who in your University is responsible for the evaluation of the Social Mission agenda?

- President/Rector/Vice Chancellor; University senior leadership and management team
- Senate or equivalent.
- Faculty
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team and/or committee
- Student Union
- Not applicable
- Other option

Question: 14.

How does your University use the results of its measurement and assessment of the impact of its Social Mission work?

Question: 15.

What are the main challenges entailed in delivering the Social Mission work of your institution?

Question: 16.

What innovative practices has your University introduced to assess the impact of its Social Mission policies?

Question: 17.

What kind of events would you like the SGroup to run, in order to enhance understanding of and disseminate good practice around the topic of the Social Mission of Universities.

Thank You!