

ENLIGHT Methodology for the Impact Assessment of Higher Education Initiatives

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Abstract

This paper presents the ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment of higher education activities, including the lessons learnt and the conclusions drawn from its testing with three case studies on challenge-based education, mobility and regional academies. The ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment is designed as a sequential and circular process, structured in six phases which are interrelated and retrofitting the next ones. It builds upon a co-creative process between the ENLIGHT Impact Task Force, action leaders and stakeholders, in order to explore the expected outcomes and desired impacts, capture and manage those changes on learners, academic and non-academic staff, institutions, systems and society. The ENLIGHT methodology has the potential to be taken as a reference in the assessment of the impact of higher education activities and can be used for the establishment of a model impact-direct planning and management in higher education.

Keywords: *Impact; Assessment; Methodology; European University Alliance.*

1. Introduction

ENLIGHT is one of the fifty European universities supported by the European Commission Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes¹. Launched in 2020, ENLIGHT is a European-wide alliance composed of ten research-intensive universities² committed to raise their potential to transform themselves and the European education landscape, as well as to become key players

¹ More information available at <https://enlight-eu.org/>

² University of the Basque Country (Spain), University of Bern (Switzerland), University of Bordeaux (France), Comenius University Bratislava (Slovakia), University of Galway (Ireland), Ghent University (Belgium), University of Göttingen (Germany), University of Groningen (the Netherlands), University of Tartu, and Uppsala University (Sweden).

in the promotion of equitable quality of life and sustainability. Explicit in its mission statement is the intention of ENLIGHT to be a transformative and impact-driven alliance.

In order to capture and manage ENLIGHT's transformative effects on people, communities, institutions and systems, the alliance has set as one of its objectives the development of a methodology for the impact assessment of higher education initiatives. Other complementary objectives include the promotion of common impact-driven research and innovation agendas, raising impact awareness, literacy, and readiness and creating a culture impact in and beyond the alliance³.

This paper focus on the first objective and presents the ENLIGHT methodology for the impact assessment of higher education initiatives, including the lessons learnt and the conclusions drawn from its testing with three case studies on challenge-based education, mobility and regional academies. The paper (1) introduces ENLIGHT understanding of impact, impact assessment, the main phases of its methodology and the pilot case studies; (2) it highlights the main lessons learnt from the three pilot case studies and how they helped refining the ENLIGHT methodology; and (3) it concludes by presenting the next steps in order to consolidate the methodology's potential to become a reference in and beyond the ENLIGHT alliance.

2. Impact and Impact Assessment in the Context of ENLIGHT

2.1. Impact and Impact Assessment

ENLIGHT's definition of impact has been evolving throughout its lifetime. Largely inspired by the impact concept developed in the context of research and innovation⁴, it has been enriched with the experience of the pilot case studies and exchanges with quality assurance, societal engagement and impact experts in different international fora⁵. ENLIGHT understands **impact** as “the effects or changes that we can see (demonstrate, measure, capture) on and beyond academia, which happen over time because of an activity/ intervention in the higher education environment”. On: on learners, academics, staff, leaders, the institution, structures; beyond: on society, economy, environment, etc.. In the context of ENLIGHT, impact is associated with “transformation” and “value” induced in various target groups by its different activities⁶.

³ More information about ENLIGHT impact activities and outputs is available at <https://impact.enlight-eu.org/>

⁴ Please consult the “Understanding Research Impact” section of ENLIGHT's repository of good practices <https://impact.enlight-eu.org/understanding-research-impact>

⁵ For example, ENLIGHT Impact Conference (30-31 March 2023), Impact Thematic Group of the European University Alliances, AESIS, EARMA and UIIN conferences.

⁶ Campillo, I., Nunes, G., Puertas, I. (2023).

In this perspective, ENLIGHT understands **impact assessment** as “the identification/ measurement/ evaluation of the changes and effects, and the extent of those changes and effects on different stakeholders over time”⁷. It conceives it as a complex and multifactorial phenomenon, which should be established as a continuous learning process, helping make accurate decisions about future action and future desired impacts. The ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment is based on these definitions and builds upon the current state of the art of the impact assessment study field⁸.

2.2. ENLIGHT Methodology for Impact Assessment

The ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment has been conceived as a **sequential process**, structured in six major phases which are highly interrelated and retrofitting the next phases in a circular approach. Each of the 6 phases includes a set of specific actions and decisions to be taken in order to proceed to the next phase (figure 1).



Figure 1. Different phases of the ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment and respective questions to be responded in each.

The pilot case studies experience has shown that impact assessment is **not a uni-directional nor linear process**, since it is often necessary to go back to a previous phase and/or action in order to adjust the former conclusions to the new realities.

2.3. Pilot Case Studies

In order to test the value of the ENLIGHT methodology, the ENLIGHT Impact Task Force has used three pilot case studies which are considered to be the most relevant and representative of the alliance potential impact on the transformation of higher education: challenged-based

⁷ Idem.

⁸ It is inspired by Puertas & Bilbao (2023) methodology for impact assessment, adjusting it to the Higher Education field, and taking the expertise, knowledge and experiences acquired in the ENLIGHT alliance (cfr. annex 1: State of the art on impact assessment at ENLIGHT (2023). *Methodology and Toolkit 2.0 for HEI Impact*).

education⁹; mobility¹⁰; and regional academies¹¹. Figure 2 illustrates the linkages between the selected pilot case studies and the overall ENLIGHT expected outcomes and impacts.

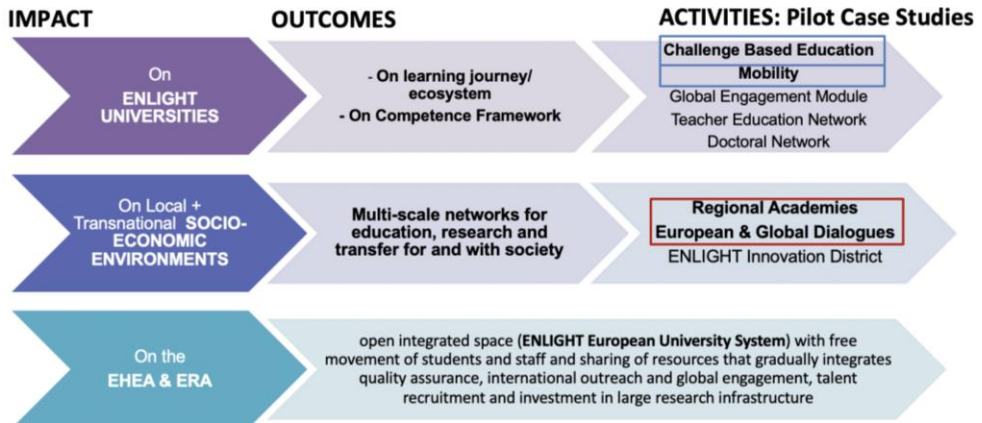


Figure 2. ENLIGHT impact scope and pilot case studies.

In addition, the selection of the pilot case studies has taken into consideration the degree of involvement of affected stakeholders throughout the impact assessment exercise and the data availability for capturing relevant impact-related indicators.

3. Pilot Case Studies: Lessons Learnt

In this section we present the different phases of the ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment, the expected decisions to be taken in each and the lessons learnt during the implementation of the pilot case studies.

⁹ The ENLIGHT Challenge-based Education action line represents all different models of challenge-based courses as well as all supporting and interrelated activities developed in the framework of the alliance to help implement them. Challenge-based Education is understood as “collaborative and hands-on teaching and learning approach, prompting students to work with peers, teachers, and experts in their communities and around the world to ask good questions, develop deeper subject area knowledge, accept and solve challenges, and share their experience” from Nichols & Cator, 2008.

¹⁰ The ENLIGHT Mobility action line is understood in its objective to develop an overarching structural and technical framework for *increased, flexible, inclusive and green mobility*, providing the conditions and the tools for flexible learning and teaching that lead to the establishment of an open and integrated space, i.e. a European University System.

¹¹ The ENLIGHT Regional Academies represent the local/regional quadruple helix structures, bringing together learners, academics, business, policy-makers and civil society players around societal challenges.

3.1. Purpose Setting

The main objective of this phase is to define the initiative under assessment, identify the reason why to perform the impact assessment and for what purpose. Whether the request for impact assessment arises in response to an external demand or if it is raised by the team involved in the initiative, there are several potential motivational elements leading to an impact assessment. For example, it could be a response to a strategy of *benchmarking and competitiveness* (to compare and improve the image/ reputation of an initiative/ institution in comparison to other(s)); *legitimation* (to increase the positive image towards society/ specific interest groups and reduce potential negative perceptions); *accountability and transparency* (to be accountable to certain interest groups); or *understanding and adaptation* (to understand whether the initiative is bringing about the expected/ desired impacts and steer change in strategies and priorities).

The pilot case studies have demonstrated this first step is fundamental as it affects the scope and all the subsequent phases of the impact assessment. As regards the definition of the initiative, it is very important to have a clear and shared understanding of what the initiative is and is not about. For example, the definition of the ENLIGHT mobility action line had to be clarified to also include online international learning experiences. Likewise, as regards the purpose of the pilot case studies, the main objective was to use them for testing the ENLIGHT methodology and not to make a comparative, benchmarking analysis between action lines or universities.

3.2. Scope Definition

The main objective of this phase is to define the scope of what is going to be assessed. For that, there are several elements that need to be addressed in most of the cases in a synchronous way:

- Identification and classification of stakeholders;
- Definition of the impact pathway, building-up the Theory of Change (ToC) causal chain of impact¹²;
- Decision on the impact assessment scope;
- Decision on the approach and composition of indicators.

In the process of defining the scope of the impact assessment and the causal chain of impact, experience has shown it is important to identify and classify the affected stakeholders, as well as take into consideration their expectations; being from those directly involved in the implementation of the action line (action leaders) or those (directly/indirectly) affected by it

¹² “The Theory of Change is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or “filling in” what has been described as the “missing middle” between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved.” Definition taken from <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>.

(learners, academics, administrative and support staff, universities' management teams, and societal stakeholders).

The integration of stakeholders' expectations in the causal chain of impact has revealed to be of great value, as it allowed to: (1) identify expected outcomes and desired impacts not initially considered in the versions elaborated together with the action leaders; (2) take into consideration undesired outcomes; (3) observe that the value given to the different outcomes vary according to the consulted stakeholder; (4) establish a differentiation between outcomes, which are mainly associated with "attribution", and impact which is mainly associated with "contribution".

Building-upon on the co-created causal chain of impact, one should define the scope of what actually is going (and can be) assessed, to then define the approach to capture evidence of impact leading to a list of indicators. The composition of indicators for ENLIGHT pilot case studies was made taking as reference the expected outcomes and the desired impact of the causal chain of impact and the agreed impact assessment scope. For that, the ENLIGHT Impact Task Force has used: ENLIGHT project indicators; ENLIGHT universities data; action line specific (performance) indicators; and stakeholders' suggestions for evidence. In addition, the Task Force has also proposed new indicators, which were mainly built upon project indicators or captured via surveys or focus groups. As a result, there were about 40 to 65 indicators defined for each action line. In this process, important lessons have been drawn:

- A few number of indicators could be repeated for different outcomes and were of relevance for different case studies;
- Even if, at a first glance, some indicators could look like as output/ performance indicators it all depends on the interpretation/ narrative associated with that indicator, as they can "indicate" a change in a certain direction.
- It is important to contrast these ideal indicators with the action leaders to check their relevance, and the viability of collecting data for those indicators. There were indicators that could not be used in the short-time as some of the activities were still ongoing or the expected changes could only be observed in the medium to long-term.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The main objective of this phase is to collect all quantitative and qualitative related data responding to the identified indicators, as well as to analyse the results of the data collection.

The pilot case studies have demonstrated that for those cases where project indicators and partners related data were used, it was often difficult to capture detailed and broken-down data as desired. This is because the collection process for those project indicators was not specifically designed to capture that type of detailed data. Therefore, the importance of combining the performance and impact assessment exercises early from a planning phase.

In parallel, the ENLIGHT Impact Task Force has run an impact survey targeting the affected stakeholders from all the partner universities and respective ecosystems. In total, 218 individuals answered the ENLIGHT impact survey¹³, which allowed the collection of relevant quantitative and qualitative data, as well as testimonies reflecting the experience of the affected stakeholders. The analysis of the survey results has demonstrated the importance of clarifying ENLIGHT jargon and key concepts to the surveyed target groups.

3.4. Assessment

Following the collection and analysis of data, the objective of this phase is to assess the observed impacts. For facilitating this, the ENLIGHT methodology suggests to make first a categorisation of the different types of observed impacts around the following criteria: temporality of the impact generated; intentionality; possibility of repairment; intensity degree; and extent/ reach. In this phase it is also important to bear in mind that any quantitative or qualitative assessment implies a value judgment, considering what is seen as positive and negative, what is important and what is not, what was intended and unintended, what was expected and unexpected.

In the context of the pilot case studies, the ENLIGHT Task Force has reflected that “assessment” exercise in the form of a **Narrative of Change 1.0** (NoC 1.0)¹⁴. The NoC 1.0 goes through each expected outcome and assesses the achievement and contribution to the expected outcomes using both quantitative, qualitative data and stakeholders’ testimonies.

3.5. Communication and Contrast

This phase consists of reporting, communicating, as well as contrasting the results of the assessment phase. For this purpose, one should determine to whom is the communication targeted at, what is going to be communicated, and how to communicate it.

The NoC 1.0 was contrasted with the respective action leaders on the accuracy of data analysis and impact assessment. It was also communicated to ENLIGHT Board of Directors. The communication and contrast with the affected stakeholders (learners, academics, administrative and support staff and societal stakeholders) still has to be carried out and should be the basis for generating the NoC 2.0.

¹³ Out of the 218 individuals responding to the survey, 214 consented to share their responses: 84 learners, 61 support staff members, 59 academics, and 10 external stakeholders. 117 individuals responded to the ENLIGHT Challenge-based Education specific questions, 98 responded to the ENLIGHT Mobility specific questions, 52 responded to the ENLIGHT Regional Academies specific questions.

¹⁴ ENLIGHT (2023). *Pilot cases’ “narratives with numbers” and global report.*

3.6. Management

This phase consists of defining the strategies to be implemented in order to manage the identified changes, seeking to correct/ minimise those effects that are considered as negative and enhancing/ maximising those that have been identified as positive. Likewise, this phase will help defining the strategy for future impact assessment(s), identifying the shortcomings to address and the positive elements of the whole exercise. This phase is still ongoing at the time of the drafting of this paper.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

The ENLIGHT methodology for impact assessment could be useful for assessing the impact of different types of higher education activities. Through the three pilot case studies the methodology has shown its potential in phases 1 to 4, and partially 5. To complete the full cycle, the NoC 1.0 needs to be further communicated and contrasted with other relevant stakeholders besides the action leaders, such as learners, academics, administrative and support staff and societal stakeholders. The resulting NoC 2.0 should then constitute the basis for the subsequent management phase (phase 6). This is a crucial phase that is well aligned and coincides with the launch of the new ENLIGHT 2.0 activities (November 2023).

We trust this theoretical-practical approach could be of value for other European universities and University Alliances and, at the same time, further enriched with their experiences. For that purpose, ENLIGHT is leading the FOREU2 Impact Thematic Group and is participating in multiple international fora around the theme of impact of higher education.

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