

The University of Gothenburg Centers for Global Societal Challenges – an evaluation

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The background

In 2014, the board of the University of Gothenburg (UGOT henceforth) set aside 300 million Swedish kronor for an initiative to address great societal challenges in a multidisciplinary manner – or, formally, the University of Gothenburg Centers for Global Societal Challenges (UGOT Challenges, for short). The call was an extension of the strategy document Vision 2020 of the University, thereby stressing the initiative as emblematic of the future ambitions of the University.¹ The strategy depicted a direction of UGOT where a series of guiding principles would shape its activities: a consistent international orientation, problem-solving ambitions and contribution to the resolution of pressing issues, interdisciplinary work modes that span faculty boundaries, and academic environments that in their entirety align education, research and collaboration in a cohesive and balanced manner. The strategy articulated the University’s self-understanding as a civic university, with a socially embedded history and evolution, and as a comprehensive and integrated university, with an emphasis on problem-solution in collaboration with societal interests.

Behind the initiative was also the perception that UGOT lagged behind other comprehensive universities in Sweden and was too fragmented internally to compete for the coveted large-scale funding. UGOT had not been successful in two of the most prominent of such calls, for the Linnaeus environments in 2006 and 2008, and for the Strategic Research Areas in 2009. Similarly, the University was critiqued in the comprehensive review of research activities conducted in 2010 for its alleged weakness in focused and integrative efforts, and ineffective mechanisms to initiate and support research across intellectual and organizational boundaries.² This altogether triggered the University Management, and eventually the University Board, to incept this initiative.³

The call text identified a series of goals for the call – the premier being scientific excellence, but also strongly emphasizing multidisciplinary perspectives. It aimed at bridging boundaries

¹ https://medarbetarportalen.gu.se/digitalAssets/1606/1606791_gu_vision_2016_inlaga_sve_webb.pdf

² https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/24885/1/gupea_2077_24885_1.pdf

³ For a background, see Staffan Edén, “UGOT Challenges”, in Schwaag Serger, Sylvia, Malmberg, Anders & Benner, Mats, eds. *Renewing Higher Education: Academic Leadership in Times of Transformation*. Lund: Lund University 2021.

between scientific traditions and fostering a more coherent UGOT. It was hoped that this would help break down the divisions between different parts of the University – which sometimes resembled an assemblage of independent faculties, rather than a cohesive higher education institution. It was also expected that the initiative would foster changes in the higher education portfolio of UGOT, introduce novel ways of operating, and increase the University's capacity to engage with and contribute to the solving of societal challenges.

The remit

The evaluation was incepted in early 2021 and was given the mandate and remit to assess how well the initiative has enabled the goals of the UGOT Challenges initiative as outlined above. Furthermore, it was expected that the evaluation would afford valuable insights into the formation and implementation of strategic initiatives at the university-wide level in the future.

A panel was set up by the Vice Chancellor in early 2021 comprising:

Tim Allen, Professor in Development Anthropology and Director of the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, London School of Economics and Political Science,
Mats Benner, Professor and Dean of Lund University School of Economics and Management, chair

Lars Geschwind, Professor in Engineering Education Policy and Management, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm

Darja Isaksson, Director General, Swedish Government Agency for Innovation Vinnova

Marja Makarow, Professor, President Academia Europaea

Göran Marklund, Head of Strategic Intelligence, Swedish Government Agency for Innovation Vinnova

Ronan O'Connell, Emeritus Professor of Surgery, President Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Deborah Power, Professor of Biotechnology, President of the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Science, University of Algarve, Portugal

Mathilde Skoie, Professor of Latin, Vice Dean, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo

The procedure

The panel was provided with a full background consisting of the call, various background documents to the initiative, documentation throughout the process (half-time evaluations, self-assessments of the centres, of the central university management, faculty management and the host departments). All in all, the panel met with over 70 representatives of the centres and of the formal organization of UGOT.

It was already clear from the start that the centres themselves would not be evaluated, but rather the initiative as such, in which of course the experiences gained through the centres were an integral part. Thus, the initiative can only be gauged by the experiences of the centres, individually and as a collective, but an assessment of the efficacy and impact of each of the centres lay beyond the competence of the panel, which should instead be the task of specialists within their respective areas, which the panel believe to be planned.

As to the interpretation of the remit and the panel's role, it is important to state some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped the evaluation. The panel welcomed the ambition to critically assess the initiative and to put it into the context of the evolution of universities, how they operate, organize themselves and interact with society more broadly and with a global system of education and knowledge production. In doing so, universities fulfil several, not always compatible, roles. They should be credible and act as guarantors of independent thinking and critical analysis. Their role in and for social and economic change and impact has been profiled in various forms in different times, which now forms a central part of the governance and steering of universities. Thus, universities are expected to function both as credible and intervening organizations. In addition, they are now enmeshed in various systems of accountability, in the financial inputs, modes of operation and outcomes in terms of scientific and societal impact. While their global role has been emphasized in recent decades (as expressed in rankings, bibliometric surveys, etc.), so has their national, and indeed often local, role, as service institutions and building blocks in and for sustainable and inclusive societies. The panel views UGOT Challenges in this light, as an intervention and as a reminder that work modes and directions should be reassessed, and to allow for experiments and novel combinations to reconcile the different expectations and act as harbingers of change. From the panel's perspective, UGOT Challenges represents an attempt to reconcile these different forces, as well as between top-down calls and bottom-up processes. This entails high expectations on UGOT's august reputation and history, and the panel's observations and recommendations should be read in this light. It expects nothing less of UGOT than a university that sets out to meet and map future expectations of visibility and engagement, inclusion and eminence.

The call and the centres

The initiative was implemented as an open call within the UGOT for bottom-up proposals, in two stages. The first stage was also preceded by an expression of interest, to make it possible for applicants to find other interested parties around the university. In the proposal, the group behind it was free to define the global societal challenge they wanted to address, and of course how it was to be done. The requirement for cross-disciplinarity was defined through the stipulation of two groups of research or faculty areas, based on the Frascati manual, and each proposal should include members from both of those groups, roughly representing the traditional concept of "the two cultures" in science and research.

After 103 expressions of interest, 78 proposals were submitted in the first stage. They were evaluated and ranked by a broad panel of international experts, and 12 groups of researchers were invited to submit a stage 2-proposal and offered a planning grant. The 12 stage 2 proposals were evaluated by a selection of the international reviewers, who in the end recommended 6 of the centres for funding. Thus, the following 6 centres have been part of the strategic initiative UGOT Challenges:

- **AgeCap** aims to promote their vision; a society in which ageing is valued for potentials and older adults are respected – a society that enable us to be active agents in our own lives, independent of age and other factors.
- **CARe** has a vision to limit mortality, morbidity and socioeconomic costs related to antibiotic resistance on a global scale through research.

- **CCHS** is devoted to critical and interdisciplinary studies of the many layers of cultural heritage as a material, intangible, emotional and intellectual field, to be able to rework the past in the present.
- **CeCAR** focuses on one of the most pressing challenges of today: Large-Scale Collective Action, a challenge that needs to be addressed in order to overcome most of our current social, environmental and health problems.
- **FRAM** work for a safe use of chemicals for both humans and the environment by research and development on chemical risk assessment and management of the combined effect of chemicals.
- **SWEMARC**:s goal is to increase the sustainability of farming food from the ocean through interdisciplinary and socially engaging research.

The observations

As an overarching conclusion, the collective outcome of UGOT Challenges (as it embodied in the centres funded), is in line with the call. The centres all relate to societal challenges in one way or the other, and their intellectual foundations reflect critical issues of the present time and the foreseeable future. They follow or sometimes even lead the knowledge frontier in their areas and can report the expected combination of disciplinary domains in their composition. They can furthermore have an impact on the educational portfolio of UGOT, and all do fit with an overall conception of the strengths and profiles of UGOT as a university in the world and for the world, serving as beacons of the engagement and impact of UGOT in the world.

The centres have made some outstanding contributions in scientific impact, achievements that are impressive by any global standard. UGOT should be congratulated on those and the ability to pinpoint and support – and reshuffle – some highly impactful areas and environments. However, the panel was expecting even higher standards and ambitions, and UGOT should consider measures to incite even higher ambitions for future initiatives of this sort.

As to their visibility as centres, at least some of them are known to the wider world and have formed important “brands” that serve as signposts for the University as a whole. Others had not yet found a clear identity within their own fields, which is not unexpected given the relative novelty of the initiative. However, given the ambition of UGOT to sharpen its profile and visibility in the world and secure a position in the abundance of higher education institutions, the University should work even harder to identify and clarify organizational formats for a select number of high-impact centres – how they are identified, mandated and assessed over time.

An important aspect to keep in mind is the time-limited nature of the initiative and the effect this seems to have had on the centres – their planning was decisively focused on the six years of funding. While such a timeframe may be perfectly sensible for the individual centres and enough for them to show their viability, the lack of continuity of the scheme as such appears to be a missed opportunity for UGOT. It may indeed be seen as paradoxical given the grand and long-term ambition of the initiative, as societal challenges and the need to focus energies around them do not normally cease after a few years. The relatively short duration therefore gives an undecisive and ambiguous impression; if initiatives like UGOT Challenges are taken, they should be integrated into a long-term model of how centres are identified and empowered, exit strategies and how (some) centres may mutate into other constellations and formats over time, and how centre legacies may be maintained.

The panel found some outstanding examples of impact in the wider society, with tangible outcomes in the form of transformed processes, relations, regulations and sometimes even practical interventions. Overall, the panel was however expecting more transformative experience put forward, and it identified stable than truly innovative and outstanding outcomes in societal impact.

The specific comments

More specified comments may be divided into organizational, social, and intellectual observations, and finally summarizing reflections.

Organizationally, the initiative was somewhat difficult to pinpoint. It was rather unclear at what level the UGOT centres were actually located within the structure of UGOT, if they were only six of several centres, or if they had a special and privileged role. The logic of location also varied: Some centres were embedded in other looser structures at the University-wide level, while others functioned as units within a larger department. If the ambition was that UGOT Challenges centres should profile the University more widely and showcase the overall global scientific and societal impact of UGOT, a somewhat more streamlined organizational format would have been beneficial.

The centres supported were mostly based on existing configurations, albeit with added dimensions – mostly in the form of collaborators outside the scope and focus of the original configuration. The core of the centres was in most cases composed of very established scholars, with stellar reputation in their fields. The complex issue of added value is therefore unavoidable, how much is really new, and how does one measure or at least monitor progress on the basis of the funding afforded? Many of the centres supported also encompass several hundred members. The panel questioned whether such large collectives are really relevant for initiatives like UGOT Challenges. Greater demarcation might have been appropriate to ensure that the initiative was more targeted.

This leads to another observation, namely the relatively lax expectations of monitoring and follow-up. While acknowledging annual reports as a format for this, the panel noticed a lack of more ambitious measures to trace the impact of the centres. It was, for example, not always clear where PhDs and post-docs ended up, or how they were connected and aligned with the centres in future interaction.

The panel noted marked differences between the subjects of the centres – gravitating from a clearly articulated collective to more individualistic stances. While this may reflect differences in disciplinary traditions in work modes, it was nevertheless noteworthy and possibly indicating a shortcoming of umbrella initiatives like UGOT Challenges, that fit better with some areas than others.

The formation of centres did not always appear to be open, but rather reflected the preferences and orientations of a core group – which may enhance the efficacy of centre operations but also limit their scope and originality. For the future, it might be advisable to foster more open-ended search processes.

The asymmetry of composition within the centres in relation to different faculties was also noticeable, often with a core in one disciplinary domain and additional members from

another. While this may be expected given the time frame of the initiative and the relatively brief planning period, it still serves as a momentum when designating initiatives as multi- or interdisciplinary, namely that genuine interaction and alignment takes measures and ambition.

The intended institutional effects – even if understated and implicit as a goal – are also somewhat elusive in the material. Such effects could for instance include more porous boundaries between faculties, more collaborative structures, and a transformative effect on UGOT into a more coherent organization rather than fragmented combination of semi-autonomous entities. It seems quite clear that the faculties in general – some adamantly – expressed the opinion that the initiative had been superfluous and have diluted resources from the general allocation mechanisms, with little effect on the overall impact and efficacy of UGOT’s research. While such comments should be understood in the context of other concerns as well – struggles concerning resource allocation, different ways of connecting with national and international networks, or similar – they point at the need of constantly engaging with and aligning with the different organizational layers of UGOT if initiatives like this are to be taken in the future. As an illustration of this need, the role of the faculties has changed over time. According to the documentation of the initiative (Edén 2021), faculties and their deans were instrumental behind the initiative in its early stages. With successive generations of faculty leadership(s), the engagement and – reportedly – insights into the initiative have diminished substantially. Overall, the role of the faculties has been understated, and it may be inferred that this may reflect other ambitions. The panel however notes a need to even better explain the rationale of the initiative to ensure that its ambitions and additionality is known within UGOT. The faculties were particularly keen to have a role in the future of the initiative and in ensuing forms and formats of supporting such endeavours.

Host departments were far more appreciative of the centres, and clearly view them as valuable additions to other activities. A pragmatic approach prevailed among departments, where the selection of centres appeared quite legitimate, and their activities conducive to the departments as a whole. In particular, the capacity to enact change in wider society was elevated as an outcome difficult to achieve without centre status. Financially and organizationally, centre management appeared to be quite lenient, with the exception of overheads. The issue of overhead appears to dilute some of the impact of the initiative and should be resolved; it makes little sense to operate with bewildering variation of overheads taxed between departments of the same university.

Moving to the **social aspects** of the initiative, the relative lack of organizational clarity notwithstanding, centres seem to have developed in a manner that satisfies expectations of coherence and integration. They were all marked by integrative mechanisms and by researchers that seemingly enjoyed working together, where a friendly and constructive atmosphere prevailed.

Leadership varies between centres and there seems to be no best practice here – which may not be expected given the different backgrounds and histories of the centres, and the necessary leeway for personal interpretations of the nebulous task of academic leadership. Having said that, it was still striking how leadership tended to gravitate in the direction of loose interaction rather than conductorship, allowing for great variation rather than concertation, possibly to the detriment of the ambitions behind UGOT Challenges.

Scientific renewal is often tantamount to the rejuvenation of the scientific workforce. A key observation that the panel made was that opportunities for junior researchers to establish themselves were not always in place. It was a striking aspect that centres are dominated by seniors setting the scene and the directions – a memento for the future should be to ensure that renewal and ample opportunities for younger scholars are integral to centres. Thus, while the social mechanisms of the centres were generally benevolent and integrative, they did not always align with the overarching goal of stimulating the rejuvenation of UGOT's leading academic environments.

As to the **intellectual impact**, a recurrent comment in the conversations with centre members was that multidisciplinary had been hampered by the lack of adequate outlets. Without engaging in detailed examinations of publication patterns in the different fields represented within the centres, this observation may be questioned. There are quite a few journals specializing in mutidisciplinarity, and there is a general orientation to multi- or interdisciplinary approaches in many specialized journals. There is also the possibility for centres to publish special editions of particularly relevant journals, to enhance their visibility and contributions to agenda-setting in their respective fields.

It would seem that the paucity of outputs clearly linked to diverse disciplinary perspectives was essentially a choice made by the research teams. This reflects disciplinary-linked publication trajectories, which do not seem to have been much challenged. The panel felt opportunities were missed for enhanced learning when it comes to the publication profile of centres, and perhaps benchmarking of opportunities with potential outlets should in future be planned from the start. It was, additionally, noted that the academic quality of outputs varied widely, and those that were within the frame of the dominant disciplines of a project tended to be of a higher quality.

The notion of complete academic environments – which is at the core to the Vision 2020 strategy of UGOT and therefore also to the UGOT Challenges initiative – is both daunting and diffuse, and the panel found few elaborated responses to this laudable ambition. Indeed, the panel found highly variegated understanding of the notion of complete academic environments, from occasional interventions to the revamping of educational programmes and trans-organizational and seamless relations that stretch beyond the University into wider society. The relative lack of articulation with education was a striking aspect. There are quite a few plausible explanations of this - the logic of educational and research funding and planning varies a lot in Sweden and the two are funded in separate streams for instance. Nonetheless, the explicit ambition of the initiative was to foster the interaction of education, research and collaboration, and the lack of mechanisms to foster change in educational portfolios is therefore striking, albeit with a few notable exceptions.

The international dimension is central to all the initiatives, however not always very demandingly so as the international dimension tended to be constricted to the traditional settings rather than new vistas. It would have been challenging to the initiative if the notion of international had been more explicated and demanding, for instance how the university would expect the centres to identify international partners; such search processes appeared not only congenial to the ambitions of the UGOT Challenges initiative.

As to impact, centres are clearly well positioned within their respective societal areas and can report some exceptional cases of impact. It may again be noted that the understanding of

impact varies considerably between the centres and their members, and the panel identified an absence of systematic thinking on the different pathways of impact. The impression was that impact relied more on existing measures and mechanisms (and goals) of collaboration, rather than experiments and traceable impact. It was noticed, however, that some are more innovative, using media techniques and platform of various sorts to align with societal interests.

As a **summary**, the outcome of UGOT Challenges - as can be evidenced by the panel - is quite good with no significant deficiencies in relation to the original expectations, but with somewhat limited novelty and renewal. This may be an outcome of the selection process, but also of the governance of the scheme: its limited duration, and underdeveloped mechanisms for monitoring and guidance.

In brief, the following may be concluded:

Has the initiative contributed to strengthening the ties between different areas of the university, in multi- or interdisciplinary forms? The answer is a qualified yes; all centres blend members from the natural sciences/medicine with the humanities/social sciences/arts, however mostly with a dominance of one over the other.

Has it contributed to elevating the international dimensions of UGOT work? To some extent, but not systematically and there was a general lack of bold ambitions in this respect.

Has it contributed to the creation of complete academic environments? This is an elusive and challenging goal, and probably the one where the impact as of yet is the most limited.

Was money well spent? As indicated, the panel did not pursue evaluations of the centres as such but rather of the scheme as a whole, but overall centres clearly had achieved their stated aims.

The design and execution of the call seems to have functioned well and the outcome and selection of centres appeared legitimate but given the magnitude of the call and the initial articulation of the initiative with the grand and long-term ambitions of UGOT, the panel had expected a more consistent alignment with the overall planning and leadership of UGOT.

The wider impact of the initiative, given the ambitious formulation of goals for UGOT Challenges, would have been even better served with models of impact pathways, of monitoring and gauging the relationship between UGOT activities and those of collaborating partners.

The recommendations

The panel's recommendations follow the remit – they are aimed at the University leadership, not at the individual centres, and should be read in this light.

The aim of UGOT Challenges is to entice the University and its constituent parts to embrace transformation – to work in different ways, with new sets of actors and interests. The panel believes this to be laudable and an example to universities in Sweden and beyond. Thus, a

first recommendation is to continue with similar schemes, to instigate change and variation, even disruption, within the University.

UGOT Challenges can be seen as a vital part in the profiling of activities within UGOT. The University should therefore champion success and profile energetic and impact areas and activities, making them flagships of the university. The University should not initiate activities like this with less than full commitment and engagement at all levels.

The panel urges the University to consider similar programmes in the future, addressing societal dynamics and scientific ambition, but further the impact of collaboration, internationalization, innovation and education, issues that were less prevalent in the UGOT Challenges scheme.

The University is recommended to enable some, carefully selected, centres to be extended beyond a six-year period – primarily with funding for networking and facilitation of interaction. Such measures are quite inexpensive and are likely to maintain the momentum and integration of (some of) the UGOT Challenges centres.

Improve communication between the different layers of the University, as centres like UGOT Challenges are critically dependent on their articulation with all levels of the University and these must be coordinated.

Ensure that commitment is not disbanded with changes in formal leadership within UGOT – centres are dependent on continuous interaction over time.

Clarify expectations already from the start – centres must report publications, impact, mobility, etc. in a streamlined manner.

Complete academic environments as a goal are difficult to achieve without reforms of employment and promotion criteria. UGOT Challenges demonstrates that research achievements tend to reign supreme in the promotion of both individuals and activities more widely, and the University should learn from the experience of UGOT to act decisively if it really aims to create a more holistic understanding of achievements for individuals and centres.

A call like UGOT Challenges should not be seen as any initiative – it should communicate an ambition of some duration and depth of UGOT. Clarify the interaction between what the University is, where it aims, and how initiatives like UGOT Challenges may make that possible. The strategic dimension needs to be sharpened; currently there are some ambiguities in what the initiative actually represents for UGOT, which hampers its efficacy.

Include funding of educational activities in future calls of this ambition – by themselves, centres cannot be expected to implement fundamental educational reform. The University might even consider centres where education forms the centrepiece.

Revamp and streamline centre policy – enable a continuous identification and empowerment of centres like UGOT Challenges and avoid swamping the category of institutes or centres.

Take measures that enhance the possibility to learn from these experiments so that these initiatives become more than the sum of its parts and that UGOT as a whole is affected by the initiative.