

UNIVERSITIES AND THIRD MISSION: CONSIDERATIONS FROM AN ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article explores the 'Third Mission' of universities, focusing on public engagement, knowledge transfer, and innovation to address social and economic needs. It discusses challenges in evaluating these activities and highlights Italian universities' efforts to integrate this mission into strategic planning for regional development and societal well-being.

Keywords: universities, third mission, knowledge transfer, public engagement.

The university originated as a place of education and dissemination of knowledge. Its traditional role, from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, consisted essentially in teaching activities. A first ‘academic revolution’ (Etzkowitz, 1998, p. 823) occurred following the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who argued that the core of the university should be the union of research and teaching. Thus, universities began to develop a second ‘mission’, that of research, focusing not just on transmitting knowledge, but also on producing it. Over time, universities have therefore been asked to abandon their ‘ivory tower’, opening knowledge to a wider public and aligning it with social, cultural and economic development.

This fundamental change was achieved starting from the second half of the last century, with the definition of a university commitment known as the ‘Third Mission’. The ‘Third Stream’, as it is preferably called by some scholars (Kagan and Diamond, 2019, p. 102), has been subject to various definitions since the 2000s, due to the multiplicity of aspects it encompasses. The expression is characterized by a certain ambiguity (Laredo, 2007, p. 451) and indeterminacy, and the adjective ‘third’ is used to differentiate some activities from those traditionally carried out by universities.

There is, however, a consensus that the new mission consists of a set of activities related to the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other potentialities of the university. Beyond teaching and research, this mission enables universities to establish relationships with society, generating positive impacts on cultural, social and economic development.

The expansion of the Third Mission is based on the belief that the growth of a region stems from the ability to establish virtuous circles between research, industry and innovation, with an increasing attention to the real needs and characteristics of a specific geographical area. This is achieved through knowledge exchange and technology transfer, also promoting practices of economic, social and environmental sustainability. It involves a mix of heterogeneous activities and services, aimed at integrating the institutional teaching and research missions performed by universities.

The extensive literature on the subject (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020) demonstrates the policymakers and academics’ interest in understanding how universities, through this new mission, can drive regional innovation.

The triple, quadruple and quintuple helix models (Etzkowitz, 2008; Frondizi, 2020, pp. 33-34) represent concepts developed in scientific literature to illustrate the new role of universities and their activities. These models involve public administration, citizens and businesses, in a more impactful process of social innovation, which consists of new ideas (in the form of products, services, etc.) ‘that satisfy social needs more effectively than existing alternatives and enhance society’s capacity to act’ (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010, p. 3).

The Third Mission enshrines the centrality of the role of knowledge within the economy and promotes the concept of an ‘entrepreneurial’ university, capable of networking with all social actors, interacting with businesses and economically exploiting the results of its research and development activities. The idea that universities can play an active role in

industrial and technological development, through research that is no longer totally independent from economic interests has become firmly consolidated.

Commercialization becomes fundamental for an ‘entrepreneurial university’. This generally takes the form of technology transfer, contracts with businesses, partnerships with various stakeholders, and a focus on patent acquisition, research and consulting contract revenue, as well as spin-off and start-up initiatives.

When the goal becomes fostering a closer relationship with the public, universities have started implementing specific marketing and merchandising strategies designed to instill a sense of belonging among key stakeholders, including administrative staff, professors and, in particular, students.

Universities are increasingly expected to connect closely with the social context and their teaching, research activities to contribute to the growth of human capital and of a knowledge-based economy (Temple, 2012), in a globalized and internationally competitive environment.

Universities are required to be more creative and innovative, generating economic returns through greater exploitation of their intellectual resources and seeking new funding sources, thus reducing reliance on public institutions. This is accompanied by a growing focus on strategic planning and the principles of New Public Management.

The Third Mission is thus understood as the set of activities through which universities engage in direct interaction with civil society and the entrepreneurial fabric to promote regional growth, making knowledge instrumental in achieving productive outputs.

In a widely accepted perspective (De la Torre, Casani and Sagarra, 2018; Secundo *et al.*, 2019), the main goals of the third mission are technology transfer and innovation (including the management of intellectual property, spin-offs, and R&D development) and lifelong learning. In fact, the ‘third mission of universities (beyond teaching and research) is currently being defined almost exclusively in economic terms with the emphasis squarely on universities’ roles as wealth creators. Policy discussions about the third mission of universities do not balance their social and economic role’ (Wilson, Manners and Duncan, 2014, p. 5).

However, an increasing attention is now given to the activities of the university’s ‘public engagement’. Public (or social) engagement refers to non-profit activities with educational, cultural and social development value, adopting new ways to disseminate knowledge within the community, fostering a greater citizen involvement, contributing decisively to social development, and reducing inequalities. Universities thereby take responsibility for producing public goods that enhance the well-being of society. These have cultural, social, and educational content (such as the organization of cultural events, the management of museum centers, public debate or scientific dissemination, etc.).

This category includes all initiatives aimed at extending education beyond academic boundaries, involving a non-expert public and in close collaboration with society and the local area (e.g., through popular publications at a national or international level; participation of teaching staff in radio and television broadcasts; public meetings or other events; interactive or educational websites and blogs; community access to museums, hospitals,

sports facilities, libraries, theatres, historical university buildings; organization of concerts, exhibitions and other events of public utility; health initiatives, territorial enhancement, orientation and interaction with secondary schools, participatory democracy, etc.).

Over time, universities have to some extent ‘institutionalized’ the Third Mission, by establishing offices dedicated to research valorization, technology transfer and businesses relation. The awareness and encouragement of Third Mission initiatives is in fact quite supported by the university governance.

The most relevant problem today rather lies in the lack of uniform parameters for measuring, evaluating, and comparing the overall impact of the Third Mission across European universities.

In fact, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all model’ (Benneworth, Pinheiro and Sánchez-Barrioluengo, 2016) to reference, as Third Mission activities are heavily influenced by higher education systems (which are often very different from each other), by different university structures and strategies, and by specific national contexts. Furthermore, despite the existence of rankings for teaching and research, no unified methodology exists for assessing Third Mission activities and their impact.

In this regard, it has been appropriately observed that no global best practice exists for the Third Mission. There is no shared understanding of the primary indicators (Sobrero and Spigarelli, 2015, p. 2) that should be considered when evaluating the social or economic impacts of University’s Third Mission activities. Consequently, each country and university must find the most appropriate solution.

In Italy, for example, the systematic reporting of Third Mission activities falls under the responsibilities of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System (ANVUR) and has already been conducted on several occasions. This involves areas of action defining the Third Mission, such as the valorization of intellectual or industrial property, academic entrepreneurship, intermediation and technology transfer structures, artistic and cultural heritage, health protection, lifelong learning, public engagement, public goods and inclusion policies, open science, and activities related to sustainable development goals.

For ANVUR, the Third Mission represents the inclination of institutions to open up to the socio-economic context by valorizing and transferring knowledge. With the introduction of the ‘Self-Assessment, Periodic Evaluation, and Accreditation System’, the Third Mission was officially recognized in 2013 as one of the institutional missions of universities, alongside teaching and research.

The new evaluation system aims to ensure the quality of activities conducted by universities and provide the latter with useful information for defining their strategies concerning teaching.

Universities are therefore required to outline their vision of research quality and of the Third Mission in strategic planning documents approved by their governing bodies. These documents define objectives based on their potential for scientific development and socio-cultural impact within their regions. Each department, in line with university-wide programs, annually elaborates its strategic lines of development of research and third

mission activity. In practice, departments complete an ‘Annual Unified Departmental Research Form’ containing information and data useful for research evaluation and Third Mission monitoring.

The documents produced within this evaluation system allow departments and universities to reflect more consciously on their programming activities in research and Third Mission, enabling them to adjust actions in these areas more effectively.

It is then the responsibility of university commissions and, locally, departmental committees to monitor the quality of research and Third Mission activities.

The institutionalization process of the Third Mission—which remains partially incomplete in terms of regulatory frameworks—has primarily required identifying specific indicators and parameters, which are considered quality criteria for institutions and study programs.

Based on these indicators, universities map their Third Mission activities. However, this process is still evolving, progressively maturing through ANVUR’s work, particularly in defining sector-specific indicators.

To enhance the methodology for evaluating Third Mission activities, ANVUR first introduced a ‘Manual’ (ANVUR, 2015) to better define evaluation criteria and establish new procedures and indicators. These indicators relate to both research advancement activities (patents, spin-offs, contracts with third parties, and intermediaries) and the production of social and cultural public goods (public engagement, cultural heritage, lifelong education, clinical experiments).

Universities were then asked to provide specific case studies of Third Mission activities whose impact could be verified through a series of indicators related to the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of impact, relevance to the reference context, added value for beneficiaries, and the proposing institution’s contribution, emphasizing scientific aspects where relevant.

In this way, the aim is to verify the strategic positioning of the Third Mission within the policies pursued by each university, namely how they interact with society to ensure that the knowledge produced through research impacts the social, economic, cultural, and educational dimensions of their regions. This positioning can create incentive mechanisms (not just reputational) for institutions and individual researchers and influence national strategic decisions regarding research.

The ‘impact’ refers to the transformation or improvement generated for the economy, society, culture, health, the environment, or, more broadly, to the efforts to reduce economic, social, and territorial inequalities, thereby improving the quality of life at local, regional, national, European, or international levels, as well as mitigating or preventing damages and risks.

However, measuring the social impact of activities conducted by higher education institutions remains a rather complex operation. It should take into account the long-term ‘sustainable change’ concretely attributable to each specific action. Additionally, this task requires a multidimensional approach, as the evaluation should consider how well universities integrate all three missions to promote community well-being.

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