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Advancing human progress together

A model for institutional decision-making in higher education and research

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Why institutional progress is hard

Universities have shaped human progress for centuries. From their origins as centers of scholarship embedded in the life of towns and cities, universities have become some of society's most important engines of discovery, innovation and social progress. Print changed how knowledge spread. Industrial economies changed who universities served. The digital revolution changed how research was conducted and education was delivered. In each era, universities adapted. That capacity for adaptation is not peripheral to a university. It is fundamental to it.

“The new social contract asks something different of universities: not to deliver education as a one-time intervention, but to remain present across a lifetime of transitions.”

Lily Kong

President, Singapore
Management University

**Not Alone podcast. The new
social contract for Higher
Education**



What has shifted is the scale and speed that adaptation now demands. Financial uncertainty, geopolitical volatility, shifting public trust, rapid AI adoption, increasing competition for talent and funding; these are not new pressures. But they have intensified simultaneously, making managing these challenges effectively harder than ever.

The leaders navigating this moment are doing so with urgency and intent. When Elsevier surveyed 450 university leaders across 20 countries in 2024, each of the 25 high-performance institutional objectives was considered a priority by the majority of respondents — a signal of ambition meeting genuine complexity ([2024 Academic Transformation Survey](#)).

That ambition sharpened fast: by 2025, 74% of academic leaders globally reported stronger pressure to demonstrate research output, while fewer than half expected funding to increase ([Academic Leader of the Future, 2026](#)). Add to that the expectations for delivering impact, innovation and securing their place in society. These pressures extend well beyond research output and funding — they show up across the whole of the institution: governance, workforce planning, student enrollment, education and more, and they look different by region and by institution type, but they point in the same direction.

Example of varying pressure points by region

United Kingdom

43%

of HEIs projected to face a deficit
HEPI, 2025



United States

\$11bn

in federal research grant cuts in 2025
NPR, 2025



European Union

25/27

EU member states declined in Academic Freedom Index over a decade
European Parliament Academic Freedom Monitor, 2026



Japan

-27%

projected decline in the number of university entrants by 2040
Japan Ministry of Education, 2026



China

450,000

fewer students registered for China's 2026 gaokao than in 2025, driven by the growth of vocational-articulation pathways that bypass the exam and reshape competition across the sector
China Ministry of Education, 2025–2026





No single cause explains this. Often it reflects a gap between the impact institutions create and whether governments, funders and communities view universities as a long-term investment to support rather than a cost to be managed, a gap that demographic shifts and geopolitical realignment shape further, in different ways by region. What varies is the mix of forces; what does not vary is the question each raises for leadership: what capabilities and choices does an institution need to navigate this moment and drive its own transformation?

Whatever form the pressure takes, whether funding cuts in some regions or intensifying competition for research and student talent in others, the need is the same: a clearer way to prioritize, decide and act.

Technology adds both urgency and possibility. More than two-thirds of academic leaders believe AI will be the primary driver of new knowledge within two to three years, and the majority are actively working to understand how their institution should respond ([Academic Leader of the Future, 2026](#)). Yet only 35% say their institution has good AI governance in place, and 44% report insufficient training to navigate it effectively: a gap between direction and readiness that represents both the challenge and the opportunity of this moment.

The pattern that emerges is not a crisis of ambition. Institutions understand the challenges they face and the outcomes they hope to achieve. What is often missing is a coherent way to prioritize, align stakeholders, evaluate trade-offs and maintain confidence that decisions are translating into measurable progress.

This paper introduces the Impact Model — a structure built for higher education and research leadership teams to work through those decisions with evidence, clarity and confidence.

“We need to have clear vision. We need to have principles and use them as our guidepost. But we also need to ensure that the university gets to the end of next week.”

Andrew Hamilton

President Emeritus of New York University (NYU); Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford; Former Provost, Yale University

Not Alone Podcast. In conversation with Andrew Hamilton

A model built around objectives

These pressures rarely arrive in isolation, and neither do the decisions institutions make in response. What has shifted is their speed, their simultaneity and the degree to which individual challenges now reinforce one another. A decision about research strategy affects your ability to attract talent. A gap in operational efficiency affects your capacity to deliver on your mission and build partnerships. A weak evidence base for societal impact affects your credibility with funders, government and civil society.

These are not separate problems with separate solutions. They are connected, and progress happens when institutions address them together.



Across our studies and conversations with academic leaders — throughout Elsevier's more than 140 years working alongside universities and research institutions globally — these institutional challenges tend to cluster around five recurring questions:

- Where should we focus?
- Who should we work with?
- How do we deliver effectively?
- How do we demonstrate impact?
- How do we know whether we are making progress?

While the specifics vary by institution and context, these questions appear repeatedly in strategic plans, leadership discussions and institutional reviews. The challenge is rarely identifying them — it is prioritizing them with a coherent, evidence-based approach amid constantly shifting pressures. Nor do these questions stop at the institutional level: they apply just as directly to a faculty, department or individual research group setting its own direction.

Taken together, these questions reflect many of the core decisions that shape institutional performance. The Impact Model translates them into a practical structure for institutional decision-making, helping leaders connect evidence, priorities and action across the institution.

The model is built around five strategic enablers: Strategize, Collaborate, Operate, Promote and Evaluate. Each represents a distinct dimension important to driving institutional performance, progress and effective decision-making. Together, they form a framework for understanding where effort is focused, where gaps exist and where action is most likely to create meaningful change.

Before any of the enablers can work effectively, the model begins with a foundational step: determining the current state — the current lay of the land, and what needs to change to achieve your goals. This is an honest, evidence-based read of where you stand today, covering areas such as your reputation and performance across research, education and innovation, alongside capabilities, available resources and emerging opportunities. Without it, priorities and direction risk being set against opinion rather than evidence.

The model is not a checklist or a linear sequence; it is a way to structure conversations, align leaders and connect evidence to help you progress any project, initiative or objective. Whether the challenge is AI governance today or the next major disruption tomorrow, the underlying need remains the same: to make decisions with clarity, evidence and confidence.

The leaders who make the most progress are not always those with the greatest resources. More often, progress comes down to culture, strategic alignment and talent, paired with leaders who ask better questions, connect evidence to decisions more deliberately and maintain a shared sense of direction. The Impact Model is designed to support exactly that.

Determining current state and applying the five strategic enablers

Determining current state

Applying the Impact Model does not begin with choosing where to focus. It begins with understanding where you stand — the foundation every later choice builds on.

Determining current state means building a shared, evidence-based picture of your institution right now, one that your leadership team can agree on. This draws on evidence from performance metrics and benchmarking, strategic forecasting, risk analysis and AI-assisted insight, surfaced in ways that connect directly to the decisions leadership teams need to make. Together, these give you the baseline from which every subsequent decision is made.

This step matters because the risk of misalignment grows when leadership teams work from different assumptions about where the institution stands. A shared baseline mitigates that risk, leading to a clearer decision rather than a negotiation.



S — Strategize

Where should we focus, invest and differentiate?

Every institution has ambitions. The question is not whether to have them — it is which ones to pursue with real conviction, and which to set aside.

The Strategize enabler helps leaders make those choices with confidence. It brings together trusted evidence, benchmarks and contextualized insights to illuminate where your institution has genuine strengths to build on, where the field is moving and what the gap is between your current position and where you want to be.

As noted earlier, when 450 university leaders were surveyed, nearly every one of 25 high-performance objectives was rated a priority — the challenge is not knowing what matters, but choosing where to concentrate effort. The Strategize enabler helps you assess your current strategy and look across the organization to make evidence-informed decisions about the priorities and initiatives you will focus on to drive progress and distinctiveness.

C — Collaborate

Who should we work with, and why?

Complex societal challenges rarely respect institutional boundaries. Progress on research excellence, talent development, societal impact or global standing increasingly depends on partnerships that span sectors, borders and disciplines.

The Collaborate enabler helps leaders identify, engage and coordinate the partners, people and networks most likely to advance their strategic priorities — including the individual academic staff who ultimately deliver on these partnerships through joint research and education programs. It is not about collaboration for its own sake; it is about ensuring that the relationships your institution invests in are the ones most likely to build capability, create opportunities and close the gaps that matter.

Among academic leaders, 69% say they are collaborating more than before, but more collaboration does not automatically mean better outcomes ([Academic Leader of the Future, 2026](#)). In our recent survey of university leaders, developing a strong global research network ranked as a top-three priority, and 87% identified developing a strong global education network as a high-priority for transformational potential, with 56% reporting progress toward it ([2024 Academic Transformation Survey](#)). The ambition to collaborate is shared; what's rare is building multi-faceted, deliberate partnerships well, which is what the Collaborate enabler helps ensure.

O — Operate

How do we digitally transform to run efficiently and sustainably?

Even the strongest strategy is only as effective as the institution's capacity to execute it. When operations are fragmented, governance structures are unclear or digital transformation has been deferred rather than driven, the friction shows up across the institution: slower decisions, higher costs and reduced capacity to deliver.

One illustration of this: among US university leaders, 76% rate digital transformation as a top priority — yet only 16% give themselves top scores on progress toward that goal ([2024 Academic Transformation Survey](#)). The barriers are rarely purely technical: for example, research into AI adoption across universities found the biggest obstacles were cultural: unclear ownership, inconsistent governance and insufficient staff support (APRU/Liu & Bates, February 2025). These same challenges sit at the heart of effective AI implementation, where institutions must balance opportunity with appropriate governance, build workforce readiness and integrate new technologies into existing workflows and decision-making processes.

The Operate enabler challenges teams to examine their operations across areas such as compliance, administrative burden and the workflows for managing funding awards, so that strategic ambitions aren't curtailed by inefficiency or fragmented processes.

P — Promote

How do we showcase excellence and impact to build our reputation?

Institutional reputation is shaped by many different contributions and achievements: research excellence, educational outcomes, student experience, societal impact, the success of academic staff and graduates, along with the capabilities that distinguish an institution from its peers. Yet communicating their collective contribution can be challenging. Evidence is often distributed across multiple systems, teams and functions, making it difficult to present a clear and consistent picture of institutional value.

The Promote enabler helps institutions bring together evidence of excellence, impact and institutional contribution into a coherent and credible story. By connecting achievements to strategic priorities and making them visible to key audiences, institutions can increase visibility, build trust and strengthen reputation among government, funders, prospective students, research partners and civil society.

Public trust in science is under sustained pressure ([The Future of Evaluation, 2023](#)), while expectations around demonstrating real-world impact continue to grow. In another study, 66% of respondents agreed that academia has a moral responsibility to incorporate real-world impact into how it demonstrates value ([Back to Earth, Elsevier, 2023](#)). Institutions that can clearly evidence their contribution, across research, education, community engagement and societal outcomes, are better positioned to strengthen stakeholder relationships, support rankings performance and communicate the full breadth of their impact effectively.

E — Evaluate

How do we measure, learn and adapt?

The Evaluate enabler is about measuring, learning and understanding performance and progress through a trusted, evidence-based approach — informed by data, expert analysis and benchmarks that put performance in context. It is the mechanism through which institutions make sure decisions are based on available evidence and learn whether their decisions are working and where they need to adapt.

An area where this is especially visible is research performance, where there is an established practice of gathering evidence — though rigorous debate continues about what that evidence should include. Among academic leaders, 78% say publications and citations remain important, while acknowledging traditional metrics alone no longer reflect the full picture ([Academic Leader of the Future, 2026](#)). There is both drive and obligation to do better.

What makes Evaluate distinctive within the model is its integrating role. It does not sit at the end of a linear process; it runs alongside every other enabler. The evidence you build through Evaluate feeds into Strategize, shapes decisions in Collaborate and Operate and provides the evidence to substantiate what you Promote. Institutions that evaluate effectively and holistically do not just know where they are, they know why — and it helps them determine what to do next.

Evaluate as the integrating layer

Evaluate sits within the model differently from the other four enablers. Not only is it an enabler itself; it runs alongside all other enablers also. The Evaluate enabler is part of deciding where to focus (Strategize), which partnerships are delivering (Collaborate), whether operations are improving (Operate) and what the institution can confidently demonstrate and communicate to stakeholders across society (Promote). It is the evidence spine connecting the whole system.





How the model works as an integrated system

The Impact Model is not a sequence. It does not require institutions to complete Strategize before they can address Collaborate, likewise, for certain objectives or initiatives, looking at the Operate enabler may not be required at all, since it isn't always a constraint on progress. Institutions rarely move in a straight line, and the model is built to reflect that fluidity.





The five enablers are also interdependent. A decision made through Strategize will shape which Collaborate relationships are worth developing. Improvements in Operate may create capacity that Promote can build on. A gap identified through Evaluate often points directly back to a choice in Strategize. These connections are the point; the model's value lies not in any single enabler but in the way they inform and reinforce each other specific to the context of the objective.

This means institutions can enter through, or focus on, any enabler that reflects their most pressing current challenge. If the immediate priority is a review and update of the existing research assessment framework, start with Evaluate. If the question is how we improve our fragmented partnership landscape, start with Collaborate. If a new strategy is being drafted, start with Strategize. The model provides structure for whichever objective matters most right now — and a path to others in the future.

Consider an institution developing a new research strategy. Strategize frames the question of focus and differentiation. Collaborate identifies the partnerships that can accelerate progress. Operate asks what needs to change internally for delivery and success. Promote considers how the institution will evidence and showcase the outcomes and impact. Evaluate defines what progress looks like, how it will be tracked and what can be measured to demonstrate success and impact. Whichever enabler you begin with, the model provides the logic that aligns teams and drives confident decisions, surfacing where you are strong, where you could improve and where opportunities and risks lie.

Start your Impact Snapshot

Take a short assessment to visualize where your institution is strong, where the opportunities lie, and where to focus next.

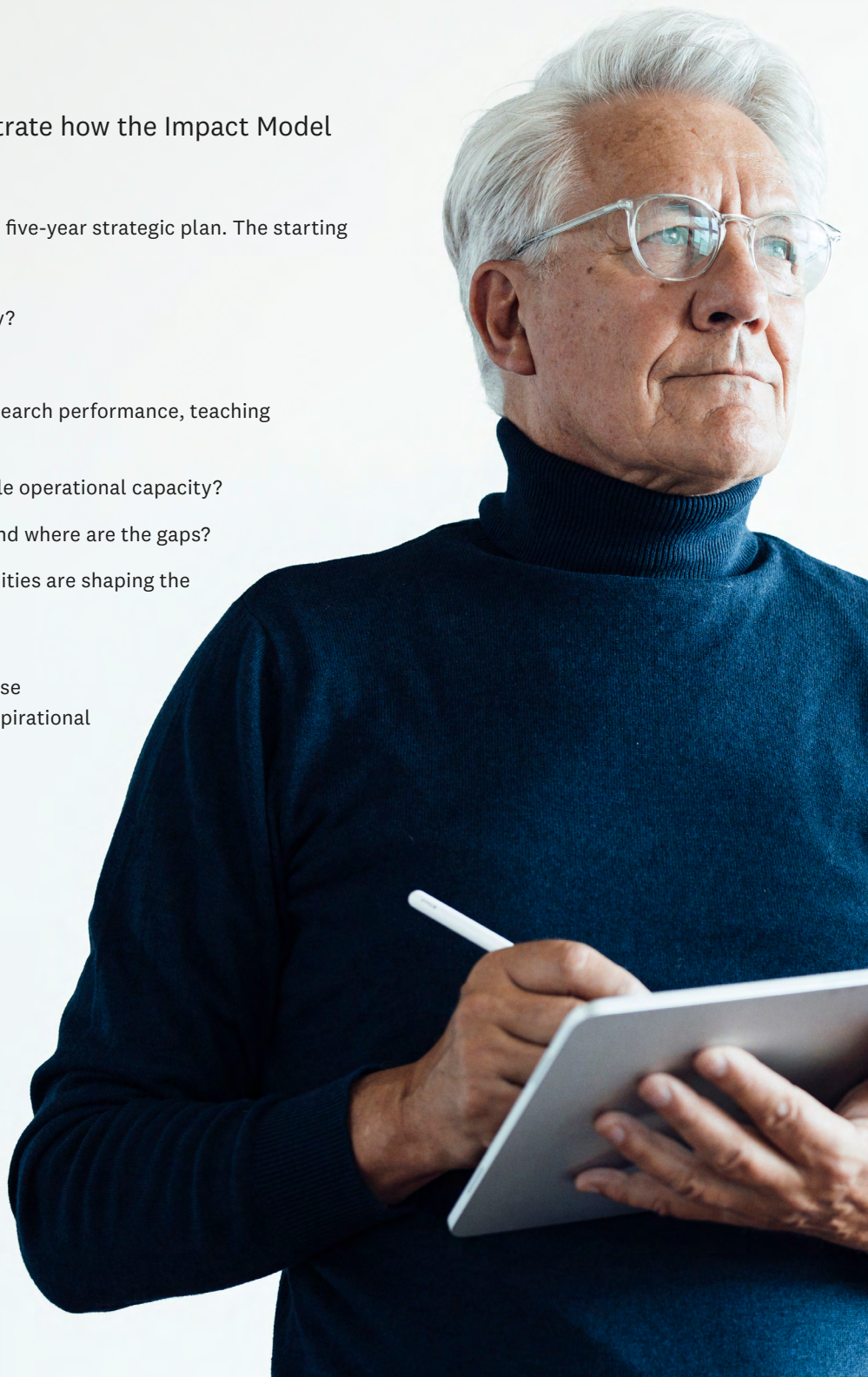
Using the model in practice

A practical example helps illustrate how the Impact Model can be applied.

Consider a university preparing its latest five-year strategic plan. The starting point is the current state:

- Where does the institution stand today?
- What does the evidence say?
- Where are our genuine strengths in research performance, teaching excellence and innovation?
- Do we have appropriate and sustainable operational capacity?
- Do we have the reputation we need? And where are the gaps?
- What external pressures and opportunities are shaping the context in which the plan will be delivered?

Without an honest, shared answer to these questions, a strategic plan risks being aspirational rather than specific and achievable.



From that baseline, the model structures the conversations that follow. Strategize moves the leadership team from a long list of institutional objectives to a focused set of evidence-informed priorities. Collaborate maps the partnerships that can accelerate progress on the priorities. Operate asks what needs to change internally — in workflows, governance and digital capability — to deliver the priorities and therefore plan effectively. Promote considers how the institution will communicate its achievements, evidence its contributions and impact and enhance trust with key stakeholders. Evaluate informs the decisions and defines, from the outset, what success will look like: the metrics, milestones and feedback loops that will tell leadership whether the plan is working.

The result is a strategic plan grounded in coherent logic, connecting priorities, decisions, actions and evidence. More importantly, it creates a shared understanding that leaders and their teams can align around and deliver together.

The Impact Model can be applied to a wide range of decisions: a research excellence strategy, a funding diversification plan, a student recruitment approach or a place-based community impact initiative. What changes is the specific question each enabler is asked to address. What stays constant is the logic connecting them.



The Impact Model Canvas

The Impact Model Canvas is a practical tool that supports this process. Structured around the five enablers, it considers the inputs and outputs associated with of institutional decision-making, giving leaders and their teams a shared surface for mapping current state, scoping objectives, identifying key decisions and agreeing on priorities and success measures. It can be used for a five-year plan, a specific project or initiative, or any institutional challenge where structured thinking adds value. The accompanying User Guide provides detailed instructions, an illustrative example and facilitation guidance for using the canvas to enhance decision-making.



How Impact from Elsevier supports the model

Understanding a model is one thing. Gathering the evidence, identifying external expertise required and applying it consistently to complex situations across a large institution is another.

The Impact Model provides a structure for institutional decision-making. But answering those questions requires more than a model alone. It requires access to trusted evidence, meaningful benchmarks, relevant expertise and a shared view of institutional strategy, mission, objectives and performance.

This is where Impact from Elsevier contributes.



Impact from Elsevier brings together data, workflow solutions and advisory expertise that support institutions across the model's strategic enablers. Through solutions such as Scopus, SciVal, Pure and Interfolio, alongside advisory expertise, it helps leaders build a clearer understanding of their current position, evaluate opportunities and risks, and make decisions with greater confidence. Together, the model and these capabilities help leaders move from evidence to decision, from decision to action and from action to demonstrable progress.

The model offers a structure for discussing and understanding institutional priorities and making decisions. Impact from Elsevier contributes evidence, insight, workflows and expertise that help institutions achieve success, deliver transformation and drive progress for society.

The Impact Model provides a structure for institutional decision-making.

Impact from Elsevier contributes evidence, workflows and advisory that support decision-making and progress.

Closing the gap between ambition and delivered progress

The challenges described in this paper are not abstractions. They are the decisions university leaders and their teams face every day — about where to invest limited resources, which partnerships to establish or deepen, how to demonstrate value to challenging and sometimes skeptical stakeholders and how to maintain a shared sense of institutional direction under sustained pressure.

The leader and the researcher of the future will be collaborative, AI-empowered, cross-disciplinary, closely attuned to societal needs and focused on upholding the core values of scientific inquiry.

Academic Leader of the Future, 2026

What the evidence shows, across multiple years and thousands of institutions, is consistent: the objectives are clear and the challenges are understood. Progress follows when institutions connect those objectives to specific decisions, actions and evidence — at a pace that matches the accelerating speed of today.

The Impact Model exists to support these connections.

Bring clarity to how you use the resources you have: ask deeper questions, connect evidence to decisions consistently and hold a shared sense of direction when the pressures mount. You do not have to start with the full model. Start with one question — whichever of the five enablers reflects your most pressing challenge — and let the evidence lead.

Next steps

Explore Impact from Elsevier to learn more about the five strategic enablers and the institutional questions each one helps address.

- [Explore the Impact Model Canvas](#)
- [Connect with Impact from Elsevier](#)
- Use the guide as part of your next project or structure strategic discussions with committees and teams

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