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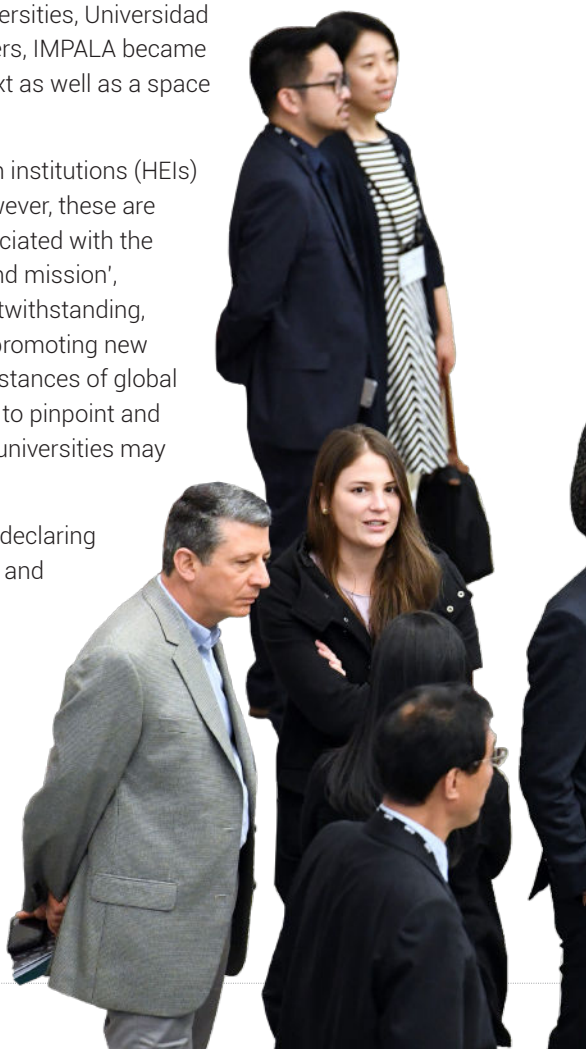
Towards a Third Mission University in Latin America: Reflections on IMPALA

Four years ago, 11 different partners came together with EFMD's International Projects Department to typify the third mission of Latin American universities and develop a model to measure their impact; the project was known as IMPALA (strengthening IMPAct of Latin American universities). At the time, the pandemic had not yet been declared and the European Union had generously decided to cofinance the endeavour given the importance of measuring impact.

The partners of IMPALA were the Colombian Association of Management Faculties - ASCOLFA; five public and private Colombian universities, including Universidad de Antioquia, Universidad del Valle, Universidad Católica de Colombia, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and Universidad de La Sabana; four Cuban universities comprising Universidad de Camaguey, Universidad Central "Marta Abreu" de las Villas, Universidad de Holguín, Universidad Agraria de la Habana "Fructuoso Rodríguez Pérez"; and two Panamanian universities, Universidad de Panamá and Universidad Especializada de Las Américas. For all the partners, IMPALA became an opportunity to better understand the role of universities in a societal context as well as a space to collaborate internationally and share best practices.



In fact, the relevance of IMPALA quickly becomes clear when higher education institutions (HEIs) are described around two main functions, namely teaching and research. However, these are not the exclusive focuses of HEIs. While prioritising teaching is generally associated with the so-called 'first mission university' and promoting research foments the 'second mission', HEIs also have a 'third mission' which pertains to their social contribution. Notwithstanding, this third mission lies at a wide range of intersections between teaching and promoting new knowledge amid realities that offer as many opportunities for innovation as instances of global crisis. Thus, HEIs' social contribution and impact are a complex phenomenon to pinpoint and measure given the heterogeneity and multidimensional character with which universities may affect a specific region, community, group, or field of knowledge.

In this context, it is not surprising that HEIs face challenges when it comes to declaring their influence on society beyond their commitment to teaching and research, and confronting the belief held by certain groups that HEIs are distant from real-world conditions. IMPALA was designed precisely to study how Latin America universities approach their impact; understand the specific regions they serve; rationalise and act on their responsibility towards their community; and reconsider how they can better transmit and transfer knowledge and technology to society.

Indeed, IMPALA defined four broad categories to analyse the third mission and used a sustainable development framework to include economic considerations, environmental protection, and social perspectives, while adding a fourth category described in the project as 'epistemological'. This last category combines the universities' first and second missions with knowledge and innovation management, to induce the engagement of what Campagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) would describe as 'non-academic stakeholders'. Thus, the project contributed an action model that identifies the main actors in a specific intervention as well as how they interact. As a result, the strategy for impact by a university is designed via a logical model that involves the relationship between resources, activities, products, effects, and the impact that is meant to be achieved.

In this context, the third mission has three broad outlets, which are formative development, research, and social outreach. For example, in formative development, one can find HEIs social contributions through lifelong learning programmes. In terms of research, HEIs may contribute via consultancy, advisory services, and innovation management training and applications. And in terms of social outreach, the study includes several community actions and services through which universities can promote cultural change and social assistance.

Hence, IMPALA defined a logical framework for impact measurement which contemplates the aspects that universities can control, specifically resources and activities, while the products, effects, and impact—which are less controllable—constitute the outputs and intended outcome. Together, these five elements are combined as part of a value chain that provides results.

Interestingly, while the term results may be translated into Spanish as 'resultados' and the term value chain is associated with an output, the term effect is related to an 'outcome', a term that does not have a direct translation into Spanish and has been frequently described in Latin America as either an objective, a purpose, or a result, a situation which has historically led to misinterpretations of what is meant to be measured. Therefore, IMPALA found that the different expressions of the third mission by Latin American universities and most of the institutional processes generating 'products', seldom involve measuring effects and rarely address impact. The two most common mistakes found by IMPALA involve on the one hand assuming that impact is the widest possible number of products that can be obtained, and on the other, that given those products there will be a specific impact.

During IMPALA, Universidad de La Sabana strategically chose to focus on two of the four categories defined by the project, namely economic considerations and social perspectives. This approach was based on the university's decision to develop its third mission through strategies as varied as adapting its organisational structure in favour of social outreach and co-creation, creating offices responsible for engagement, extending the reach of its business and innovation incubator, sharpening the objectives of its consultancy and advisory service, investing its resources in infrastructure to include applied research, developing a centre for translational science, and strengthening relations and follow-up of alumni.

The impact measures associated with the economic dimension and the social perspectives of the IMPALA model were explored respectively by the university through an entrepreneurship development programme that has provided mentoring to over 3,500 small entrepreneurs in 44 municipalities, mostly women, and the Service Consultancy, which has reached over 20,000 people in the university's impact zone through service, customer experience, hospitality, and social responsibility advisory, to promote sustainability among non-academic actors including both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations.

For Universidad de La Sabana the project contributed to the realisation that the third mission is part of the modernisation of higher education, in which a university is expected to be more multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral, socially impactful, and entrepreneurial. As a result, perhaps the most important reflection on IMPALA is that we should understand that social contribution and engagement by non-academic actors is about targeted impact in the long run, thus a part of a value chain that allows for the construction of indicators based on the specific community targeted for impact by each HEI.

> “Complexity theory shows that great changes can emerge from small actions. Change involves a belief in the possible, even the “impossible.” [...] Traditional evaluation approaches are not well suited for such turbulence.”
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> **- Michael Quinn Patton -**

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