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Editorial: Purpose-Driven Learning in Universities and Its Role for Societal Impact

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly challenged to respond to global sustainability crises, shifting workforce demands, and the expectations of Generation Z learners who seek meaningful, socially conscious education. This editorial positions purpose-driven learning as a transformative approach for higher education—one that aligns institutional missions, curricula, research, and partnerships with societal needs. Drawing on the diverse contributions within this Special Issue, we identify three global patterns shaping the future of purpose-driven universities: the integration of purpose and societal impact into strategic and curricular structures; the rising demand from students for learning that aligns with their values and contributes to real-world change; and the growing emphasis on research systems and institutional capacities, particularly in the majority world, that enable universities to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Purpose-driven learning has been shown to nurture intrinsically motivated, resilient, and impact-oriented learners while encouraging universities to re-examine their identity and contribution to society. We argue that the next phase of development requires longitudinal evidence, cross-disciplinary expansion, and institutional ecosystems that support authenticity, agency, and real-world relevance in learning. This editorial calls for deeper scholarship and sustained commitment to purpose-driven education as a pathway for universities to drive social and environmental progress.

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Practical Notes

1. Purpose-driven learning enables universities to cultivate intrinsically motivated, socially conscious learners who can contribute to societal and environmental impact.
2. Embedding purpose into curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional strategy requires coherent systems—such as experiential learning models, authentic assessment, and SDG-aligned research frameworks—that support learning with real-world relevance.
3. Purpose-driven universities benefit from longitudinal evaluation and impact-focused scholarship that examines how students' sense of purpose develops and how institutional practices translate into sustained societal contribution.

Keywords

Purpose-led learning, SDG, societal impact, university

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Introduction

The concept of organisational purpose and corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not new (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Recently, scholars have begun taking these ideas into the academic world, and the concept of the purpose of a university has emerged due to several driving forces challenging the classical Humboldtian Model of higher education. The need to interrogate universities' purpose is made more urgent in the era of the Anthropocene (UNDP, 2020) as encapsulated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Khamis & Khamis, 2020). Further, with corporate scandals and global financial crises in the 2000s, many criticised the role of universities in educating students who focus too much on share value and profit maximisation rather than on positive social impact (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017).

As the United Nations started working with academic institutions on the education for sustainable development initiative, more focus was given to purpose and impact in academia (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017). The United Nations SDG Report (UN DESA, 2024) indicates that only a small percentage (16-17%) of targets are on track to be met by 2030. Many targets show minimal or moderate progress, and over one-third have stagnated or regressed. Recognising that universities have an essential role to play in achieving global goals, there is a growing call for universities to care for the community of life and sustainable human progress (Andrew et al., 2023; López-López et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2022; Weakley et al., 2021). Universities are urged to "accelerate the learning that supports socio-ecological sustainability transitions, develop the human capacity for societal change at scale, and provide the moral leadership by driving change within their own institutions" (Stewart et al., 2022).

At the same time, employers increasingly value graduates who can tackle real-world complex challenges and navigate the complexity and uncertainty of the rapidly changing job market accelerated by technological advancement reflecting the need for analytical and creative thinking, resilience, and flexibility (Osmani et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2025). To nurture these capabilities, universities are urged to offer their students opportunities to tackle real-world challenges in real-world contexts with site partners, pointing to the importance of transformative learning, transdisciplinary learning, project-based learning, and experiential learning (Duchatelet et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2017; Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

Importantly, Generation Z (Gen Z), people born after 1995, is increasingly recognised for its social consciousness and commitment to the SDGs (Jayatissa, 2023; Tan et al., 2023). Gen Z is deeply aware of the global sustainability crisis as well as actively advocates for sustainable practices (ibid). In addition, students from Gen Z demand learning that aligns with their aspirations and passions, not just for employment (Chao et al., 2024; Jayatissa, 2023). The rise of Gen Z challenged universities to empower this generation to pursue their life goals and contribute to societal progress. Universities are urged to design learning that is meaningful to the students, leading on and leading towards societal impact.

The above myriad forces nudge universities to become purpose-driven, offering purpose-driven learning. A purpose-driven university is defined as a university that aligns its mission, teaching and learning, research, and operations with societal needs to foster social and environmental impact (Haski-Leventhal, 2020; Hurth & Stewart, 2022). This intentional approach re-emphasises universities' role for the public good and the need to respond to societal challenges. Various purpose-driven university frameworks have been proposed, including how a university integrates

sustainability into its research, education, and operations (Chakraborty et al., 2021; López-López et al., 2021).

Fundamentally, the thesis is forwarded that higher education needs to support students to develop a life purpose leading to their success, meaning, and well-being throughout the life course (Colby, 2020). 'Purpose' here refers to 'an enduring commitment to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Damon, 2008). This denotes the importance of purpose being meaningful to oneself and having a positive impact on the world beyond oneself. The scholarly literature has increasingly recognised the benefits of being purposeful and pro-social to the emotional well-being, resilience, empathy, and sense of agency among youth (Damon, 2008; Napier et al., 2024; Pfund et al., 2020; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019).

Synthesising the concepts discussed above, purpose-driven learning can be conceptualised as education that empowers learners to develop their life purpose, nurtures learners who are committed and capable of tackling the complex challenges faced by industry or society, making a positive impact on the world (Colby, 2020). This concept is consistent with literature that emphasises the importance of empowering students' innate passion for learning through social-emotional learning (Moreno, 2022) and the need to care for societal progress (López-López et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2022).

While the need for this new form of education should be clear, integrating it into universities' traditional roles remains unclear. In addition, translating the intention into curriculum designs, students' learning experiences, and creating a community of academics committed to contributing to societal impact is challenging. This special issue curates empirical and conceptual articles that provide the frameworks and practical guidelines around purpose-driven learning and teaching. This issue provided scholars a platform to discuss how purpose shapes higher education in different countries for societal impact, affecting teachers, students, and stakeholders.

About this Special Issue

This Special Issue brings together a diverse group of scholars whose work collectively signals an important evolution in how universities conceptualise purpose, societal responsibility, and the conditions required for meaningful student learning. The contributions by Yu (book review), Nadir Ali et al., Wachira, Thian et al., Phang et al., Diagarajan et al., Lang, Inam et al., and Hussain et al. demonstrate that purpose-driven learning is emerging not as an isolated pedagogical trend but as a coherent global movement reshaping higher education. Across these contributions, several macro-level patterns become visible.

First, the authors collectively illustrate that universities are increasingly embedding purpose and societal impact into institutional strategy, curriculum design, and learning ecosystems. Whether through experiential learning models, sustainability-aligned curricula, or community-engaged inquiry, the works of Thian et al., Wachira, and Phang et al. highlight how purpose-driven learning is being structurally integrated into mainstream academic practice. Second, the papers underscore a generational shift in expectations of higher education. Generation Z students seek learning that is meaningful, socially conscious, and connected to real-world impact. This shift is evident across the contributions: Yu highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation; Lang demonstrates how purpose can elevate student engagement in data analytics; Nadir Ali et al.

reveal students' sustainability-driven values; and Diagarajan et al. show how purpose-driven hackathons offer authentic, challenge-based environments that resonate strongly with students' desire to learn through real-world impact. Collectively, these works affirm that purpose-driven learning aligns directly with Gen Z's aspirations for education that reflects their values and empowers them to contribute to societal progress. Third, several contributions foreground the research systems and institutional capacities necessary to advance societal impact—particularly in the majority world. The studies by Inam et al. and Hussain et al. highlight the growing emphasis on SDG-oriented research ecosystems, evaluation frameworks, academic capability-building, and institutional accountability. These contributions illustrate that purpose-driven universities require more than redesigned classrooms—they require supportive, coherent academic infrastructures.

Together, the nine contributions in this Special Issue demonstrate that purpose-driven learning is not merely an educational innovation; it is a reframing of the university's social contract. Collectively, these works show that purpose-driven learning cultivates students who are intrinsically motivated, resilient, and future-oriented, and institutions that are more intentional in aligning teaching, research, and partnerships with societal needs. For scholars, practitioners, and institutional leaders, the authors in this Special Issue offer a collective message that the future of higher education lies in purpose-led design, evidence-informed action, and sustained societal engagement. As Editors, we see this Special Issue as both a reflection of accelerating global momentum and a call to deepen the scholarship, longitudinal evaluation, and cross-disciplinary inquiry required to advance purpose-driven learning at scale.

The Future

The collective insights within this Special Issue make clear that purpose-driven learning is no longer a peripheral or experimental agenda for higher education—it is becoming a defining expectation of students, employers, and society. Yet, the work ahead is substantial. If universities are to position purpose at the centre of learning, research, and institutional identity, the next frontier requires deeper evidence, stronger infrastructures, and bolder forms of academic practice.

A critical future direction lies in understanding how students' sense of life purpose develops over time, and how universities can intentionally nurture that development beyond isolated initiatives. Longitudinal studies will be essential to evaluate whether purpose-driven learning translates into sustained graduate capabilities, civic engagement, ethical decision-making, and societal impact across the life course. Without this evidence, purpose risks becoming an aspirational slogan rather than a transformative educational principle.

There is also an urgent need to expand purpose-driven learning across disciplines, including those traditionally less associated with social impact. Purpose must find meaningful expression in STEM, business, arts, humanities, and health, each requiring nuanced approaches that respect disciplinary ways of knowing while connecting them to societal needs. At the institutional level, universities must now grapple with the systems and structures that either enable or inhibit purpose-driven innovation. This includes how academic workload, recognition, curriculum governance, and partnerships frameworks can support educators who are redesigning learning around authenticity, agency, and societal relevance. The future will require coherent ecosystems, not isolated champions.

Finally, the global higher education community must continue to elevate research on societal impact itself, particularly from the majority world. As scholars and institutions engage with the Sustainable Development Goals, there is an increasing need for contextually grounded methodologies, monitoring frameworks, and ethical approaches that recognise local priorities and power dynamics. In short, the future of purpose-driven learning depends not only on innovative educational practices but on universities' willingness to re-examine their own identities, cultures, and commitments. The contributions in this Special Issue illuminate a path forward; the challenge now is scaling that momentum with rigour, inclusivity, and courage.

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