

**Keynote Address by SMU President Prof Lily Kong**  
**FORCE11 (Future of Research Communication & e-Scholarship) Conference**  
**3 June 2026, 3–4.30pm, Singapore Management University**

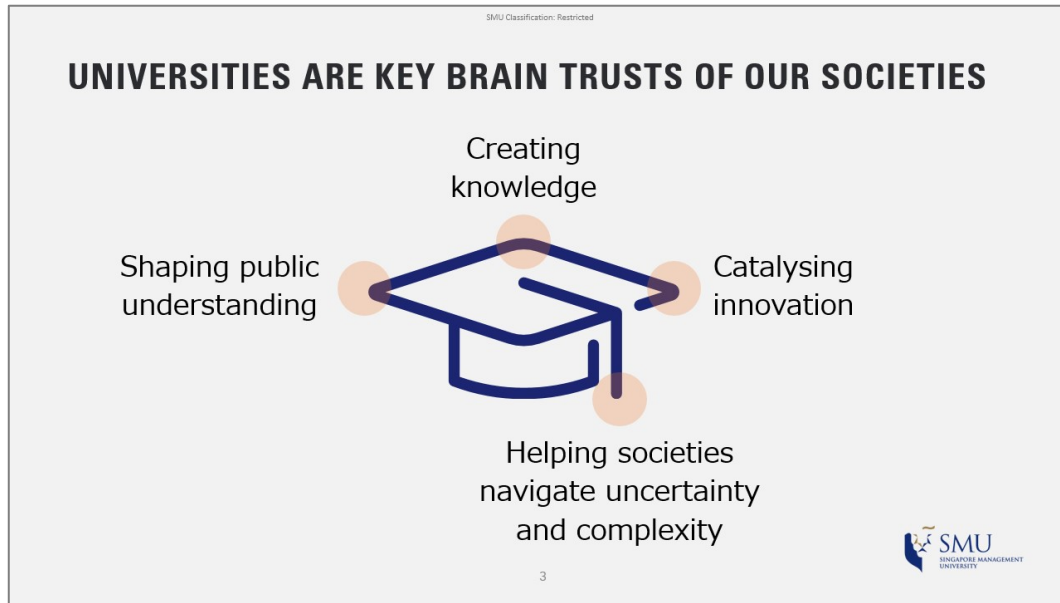
**“Publish or Perish” to Purpose and People:**  
**Going Together on Research Assessment Reform**

**I. OPENING**

Good afternoon, colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to join you at FORCE 2026. The alliance, FORCE11, emerged from a recognition that scholarly communication and research assessment systems were no longer fit for a digital age. You have since meaningfully brought together scholars, librarians, publishers, funders and technologists to rethink how knowledge is created, evaluated and shared. More than a decade ago, the FORCE11 manifesto identified a problem that remains strikingly current today: that existing academic assessment systems do not adequately recognise the full breadth of scholarly contribution.

These questions matter profoundly because universities occupy a unique and privileged position in society. They are among the key brain trusts of our societies: creating knowledge, shaping public understanding, catalysing innovation, and helping societies navigate uncertainty and complexity. Some of humanity’s most transformative advances have emerged from universities. The discovery of insulin at the University of Toronto. The development of the seatbelt at the University of Minnesota. The AstraZeneca COVID vaccine at Oxford. At their best, they advance not only academic knowledge, but also economic progress, human flourishing and public good.



Yet, universities today operate within increasingly complex environments shaped by ranking pressures, funding constraints, geopolitical uncertainties, global competition for talent, evolving public expectations, and growing demands for accountability and societal impact. At the same time, researchers navigate systems in which publications, citation counts and prestige indicators shape career progression, funding and institutional reputation. Within such contexts, it is easy to chase misplaced goals. We may end up pursuing what is measurable rather than what is important. We may move ever faster, without asking whether we are moving in the right direction.

Today, therefore, I would like to reflect on three broad issues:

- First, how the cultures of “publish or perish” and metrics-driven evaluation have contributed to growing distortions within research culture and purpose.
- Second, why reforming research assessment has proven far more difficult than simply articulating better principles.
- And third, what it might mean for universities, funders, publishers, librarians and other actors across the research ecosystem to move collectively towards cultures centred not only on outputs and prestige, but also on purpose and people.

Ultimately, reforming research culture is not work that any one institution, sector or actor can undertake alone. As you have rightly identified in the conference's theme, it requires us to go together.

## **II. UNIVERSITIES, RESEARCH, AND A CRISIS OF CULTURE**

Besides the achievements that universities attain with rigorous and purposeful research, universities also play an increasingly important role in countering misinformation and pseudoscience. In what the World Health Organisation has described as an era of “infodemics,” that is, where the spread of misinformation and disinformation is rapid, much like a virus, rigorous and evidence-based scholarship becomes even more critically important. As custodians of knowledge — and many of you in this room are precisely that — universities and the communities that support them bear responsibility not only to scholarship itself, but also to the broader society they serve.

It is critical therefore to ask whether some of the systems surrounding research are leading us in the right direction. For many, the reaction to this question is one of unease.

### **A. The Two Dominant Structural Forces**

At the heart of this unease are two developments that have become deeply embedded within contemporary higher education systems. Some will believe the ensuing views to be provocative; others may see them as clear-eyed. But I believe it is important to name what is happening directly: that academia has, in significant ways, come to chase misplaced goals, and that this crisis of direction has profound consequences for institutional culture, for the well-being of the people within it, and ultimately, for society.

The first is the culture commonly described as “publish or perish”, the pressure to publish in order to progress in academic careers, failing which one has no choice but to leave the profession when the tenure clock is up. Publications in top-tier journals, defined by high impact factors; publications with university presses; garnering high citations; better still, “home-run” publications with outsized citations; performances finetuned to h-indices and field-weighted citation metrics: this is now the dominant language of academic evaluation. These are proxies for academic quality and impact. But at its most meaningful, research matters because it shifts perspectives, challenges received wisdom, and enhances our understanding of the human condition. Where we publish and how many cite us are proxy indicators, and imperfect ones.

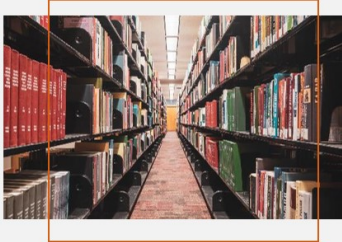
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## TWO DOMINANT FORCES SHAPE A CRISIS OF DIRECTION

**1** *‘Publish or perish’*  
**The pressure to publish to safeguard one’s academic career**

- Publications in top-tier journals, high citation counts and performances tracked by citation metrics are treated as proxies for quality and impact

**These are flawed indicators.** Research should be evaluated based on whether it shifts or enhances understanding of the human condition, not where and how it was published



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The second force is the rise of global university rankings. The most popular of rankings allocate the majority of their metrics to research. In the race for rankings, institutions have been willing to justify the resulting imbalance between teaching and research with arguments that would make many of us uncomfortable. As one analyst has put it directly: “for students, the value of their credential is, in large part, a function of the prestige of the institution which is driven by research as reflected in rankings and prizes. Every marginal bit of effort the university puts into research may be at the expense of a student’s education but ultimately benefits them in the long run.” I trust you find that logic as troubling as I do.

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## TWO DOMINANT FORCES SHAPE A CRISIS OF DIRECTION

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**2** *Global university rankings*

The race for rankings drive institutions to justify the resulting **imbalance between teaching and research**

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Together, these forces have created what I would describe as tightly interconnected prestige economies, where institutional reputation, faculty recruitment, funding competitiveness and rankings reinforce one another through common metrics frameworks.

### B. The Consequences: Mistreatment, Misconduct and Manipulation

When we look closely at what these hyper-competitive environments produce, we must confront the dark corollaries of a metrics-driven culture: **Mistreatment, Misconduct, and Manipulation**. This is not simply an administrative misalignment. It is a human and ethical crisis. It directly erodes the integrity of the scholarly record that many of you in this room spend your careers protecting.

#### Mistreatment: “Prestige does not prevent poverty”

The Stanford University Postdoctoral Association captured something important when they observed that “prestige does not prevent poverty.” The phrase referred to the long reliance in American academia on “the cheap, skilled labour of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers” — scholars who struggle to make ends meet even within elite institutions, working long hours “in the pressured atmosphere of competitive research.” To “make academic science a good career again,” “research needs a radical restructuring.”

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## THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION

**Mistreatment**

**Misconduct**

**Manipulation**

*"Prestige does not prevent poverty"*  
 – Stanford University Postdoctoral Association

**The long reliance in American academia on the cheap, skilled labour of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers**

Scholars struggle to make ends meet even within elite institutions, working long hours in the pressured atmosphere of competitive research

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Research from the University of Bristol reinforces this concern. Researchers have been found demoralised by a culture that actively disincentivises sharing and collaboration, encourages questionable research practices such as data manipulation, and increases the risk of bias. Researchers worry about their ideas being “scooped.” Younger or less-experienced researchers do not always receive proportional credit for their work. There is fear of discrimination in research assessment based on personal characteristics such as gender. The focus on traditional peer-reviewed papers is thought to be a major contributory factor to this malaise.

A major study commissioned by the Wellcome Trust went further. It found that competition in research had become “aggressive and harmful.” The focus on “the quantity of outputs, and narrow concepts of ‘impact’, rather than on real quality” was causing “intense pressures to publish, with too little value placed on how results are achieved and the human costs.” The report documented discrimination, exploitation, harassment and bullying. These are not outliers. These are systemic features of contemporary research culture.

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## THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION

**Mistreatment**

**Misconduct**

**Manipulation**

**Major study commissioned by the Wellcome Trust found that:**

- Competition in research had become “aggressive and harmful”
- Intense pressures to publish, with too little value placed on how results are achieved and the human costs
- Discrimination, exploitation, harassment and bullying

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The consequences were spelled out with uncomfortable clarity, and should concern every one of us:

“For researchers, poor research culture is leading to stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of isolation and loneliness at work. For research, the perceived impacts include a loss of quality, with corners being cut and outputs becoming increasingly superficial, problems with reproducibility, and the cherry-picking of results and data massaging. For society, the dangers are seen as loss of talent from the sector and a reduction of real innovation and impact resulting from a narrow set of priorities, as well as a loss of trust from the public.” (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

### **Misconduct: Breach of Academic Integrity**

As universities are increasingly drawn into quantitative standards of success, with metrics-driven incentives in competitive environments, ethical compromises have emerged. Breaches of academic integrity take various forms, from questionable practices at the margins to full-scale misconduct.

For example, researchers may use questionable research practices to yield publishable outcomes. One prominent tactic is p-hacking: performing many statistical tests on data but reporting only those that yield statistically significant results, increasing the likelihood of false positives.

More troubling still is outright data fabrication, which can derail entire fields of study. A high-profile case in Alzheimer's research, where falsified data was used, led to wasted years of effort and substantial financial losses, setting back critical medical advances. Hundreds of images were found to show what investigators described as "shockingly blatant" tampering, combining images from different experiments, potentially altering results to better fit the hypothesis.

In 2023 alone, more than 10,000 research papers were retracted globally -- a new record. Ten thousand. That number should alarm all of us. It represents not just individual failings but a system that, in some respects, has become diseased.

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## THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION

Mistreatment

Misconduct

Manipulation

Breach of Academic Integrity

- **Researchers engage in questionable practices to yield publishable outcomes:** E.g. P-hacking that increases the likelihood of false positives
- **Data fabrication:** An Alzheimer's research used falsified data

In 2023 alone, more than 10,000 research papers were retracted globally -- a new record.



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What all these point to is the intense pressure to publish, leading to temptations to take short cuts, sometimes to preserve jobs at risk.

As we move further into the age of generative AI, these temptations will only intensify. Already, we are seeing the rise of sophisticated "paper mills" leveraging AI to manufacture entirely fabricated studies at scale. The consequences of such breaches reach far beyond academic reputations. When falsified data or synthetic papers enter medical or environmental science, they can result in flawed public health policies, ineffective treatments, and even life-threatening outcomes.

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## THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION

Mistreatment

Misconduct

Manipulation

**Intense pressure to publish drives temptation to take shortcuts**

- The rise of sophisticated "**paper mills**" leveraging **generative AI** to manufacture entirely fabricated studies at scale
- Falsified data or synthetic papers in medical or environmental science can result in **misguided actions**: flawed public health policies, ineffective treatments, and even life-threatening outcomes

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### Manipulation: The Dark Incentives of Metrics-Driven Research

A third area of concern is citation manipulation. While not amounting to data or textual fabrication, this is a troubling form of academic dishonesty. 20% of respondents in one study reported coercive citation, where editors pressure authors to add citations from the editor's own journal on very thin academic grounds. Over 50% admitted they would add unnecessary citations to improve their chances of publication.

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## THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION

Mistreatment

Misconduct

Manipulation

***The Dark Incentives of Metrics-Driven Research***

In one study:

|                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                     |
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| <p><b>Over 20%</b></p> <p>of respondents reported coercive citation (editors pressure authors to add citations from the editor's own journal)</p> | <p><b>Over 50%</b></p> <p>admitted they would add unnecessary citations to improve their chances of publication</p> |
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In extreme cases, entire journals have been discovered to engage in citation cartels, where authors and editors collude to disproportionately cite each other's work to inflate citation counts and impact factors. This exploitation of the citation system undermines the credibility of those journals, and rewards researchers who play the metrics game, often at the expense of genuine innovation. It corrupts the very knowledge record that libraries, publishers and scholarly communities are sworn to preserve. Such practices pose moral dilemmas for researchers and editors alike, and they point, ultimately, to what can only be described as a diseased ecosystem.

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**THE CONSEQUENCES: MISTREATMENT, MISCONDUCT, AND MANIPULATION**

**Mistreatment**

**Misconduct**

**Manipulation**

**Citation cartels:** Authors and editors collude to disproportionately cite each other's work to inflate citation counts and impact factors.

- corrupts the academic ecosystem
- rewards researchers who play the metrics game
- at the expense of genuine innovation**

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### C. Research Culture and the Human Cost

Perhaps among the most concerning consequences are those relating to research culture and human well-being more broadly.

The issue is not competition per se. Competition has always been part of academic life and can often drive excellence and innovation. Rather, the concern is that increasingly intense forms of competition may begin to undermine the very conditions that support good scholarship and healthy academic communities. When researchers feel unable to take intellectual risks, when collaboration gives way to competition, when quantity overwhelms reflection, and when exhaustion becomes normalised, the quality and integrity of scholarship ultimately suffer. For early-career researchers especially, these pressures are not abstract. They are lived as financial precarity, insecure contracts and the exhausting performance of constant visibility.

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## RESEARCH CULTURE AND THE HUMAN COST

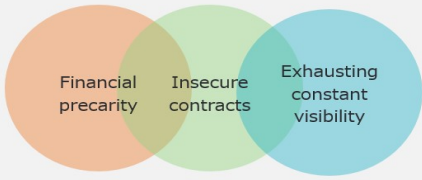
**Increasingly intense competition:**

- + Researchers feel unable to take intellectual risks
- + Collaboration takes a backseat
- + Quantity overwhelms reflection
- + Exhaustion normalised

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**Quality and integrity of scholarship suffer**

**What this means for early-career researchers**



Financial precarity    Insecure contracts    Exhausting constant visibility

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### D. AI, Trust and the Future of Scholarly Contribution

These pressures on research culture may become even more acute as generative AI reshapes the landscape of scholarly work. AI tools are no longer simply assisting with research workflows in limited ways. Increasingly, they are participating in substantive aspects of scholarly production itself.

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## AI, TRUST AND THE FUTURE OF SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION



**Challenge:**  
**AI tools may intensify pressure and distortion**

- AI can generate literature reviews and analyses, and draft manuscripts at dramatic speeds and scales

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Researchers already report the ability to generate literature reviews, statistical analyses and even draft manuscripts at speeds and scales that would previously have been unimaginable within conventional academic workflows.

As AI alters the economics, speed and scale of research production, myriad questions are currently without answer. What does originality mean in an age where synthetic text can be produced almost instantaneously? Should the traditional academic paper become a less central unit of scholarly communication? How do universities identify intellectual labour, assign attribution and recognise creativity within such environments? How do we preserve trust, rigour and careful scholarship? If publication volumes increase dramatically while peer review and evaluation systems remain relatively fixed, how do we deal with the intensification of pressures already embedded within academia? How should we handle incentive structures built around publication counts and visibility when they become increasingly disconnected from meaningful measures of scholarly contribution?

### **III. THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP**

#### **A. Reform Movements and the Limits of Consensus**

The diagnosis, of course, is not new, and the questions are on many minds. Many in this room have spent years helping to surface these concerns and build frameworks for change — from the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment<sup>1</sup> and the Leiden Manifesto<sup>2</sup>, to FAIR<sup>3</sup> principles, and CoARA<sup>4</sup>. These efforts have shaped international conversations about research culture. They have broadened awareness of the limitations of existing systems, encouraged universities and funders to think more critically about the incentives embedded within contemporary research cultures, and foregrounded important questions about transparency, integrity, reproducibility and societal contribution. Perhaps most importantly, they have reminded us that research is not simply an individual academic exercise, driven by personal passions, important as curiosity-driven research is. Much research is publicly funded. Its legitimacy relies not only on academic excellence, but on public trust and public value.

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<sup>1</sup> The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) is a global initiative developed in 2012 that campaigns for improved ways to evaluate scholarly research. It primarily denounces using the Journal Impact Factor to judge the merit of individual scientists or their specific articles.

<sup>2</sup> The Leiden Manifesto provides ten principles for the appropriate use of metrics in research evaluation.

<sup>3</sup> The FAIR Principles are a set of international guidelines designed to optimize the reusability, accessibility, and discovery of digital assets, particularly research and scientific data.

<sup>4</sup> The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) is a global alliance of over 800 research organizations, funders, and academic societies committed to reforming how research and researchers are evaluated. It shifts the focus from publication-based metrics to qualitative judgments, recognizing diverse contributions like open science and societal impact.

Yet despite these important shifts in conversation, many universities continue to behave in remarkably traditional ways. Publications in high-impact journals remain deeply consequential for hiring, tenure and promotion decisions. Citation metrics continue to function as shorthand proxies for quality and prestige. Even institutions that publicly endorse reform frameworks often struggle to operationalise them meaningfully within their own systems.

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## REFORM MOVEMENTS AND THE LIMITS OF CONSENSUS

**Frameworks of change to improve research culture**

- San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)
- Leiden Manifesto
- FAIR principles
- The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment CoARA



*But not much has changed in university behaviours because **they compete within deeply interconnected ecosystems of incentives, expectations and dependencies.***

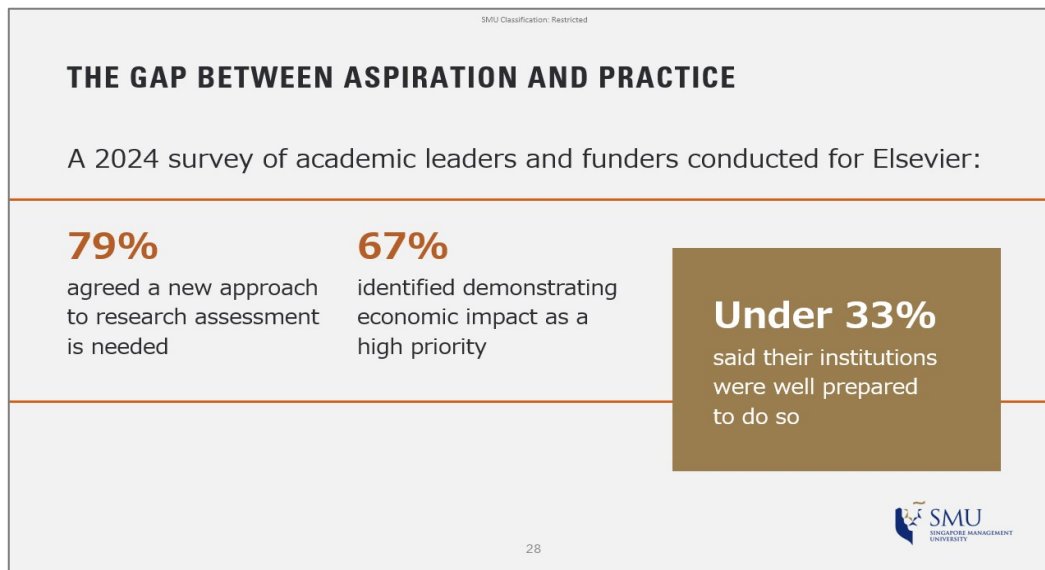
**Conventional metrics persist because they offer comparability and legibility**



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It reflects the reality that universities operate within deeply interconnected ecosystems of incentives, expectations and dependencies. Institutions compete for talent, research funding, philanthropic support, partnerships, international students and reputational visibility. Governments expect accountability for public investment. Students and families look to rankings as proxies for quality. In this environment, conventional metrics persist partly because they offer something useful in simple ways: comparability and legibility across institutions and borders.

And so the gap between aspiration to develop other research measures and the practice of it persists. It is well evidenced. A 2024 survey of academic leaders and funders conducted for Elsevier found that 79% agreed a new approach to research assessment is needed, and 67% identified demonstrating economic impact as a high priority. Yet fewer than a third said their institutions were well prepared to do so.



## B. Why Declarations Alone Do Not Change Behaviour

So this is where the rubber hits the road. If the issue were simply one of awareness or agreement in principle, then change might already have occurred more substantially across the sector. But universities face multiple pressures, as mentioned earlier.

A university may genuinely wish to value interdisciplinary work, public scholarship or societal contribution more fully. Yet hiring committees may still rely heavily on publication records in established journals because these remain the clearest and most widely recognised signals within international academic labour markets. Promotion systems may continue privileging conventional metrics because they are viewed as more measurable, comparable or defensible across disciplines and institutions. And reviewers continue to write their endorsements and criticisms, using such metrics.

Similarly, universities may publicly support broader definitions of impact while continuing to communicate ranking successes prominently because rankings remain deeply influential in shaping external perceptions among students, governments, partners and donors. In this sense, institutional aspirations and institutional behaviours appear not to align neatly.

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## WHY DECLARATIONS ALONE DO NOT CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

A university may genuinely wish to value interdisciplinary work, public scholarship or societal contribution more fully, but conventional metrics persist:

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| <p><i>Hiring committees</i><br/>rely heavily on<br/>publication records<br/>because these remain the<br/>clearest and most<br/>widely recognised<br/>signals within<br/>international academic<br/>labour markets</p> | <p><i>Promotion systems</i><br/>are based on<br/>conventional metrics<br/>because these are viewed<br/>as more measurable,<br/>comparable or<br/>defensible across<br/>disciplines and institutions</p> | <p><i>Universities</i><br/>communicate<br/>rankings successes<br/>because rankings shape<br/>external perceptions<br/>among students,<br/>governments, partners and<br/>donors</p> |
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Part of the difficulty also lies in the nature of societal contribution itself. Publications and citations, for all their limitations, are relatively legible within existing systems. They can be counted, benchmarked and compared. Societal impact is far more diffuse, collective and long-term, and involves qualitative assessment. Influence on policy, professional practice or public understanding may unfold over many years and through multiple actors. Some forms of contribution are highly visible; others are quieter, no less important, but difficult to evidence.

## IV. FROM DIAGNOSIS TO IMPLEMENTATION

### A. Rethinking What Matters

How then may institutions operationalise broader conceptions of research contribution within systems still heavily shaped by conventional indicators of success?

Across several jurisdictions, major assessment frameworks have evolved in response to this recognition. Among the most visible developments has been UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Introduced formally in 2014, REF has incorporated research impact as a core component of national research assessment. Impact is defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."

It is important to note that REF did not abandon conventional notions of academic excellence; research outputs and scholarly quality remain central to assessment. Rather, REF broadened the evaluative lens to recognise that excellent research may also generate demonstrable benefits beyond the academy.

Impact in REF is assessed primarily through detailed impact case studies. Universities are required to demonstrate not only that high-quality research was undertaken, but also that it contributed to meaningful change or benefit beyond academia. Assessment focuses on both the “reach” and “significance” of impact: the extent and diversity of beneficiaries, and the degree of change or influence achieved. This has encouraged universities to think more intentionally about pathways through which research informs public policy, professional practice, healthcare, environmental outcomes, business innovation, public engagement and cultural life. REF has also stimulated more systematic approaches to documenting evidence of impact, including policy citations, adoption in professional guidelines, industry partnerships, public engagement outcomes and community benefits.

Importantly, REF demonstrates that recognising societal impact need not come at the expense of academic rigour. On the contrary, impact case studies must be underpinned by research judged to be of internationally recognised quality. The framework therefore signals that scholarly excellence and societal contribution are complementary rather than competing objectives.

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## EXPANDING HOW RESEARCH IS ASSESSED

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### UK Research Excellence Framework (REF)

- Incorporates **impact beyond academia** into assessment
- Defines impact as **benefit to economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life**

#### HOW IMPACT IS EVALUATED

- Impact case studies
- Measured by **reach** and **significance**



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Despite what in my view is a positive philosophical shift, REF has been widely criticised for reinforcing performative and managerial behaviours in universities. The introduction of “impact” case studies, while broadening recognition beyond academic publications, has also generated concerns that universities privilege research with demonstrable short-term economic or policy outcomes over slower-burning, foundational, or critical scholarship. Critics argue that the requirement to evidence impact can incentivise strategic storytelling and retrospective attribution rather than genuine societal transformation. More recently, the addition of “research culture” as an assessment dimension has been welcomed in principle, but questioned in practice: some contend that it risks becoming another bureaucratic audit exercise, encouraging institutions to codify narratives of collegiality, inclusiveness, and wellbeing without adequately addressing the structural pressures created by REF itself, including hyper-competition, precarity, and publication-driven performance cultures.

In Asia, Hong Kong’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has similarly evolved, with impact case studies in addition to publication metrics tracked. As in the UK’s REF, HK’s RAE is closely tied to the allocation of public research funding, although the mechanisms and scale differ.

Besides these system-wide initiatives to rethink what matters, a parallel development is the Financial Times’ evolution of international business school rankings. Historically focused on salary outcomes, career progression, selectivity and research publications, FT has progressively incorporated broader considerations of diversity, internationalisation, sustainability and societal contribution. In 2024, it published a report that focused on “rigour, resonance and relevance”. Rigour refers to scholarly quality and methodological credibility, where emphasis remains on meeting conventional standards of academic excellence. Resonance refers to the extent to which research travels beyond academia and reaches practitioners, policymakers, and wider audiences, using indicators such as policy citations, downloads by non-academic users, use in teaching cases, and dissemination in practitioner communities.

Relevance concerns whether research addresses pressing societal and organisational challenges, including issues such as climate change, inequality, sustainability, and technological disruption. FT presents these concepts partly as a critique of narrow reliance on journal rankings and citation metrics. It argues that highly technical and theoretically sophisticated work may be rigorous without necessarily being relevant or resonant, and that business schools should be evaluated for broader forms of societal contribution as well.

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### ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS ARE EVOLVING

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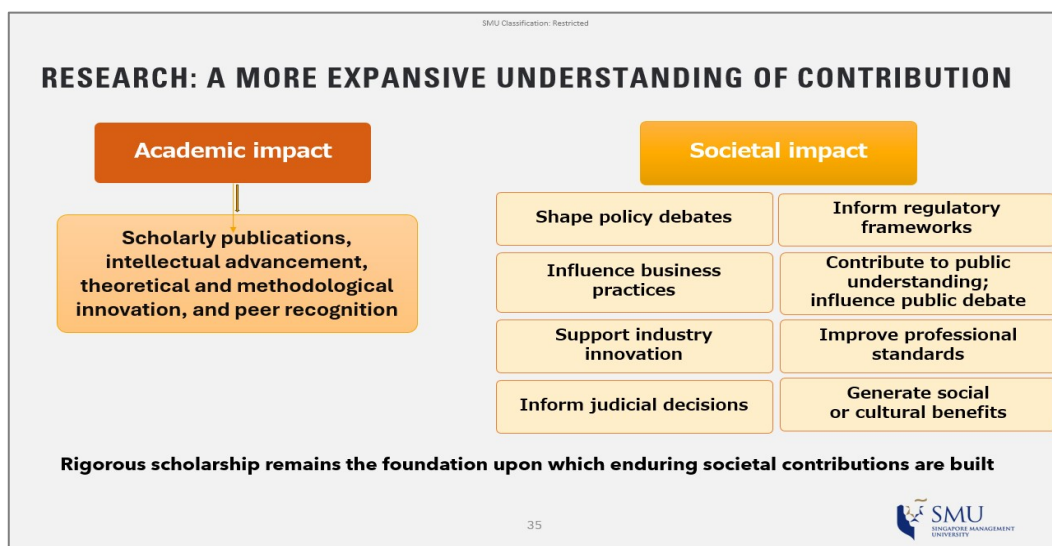
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| <p><b>Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporates impact alongside publications</li> <li>• Linked to public research funding</li> </ul> | <p><b>Financial Times (FT) International Business School rankings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigour → scholarly quality</li> <li>• Resonance → reach beyond academia</li> <li>• Relevance → address real-world challenges</li> </ul> |
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At SMU, these developments have shaped our own reflections on how universities create and demonstrate value. Campus-wide conversations have increasingly helped to shape our approach. It begins with a broader conception of impact itself. We do not see impact as confined only to research. Universities contribute to society through multiple interconnected missions: education, student development, knowledge creation, community engagement, institutional partnerships and public discourse. Accordingly, our conception of impact encompasses not only research impact. We articulate our desired impact in terms of human capital development, knowledge creation, economic development, and strengthening social and community life. This broader framing recognises that universities influence society not only through scholarly publications, but also through the students they nurture, the civic values they cultivate, the professional capabilities they develop, and the institutional and community ecosystems they help strengthen.

Within research itself, we similarly embrace a more expansive understanding of contribution. We affirm both academic impact and societal impact. Academic impact remains vital. Scholarly publications, intellectual advancement, theoretical and methodological innovation, and peer recognition continue to matter deeply. Rigorous scholarship remains the foundation upon which enduring societal contributions are built. At the same time, research may also shape policy debates, inform regulatory frameworks, influence business practices, contribute to public understanding, support industry innovation, improve professional standards, and generate broader social or cultural benefits.



Recognising societal impact does not mean diluting academic standards or replacing rigour with publicity or visibility. Nor does it imply that all research must demonstrate immediate instrumental outcomes. Fundamental and curiosity-driven research remain essential to the long-term advancement of knowledge.

Rather, the objective is to acknowledge that valuable scholarship may travel through multiple pathways and create influence in different ways over time. Universities therefore require evaluative frameworks capable of recognising these diverse forms of contribution.

This recognition necessarily raises questions about measurement. Conventional citation-based metrics remain useful indicators of academic visibility and scholarly influence. Citation counts, journal impact factors and related bibliometric measures continue to provide important information about how research circulates within academic communities.

However, such metrics are often less effective at capturing broader societal engagement and influence. Research may shape government policy, inform judicial decisions, influence public debate, guide industry practice or contribute to community outcomes without necessarily generating large citation counts within academic journals. As a result, universities must explore complementary indicators that provide a fuller picture of research influence and engagement. One such development is the growing use of Altmetrics, which tracks broader forms of engagement surrounding research outputs, including mentions in news media, policy documents, social media, public forums, blogs and online reference platforms. These indicators can help illuminate how research travels beyond academic audiences and enters wider public conversations.

Similarly, platforms such as Overton allow universities to identify and analyse references to research within public policy documents, legislation, regulatory guidelines and governmental reports. This provides valuable insight into the ways research informs policymaking and governance.

Lens.org and related platforms further expand analytical possibilities by linking scholarly publications to patents, innovation ecosystems and industry applications. Such tools help reveal pathways through which research contributes to technological development, entrepreneurship and translational innovation.

The Open Syllabus Project is perhaps the closest thing to a global tracking system that identifies research publications used for teaching purposes. It aggregates millions of university syllabi internationally and allows a search by author, providing data on how research translates into influence on how learners think, frame problems, and structure understanding.

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## MEASURING RESEARCH IMPACT IN PRACTICE

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**Traditional metrics capture academic visibility,  
but miss how research travels beyond academia**

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| <p><b>Conventional metrics:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citation counts</li> <li>• Journal impact factors</li> <li>• Related bibliometric measures</li> </ul> <p>They remain useful indicators of academic visibility and scholarly influence</p> | <p><b>Complementary indicators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Altmetrics (media, public engagement)</li> <li>• Overton (policy citations)</li> <li>• Lens.org (patents, innovation)</li> <li>• Open Syllabus Project (teaching use)</li> </ul> |
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**BUT not another exercise in metric accumulation.  
The challenge is not simply to measure more,  
but to measure in ways that illuminate rather than distort.**

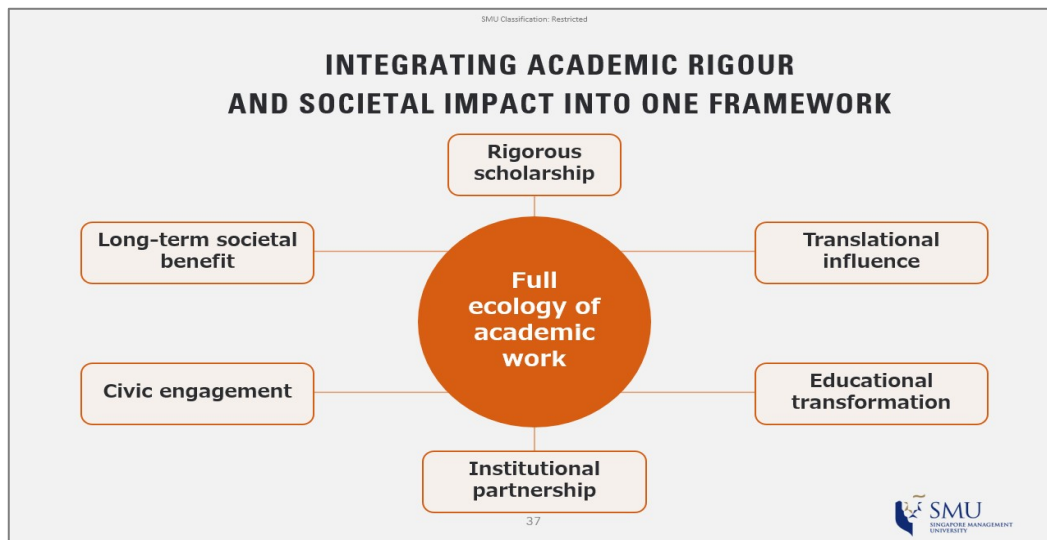


None of these measures is perfect, nor should they be treated as substitutes for scholarly peer review or rigorous academic assessment. Alternative metrics may themselves contain biases and limitations, and care must be taken to avoid reducing impact to simplistic quantitative proxies.

Nevertheless, these tools are useful because they illuminate dimensions of influence that conventional metrics often overlook. They enable universities to better understand how research circulates across different sectors, who engages with it, how it informs practice and policy, and where broader societal value may be emerging.

The broader challenge for universities is therefore not whether to maintain academic rigour or embrace societal impact. The real challenge lies in integrating both responsibly. In the midst of such rethinking, it is important to remain mindful that this is not intended to become another exercise in metric accumulation. The challenge, ultimately, is not simply to measure more, but to measure in ways that illuminate rather than distort.

Universities need systems capable of recognising that meaningful scholarly contribution cannot always be reduced to publication counts and citation visibility alone. A more expansive conception of contribution allows universities to better recognise the full ecology of academic work: rigorous scholarship, translational influence, educational transformation, institutional partnership, civic engagement and long-term societal benefit.

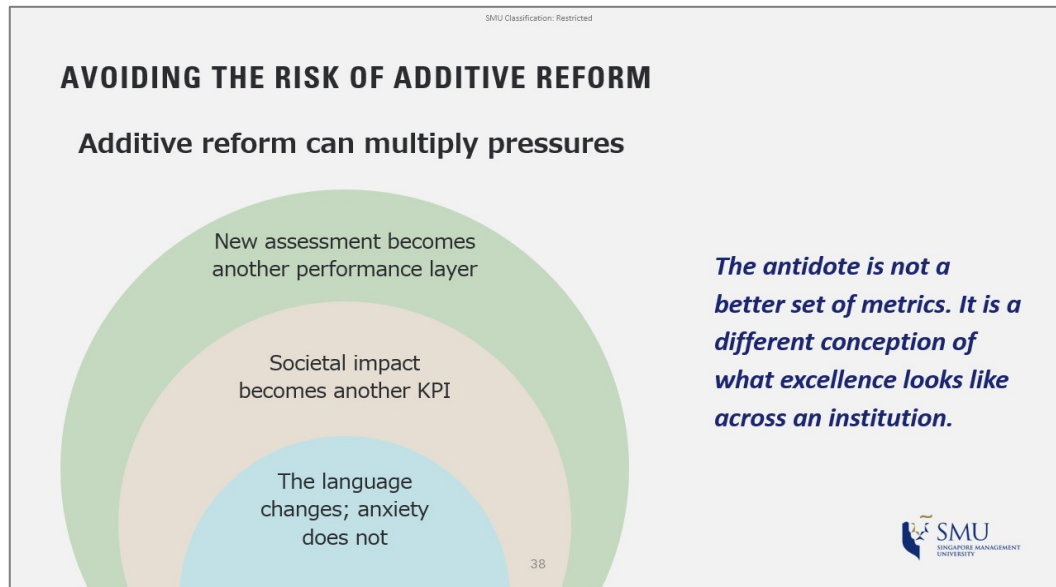


For SMU, we have chosen to take this philosophical position, and are on a journey to translate it into workable systems. We do so without the pressures of a system that allocates funding, as REF and RAE in the UK and HK do.

## B. Avoiding the Risk of Additive Reform: The Portfolio Approach

There is a danger that universities, in their genuine enthusiasm for reform, make things worse.

If institutions continue rewarding publication volume while simultaneously expecting all scholars to demonstrate policy impact, interdisciplinary engagement, public communication and translational outcomes, then reform risks multiplying pressures rather than transforming culture. Every new dimension of assessment becomes another performance layer. Societal impact becomes another KPI. The language changes; the anxiety does not. This is what might be called additive reform, and it is, the most likely failure mode confronting well-intentioned institutions.



The antidote is not a better set of metrics. It is a different conception of what excellence looks like across an institution. The sociologist Michèle Lamont argues that when multiple matrices of evaluation are used, it creates the possibility for more scholars to "shine under different lights." That phrase does more work than it might first appear. It is not simply an encouragement to be inclusive. It is a philosophical claim: that excellence is plural, that contribution is heterogeneous, and that institutions which force all scholars towards uniform optimisation are not raising standards; they are narrowing them.

At SMU, I hope to see a portfolio approach to research contribution. The institution, understood as an ecosystem, needs different kinds of scholars doing genuinely different things. Some produce foundational theoretical work whose influence unfolds over decades. Some engage directly with policy. Some translate research into practice through industry partnerships or professional communities. Some build public discourse, or mentor the next generation with unusual care and rigour. Some convene across disciplines in ways that make other people's work possible. These are not lesser forms of contribution. They are the conditions under which a university actually functions as a knowledge institution.

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## EXCELLENCE IS INCLUSIVE



**Sociologist  
Michèle Lamont:**

*When multiple matrices of evaluation are used, it creates the possibility for more scholars to **"shine under different lights"***

**SMU's portfolio approach recognises different scholars contribute differently:**

- Production of foundational theoretical work
- Direct engagement with policy
- Translation of research into practice through industry partnerships or professional communities
- Building public discourse
- Mentoring the next generation
- Convening across disciplines



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What this means in practice is that not every scholar should be expected to do everything. The portfolio approach allows the institution to recognise plurality without requiring uniform performance across all dimensions. The pressure to achieve top-tier publications with high citation counts as the universal measure of worth, for every academic, in every field, at every career stage, can begin to be disrupted. And with it, some of the conditions that drive the misconduct, exhaustion and cynicism described earlier in my address has a chance of easing.

None of this is straightforward to implement. Once institutions move towards broader conceptions of contribution, difficult questions arise about standards, fairness, consistency and workload. Who decides which pathways count? How are they evaluated? How do you prevent the portfolio approach from becoming a cover for lower expectations in some areas? Faculty scepticism on these questions is real, and sometimes warranted.

But those difficulties are reasons to implement reform with care, not reasons to abandon reform. The goal is not to measure more things. It is to build systems of recognition that are more thoughtful, more plural, and more honest about the many different ways that scholarship generates value. Universities that manage to do this will not only serve their researchers better. They will produce more (and more varied) knowledge than institutions that continue optimising for a single, narrow definition of excellence.

### C. Structural Change, Institutional Capacity and Unfinished Work

Institutional aspirations alone are insufficient unless accompanied by corresponding organisational capacity. If universities genuinely wish to strengthen pathways between scholarship and societal contribution, they must think carefully about the structures, leadership arrangements and support systems needed to enable such work.

At SMU, we have established an Office of Impact led by a Vice President. The Office was created to help strengthen institutional coordination, build culture and communities of practice, develop measures and metrics, support evidence gathering, and build substantial and substantiated impact narratives across the university, not just on the basis of faculty research, but in other areas of the university's activities, such as in education, student development, innovation and entrepreneurship, and ecosystem development.

SMU Classification: Restricted

## SMU's Office of Impact

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- Helps strengthen **institutional coordination**
- Builds **culture** and **communities of practice**
- Develops **measures and metrics**
- Supports **evidence gathering**
- Builds **impact narratives** across the university

The aim is to **build a community of scholars** who are galvanised by what their work could do **to make the world a better place**, through their **contributions to education and research**; the remit is to **support the community on this journey**, and to **give language and voice to successes**.





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The intention is not to instrumentalise all research towards immediate outcomes. Rather, the aim is to build a community of scholars who are galvanised by what their work could do to make the world a better place, through their contributions to education and research; the remit is to support the community on this journey, and to give language and voice to successes.

Working together with other units on campus that are responsible for research strategy and partnerships, the mission for the Office of Impact is to cultivate a habit of mind, that impact is not simply an afterthought appended to research outputs, but a pathway that can be designed, supported and strengthened institutionally over time. Learning from the experience of RAND Corporation, researchers are encouraged early within project lifecycles to think about intended users, pathways of influence and the broader contexts within which research might travel and be applied. The purpose is not to guarantee policy wins or predetermined outcomes, but to cultivate a culture in which questions of relevance, accessibility and use are discussed explicitly rather than treated as incidental.

We are early in our journey. Like many universities, SMU continues to grapple with tensions between ranking pressures, disciplinary expectations, external accountability systems and aspirations towards broader societal impact. Some aspects of institutional change are easier to articulate than to operationalise. But it is a journey well worth undertaking. Open and transparent engagement and communication is not optional; it is foundational. If reforming research culture were straightforward, it would already have happened.

## **V. GOING TOGETHER**

Ultimately, no university can reform research culture alone. Universities operate within broader ecosystems shaped by publishers, funders, ranking agencies, governments, technology platforms, libraries and scholarly communities themselves. The incentives embedded across these systems often reinforce one another. As long as they do, institutional change will remain difficult if actors move independently or in contradictory directions.

Universities may seek to broaden definitions of scholarly contribution, yet hiring and promotion systems continue to rely heavily on journal prestige and citation visibility. Funders may encourage societal impact while still evaluating grants primarily through conventional metrics. Ranking systems may speak about holistic excellence, while continuing to embed strong citation and reputational weightings within their methodologies.

This is why the theme of this conference -- “going together” -- feels especially important. If any one part of the ecosystem attempts to move away from narrow metrics while the broader ecosystem continues rewarding longstanding indicators, reform will remain fragile and difficult to sustain. The challenge, therefore, is not only technical, but relational. It requires greater alignment across ecosystems about what forms of contribution should be recognised and rewarded. It requires more honest conversations about the limitations of existing systems. And it requires humility from all actors about the unintended consequences of the structures we collectively sustain.

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**REFORMING RESEARCH CULTURE TOGETHER REQUIRES:**

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**Greater alignment** across the higher education ecosystem about **what forms of contribution should be recognised and rewarded**

**More honest conversations** about the **limitations** of existing systems

**Humility** from all actors, including universities themselves, about the **unintended consequences** of the structures we collectively sustain



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## VI. CLOSING: PURPOSE AND PEOPLE

Despite the challenges I have outlined today, I remain hopeful. Why? Because many within the global research community clearly recognise that existing systems are no longer fully adequate. Because conversations that once sat at the margins of higher education are now being taken seriously across universities, funders, publishers and governments. And because communities such as FORCE continue creating spaces where difficult questions can be explored collectively, critically and constructively.

Reforming research culture will not be quick work. There will continue to be tensions between visibility and value, competition and collaboration, accountability and intellectual freedom. Institutional change will remain uneven and contested.

But perhaps the point is not that universities arrive quickly at perfect systems. The more important task is ensuring that, collectively, we continue moving deliberately towards systems that better serve purpose and people, that collectively, we acknowledge that our role is not only to produce more knowledge, but to help ensure that we support human flourishing and enable the societies we ultimately seek to serve.

Thank you.