Introduction: Universities and the Matter of Mattering



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Making Universities Matter

Universities have long been integral to society, fulfilling a vital role as institutions for knowledge development, exchange, and diffusion. Even though universities have only in recent decades been portrayed as bridging the gap between academia and society through interdisciplinary collaboration and engagement, they have always been founded on societal needs and thereby have also recognized the importance of interactions with society.

Recently, however, there has been a wave of discussion about the role of universities—within universities, among policymakers, and in the public sphere. On the one hand, there is an increasing public skepticism toward science fired by the replication crisis (Fanelli, 2018), the mistrust of experts (Eyal, 2019), and the (mis)use of scholarly work for political purposes (Peci et al., 2023). This skepticism is also fueled by the widespread occurrence of unethical behaviors and misconduct—including fabrication and falsification (Biagioli et al., 2019). On the other hand, there are repeated calls for universities to matter more—to spread their impact further, broader, and in new ways (Benner et al., 2022; Upton et al., 2014). Indeed, there has been a global

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push to reinvigorate universities' social responsibilities, to reorient toward extrascientific modes of knowledge exchange, and to make research accountable to end users and not only target the scientific community (Sarewitz, 2016; see also Cuppen et al., 2019). Together, these calls highlight an increased imperative for making universities matter more to society by embracing a broader societal responsibility, in terms of both scope and magnitude. As the perception of universities' societal role continues to evolve, there is a broadened understanding that goes beyond traditional notions of industry–academia collaboration and technological progress for economic growth. Instead, universities are now seen as integral to a complex system that embraces diverse interactions and involves multiple stakeholders, with the aim of driving transformative progress within society (D'Este et al., 2018; Trencher et al., 2014).

While the desire to make universities more socially engaged and impactful—to make them matter more—is well-intended, it also introduces a number of challenges and tensions that must be carefully navigated. As the seeds of previously mentioned public skepticism reveal, as universities seek to broaden their societal roles, a number of concerns emerge that may threaten their core functions and integrity, or the view thereof of some actors both within and outside of academia. One such concern is that the drive to prioritize making universities matter to current societal issues may shift resources and attention away from fundamental research and knowledge quest for its own sake. This could jeopardize long-term scientific advances, which have historically formed vital building blocks for universities' contributions to society (Gulbrandsen & Smeby, 2005; Sauermann & Stephan, 2013). If research grows more focused on current societal demands, there are expressed concerns about overlooking path-breaking and curiosity-driven projects that may not yield immediate practical applications but may lead to future discoveries (Fleming et al., 2019; Spector et al., 2018). Another source of concern is the potential for conflicts of interest and challenges to academic independence and openness that pressure to engage with various stakeholders outside of academia can bring about (Schmid & Betsch, 2019; Tartari & Breschi, 2012). Questions about research integrity and objectivity may arise as universities form tighter partnerships with industry, government, and other societal actors in their quest to matter more. As universities are integrated into complex dependencies involving multiple stakeholders, power dynamics and inequalities can emerge. Different actors might have varying degrees of influence, leading to potential biases in research agendas and outcomes. There are thus concerns about ensuring that universities' engagement with external partners is appropriate and transparent and does not jeopardize the integrity of their academic pursuits. As a result, the importance of striking a balance between collaborative engagement and critical independence has been highlighted.

For universities to maintain their deep-rooted societal role, we must better understand how the nature and dynamics of such a role may determine and potentially strengthen their ability to matter. The present volume seeks to tap into these debates and, moreover, to contribute to the evolving literature on universities' role in society through a coherent set of chapters, all of which speak to questions of universities' collaboration, engagement, and impact. More specifically, we address questions such

as: How can the knowledge produced in and through the activities of universities matter beyond intra-scientific knowledge exchange? How have the conditions for universities mattering changed over time, and how do they vary across disciplines or areas of scientific conduct? Attending to such questions, the volume explores how universities can extend their impact beyond traditional higher education missions. By presenting a collection of insightful inquiries, we strive to deepen our comprehension of the diverse dimensions in which universities matter, shedding light on the how, where, and when of their influence in and on the societies that enable their continuation.

The studies in this volume arose from a knowledge platform funded by the Swedish Innovation Agency Vinnova between 2015 and 2023. The platform's goal was to shed light on how universities organize their activities and how they align with various societal interests, including those within universities. The platform brought together researchers and policymakers in a variety of collaborative projects, policy debates, and studies centered on topical discussions of mutual interest for the many issues addressed in this volume. These circumstances help explain the tendency of the present volume to draw on historical examples and empirical materials mainly from the Swedish context in the discussion of past, present, and potential future roles of universities in society. While international perspectives are also covered in the volume, we hold that Sweden stands out as a captivating country to explore. Firstly, Sweden is a country that allocates substantial funding to research in proportion to its population. Secondly, the country has witnessed a growing influence of external funding actors, resulting in mounting expectations to foster collaboration with society and ensure that their work transcends academic boundaries and benefits the broader community. Thirdly, in Sweden, the so-called third mission is institutionalized and enshrined in legal frameworks that stipulate that higher education institutions should, apart from teaching and conducting research, collaborate with society and make sure that research results come into use (e.g., Benneworth et al., 2015).

The present chapter introduces the volume, including the contexts, themes, and issues addressed herein. In so doing, it contextualizes the included chapters in addition to outlining their topics, angles, and arguments. First, however, we turn to the idea of "mattering," the core concept of the volume.

The Matter of Mattering

In the present volume, the pivotal notion of "mattering" serves as the lynchpin concept that runs through all chapters. Its centrality necessitates delving deeper into the concept to clarify and expand on its meaning. Given that "to matter" is to be of importance or have some sort of effect on somebody or something, the notion of "mattering" encompasses various connotations and implications within the context of universities. What is it for universities to matter? Matter to whom? Matter how and when? Engaging with such corrective questions is vital in order to avoid reductionistic

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understandings of the questions at hand. Universities may matter in different ways, many of which go unnoticed, to different types of stakeholders.

The ways in which universities matter range from the microscopic scale and individuals who profit or flourish from their existence to the macroscopic scale and questions of pervasive sociocultural change. The former scale pinpoints the fact that universities logically mean something to those who pass through them, leaving either with degree certificates, life-long *bildung*, or personal growth (e.g., Nussbaum, 2010), or those who experience the fruits of academic knowledge through books, documentaries, exhibitions, or other media. They also include those who benefit from health, technological, or environmental improvements, have their lives and jobs made easier, or profit from commercial inventions or solutions originating in academia. The latter is the collective and cumulative scale at which the knowledges that flow through universities at different points in time exert more or less tangible influences on the environments in which they are placed (e.g., Myhre, 2011). This includes the accumulation of knowledge that educates the general public and enhances our understanding of society, finds solutions to societal challenges, and through the establishment of new firms, stimulates the creation of job opportunities and competitiveness.

In direct and indirect ways, then, universities may mean something to publics or beneficiaries of research and other university-based activities. However, mattering is not a one-way street in which extramural actors are merely recipients of academic activities. As we will explicate later in this chapter, mattering can include an interactive process in which the benefits of the relationship are mutual, and mattering is more than just getting a direct return on taxpayers' money from public universities (Laredo, 2007; Nedeva, 2008). Nevertheless, for universities to matter is also a political request and a warranted public demand. As policymakers and society place greater emphasis on universities being accountable for public and private funding investments, there is a growing plea for universities to matter with expectations of some sort of return. Accordingly, mattering may also be seen as a demand placed upon universities as a way of sustaining their legitimacy.

In this light, there is kinship between mattering as a normative idea and Kerr's (1982) oft-quoted expression "the uses of the university." Firstly, "mattering," as well as "uses," alludes to the idea that universities house a plurality of knowledges that affect—and should affect—the environments of which they are integral parts. Secondly, they both seem to feed on the idea that universities are institutions whose knowledge resources can—and should—be extracted and utilized for a range of different purposes, all of which change over time. As mentioned earlier, the expectations that society places on universities and their own pursuit of fulfilling those expectations have undergone significant changes over time, from ancient establishments of wisdom and learning to contemporary interdisciplinary knowledge and innovation hubs. In this way, the long-standing pursuit of knowledge production has been reorganized to encompass additional forms of advantages, benefits, and values aligned with the demands of the entrepreneurial university (Clark, 2003a, 2003b).

We recognize the importance of maintaining a critical gaze on such developments. Correspondingly, we hold that it is important to establish and defend a broad and multifaceted understanding of mattering. Indeed, in science policy circles, there

has been a tendency to ascribe value mostly to research that contributes to material innovations, economic growth, or practical solutions. Similarly, the literature on how universities can matter has mostly focused on universities as the main knowledge producers that contribute to the development of tangible outputs. While important, it would be a perilous mistake to conflate the raison d'être of universities with simplified conceptions of knowledge utility. It is a stillborn project to single out knowledge that does *not* matter, ultimately because there is no easy way of knowing what will matter when and to whom.

The idea of mattering is designed to bolster and enrich the discussion on universities in societies. While there are manifold dimensions of mattering, the present volume necessarily centers on a demarcated selection. A first delineation presents itself through our choice to focus on research-related activities, which admittedly are not the only mission through which universities can matter. In many countries, universities have been expected to fulfill three major interrelated missions: education, the generation of new knowledge, and the use and transfer of that knowledge to help benefit societal development. Although we recognize the critical societal importance of education and training of students, this book primarily focuses on how knowledge is generated and disseminated through the second and third missions. This is due to the fact that the unique and undeniable role of education in constructing society has been part of universities' tasks since their founding and it is rarely central to the debate over how and whether universities matter.

Mattering Through Collaboration, Engagement, and Impact

In this volume, we approach mattering through three key concepts associated with the manifold ways mattering can be grasped and achieved: collaboration, engagement, and impact. While we argue that all these concepts, from different perspectives, are central to the understanding of how universities matter, they are not exhaustive; we acknowledge that there are aspects of mattering beyond those covered by our key concepts. However, previous literature has argued that some kind of engagement is needed to create impact, and this is facilitated through collaboration between actors from academia and society. Before going into the individual chapters that, separately or jointly, deal with the three concepts, we will briefly outline why and how each concept contributes to an increasing understanding of mattering.

Collaboration involves the mutually beneficial interaction between diverse actors within academia and between academia and external actors (Bozeman & Boardman, 2014). Such collaborations allow universities to leverage diverse knowledge and perspectives within universities and in various societal contexts, fostering novel approaches to complex challenges. Previous literature has mainly focused solely on academic collaboration or on collaboration between academia and industry, where the latter in both policy and academic spheres has become synonymous with societal collaboration (Clark, 2011; Wagner, 2018). To matter beyond tangible outputs such as publications and commercial products, collaboration must take place through

mutual interactions with a multitude of stakeholders beyond business. To address this partly limited view, several chapters in this volume address collaboration from the perspective of how different environments and cultures can create barriers to as well as strengthen collaboration.

Engagement involves deep and active commitment to concerns of importance to different sectors, such as industry, communities, public organizations, and policymakers, to ensure relevance and responsiveness and to mobilize for societal change and renewal (D'Este et al., 2018). Also, the existing body of engagement literature has shown a certain narrowness when it comes to examining academia's potential interactions with external entities. In a comprehensive analysis of academic engagement, Perkmann et al. (2021) determined that prior research has primarily focused on activities such as consulting, contractual agreements, and collaborative research, with industries as the primary means through which academia interacts with external stakeholders. These studies, however, provide a limited view on engagement. The chapters concerned with engagement in this book expand the conversation about academic engagement by going beyond conventional descriptions of engagement focused on commercialization and entrepreneurship and exploring diverse engagement channels in political and social movement spheres. By doing so, we emphasize the broader significance of universities' engagement with various actors to widen the societal impact of their endeavors.

Lastly, impact focuses on understandings of the long-term consequences that result from the pursuit of knowledge, making a progressive difference in society. While collaboration and engagement with external actors emphasize the importance of actively involving specific stakeholders to whom universities should matter, the concept of impact focuses on the outcomes of these interactions (Bornmann, 2013; Donovan, 2011; Martin, 2011). With the increasing emphasis on impact, scientific as well as external evaluations have largely come to focus on measurable, often quantitative, indicators such as publications, patents, and start-ups. These, however, only cover a small segment of the multifaceted ways in which universities can make a meaningful difference. The chapters in this volume dedicated to examining impact discuss different channels through which impact can be achieved. Moreover, they acknowledge that measuring impact goes beyond academic metrics and encompasses the broader societal implications of research. The chapters recognize that impactful research is not confined to immediate outcomes but rather unfolds through unpredictable and meandering knowledge flows, influenced by the actions of external actors.

The first section of the volume includes chapters that primarily discuss the role of *collaboration* as a driver for making universities matter. In Chap. 2, Jonsson, Perez Vico, and Politis investigate the role of post-doctoral education in developing faculty and support staff capacity for long-term and integrated societal participation and collaboration. Taking as its starting point the need and desire for the individual academic researchers and teachers to matter, the authors demonstrate, through a study of their own training initiative, how education can promote reflective scholars of societal collaboration.

Chapter 3, by Ralfs, delves into the role of proximity in collaboration and reveals how the potential of universities to matter is determined by their position in the global system of science. The point of departure is the assumption that collaboration between scholars is seen as a means to handle inequality between the Global North and Global South. The conditions for collaboration and types of inequalities are discussed using a multidimensional proximity framework.

The second section of the volume discusses the role of *engagement*. In Chap. 4 by Bashiri, the focus is on researchers that use activism to engage in societal challenges. The chapter provides an overview of existing literature on activism and argues that scholar activism may bring academic work closer to social impact and transformation, particularly within the context of social justice and the issue of mattering to social movements and the struggles of the people.

Chapter 5, by Perez Vico, Joelsson, Mattsson, and Nelhans, links to both the concepts of *collaboration* and *engagement* by investigating the connection between university collaboration strategies and how engagement skills are valued on an operational level. More particularly, the chapter investigates the significance of mattering by analyzing the assessment guidelines for docentship of Swedish universities. The use of strategies is a way for universities to signal their intentions and emphasis on collaboration. However, as this chapter demonstrates, these intentions are not necessarily implemented internally.

In Chap. 6, Benner and Hylmö study research centers as a policy model for engagement and, more specifically, how they have been set up in relation to other parts of the university and what types of engagement and collaboration they foster. The authors emphasize the importance of alignment between work modes, university strategy, and partner orientation to maximize the benefits of collaboration with extramural actors.

The third concept that needs to be tackled in order to understand the consequences of how universities can matter is the *impact* that the above-mentioned collaboration and engagement with society may have. In Chap. 7, Bjare gives a historical overview of how the Swedish state has sought to have an impact on how universities should matter. Through metagovernance, as Bjare argues, the state has attempted to steer the direction of policy agendas for educational reform of Swedish academia in ways that advance the means through which universities can matter to society at large. This indirect way of governing may be exemplified by attending to the ways in which changes in research policy affect the development of research quality in different areas of research. In Chap. 8, Müller discusses how such dynamics have unfolded with regard to the humanities in Sweden. She shows that dominant ideas in the national policy space, for instance concerning quality metrics, have not had a straightforward impact on the humanities. Rather, understandings of research quality in the humanities have been shaped in response to, and thus in collaboration with, articulations of research quality more generally.

Chapter 9, by Salö, Hammarfelt, and Nelhans, illustrates yet again that *collab-oration*, *engagement*, and *impact* are intertwined concepts with nested scopes. The chapter deals with policy impact, understood as knowledge uptake in science–policy interaction, by using the sources of references in governmental reports. It argues that the knowledge produced in settings where political decisions are made has not

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been acknowledged as a channel for scientific output and that it rarely lingers in debates about how to measure research impact. It also points to the value of agency in the production of impactful texts: researchers who seek to matter can enhance their chances by adapting their publishing practices.

By the same token, in Chap. 10, Perez Vico, Sörlin, Hanell, and Salö point to agentive collaboration and engagement as means to achieve impact. The chapter takes as its departure point the marginalization of humanities knowledge in research policy and emphasizes the need to understand how the valorization of humanities knowledge generates societal impact. The authors propose using historical impact stories as a methodological approach to gain a deeper understanding of valorization and its unpredictable nature. They introduce the concepts of "acting space" and "meandering knowledge flows" to shed light on the access, collaborators, and channels that enable knowledge valorization in the humanities.

To conclude, this volume offers what we hope is a compelling argument for redefining the concept of mattering within the context of universities. By advocating for a context-sensitive and nonnormative understanding, we shed light on the potential meanings and implications of mattering that extend beyond conventional interpretations that have emphasized industry-academia interactions with a focus on commercialization. The chapters of the volume reveal that "to matter" encompasses diverse dimensions, including collaboration with a diversity of actors and modes, engagement far beyond industry interaction, and the production of fundamental scientific knowledge. While collaboration and engagement with external actors are commonly associated with mattering, we have also emphasized the importance of producing scientific knowledge that addresses unknown future societal challenges. This expanded perspective acknowledges the crucial role of universities in generating knowledge that can effectively respond to the evolving needs of society. Furthermore, we have explored the concept of external knowledge partners and beneficiaries—the individuals or groups to whom universities should genuinely matter. Through examining perspectives on the relationship between the science community and these external actors, we have highlighted the shared responsibility and collective act of making universities matter. By fostering understanding, dialogue, and mutual recognition, universities can establish meaningful connections with diverse stakeholders and effectively address their unique needs and aspirations.

In this light, the book may contribute to broadening the dominant understandings of impact that have been focused on interaction with a few actors, such as industry and policymakers. It highlights the many aspects of how universities matter in society as a whole and how mattering can be further improved by considering both an evolutionary and a futuristic perspective. Taken together, the scope and focus of the volume offer a multifaceted and critical understanding of the many ways in which universities have mattered, currently matter, and can matter in the future. Such understandings enrich present-day debates on impacts, practices, and conditions for making universities matter in society.

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