

EDUCATION, INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY: THE TRIPLE MISSION OF MODERN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how contemporary universities are redefining their missions in order to foster community involvement and address the challenges posed by social, technological, economic, and environmental changes. The article examines strategic initiatives undertaken by universities, such as specialized AI programs, smart labs, and community-oriented research projects, which contribute to tackling global challenges and enhancing local and national resilience. Additionally, it discusses how universities can integrate AI literacy, technological innovation, and collaborative partnerships to strengthen their role as drivers of societal progress. Finally, the analysis highlights the broader implications of universities as key agents of change in the twenty-first century, emphasizing their active engagement in business partnerships, educational innovation, and public policy to align academic missions with community needs.

Keywords: community, partnerships, university, education, innovation.

1. Introduction:

The strategic mission of universities

The relationship between universities and their contributions to their local communities has been extensively analyzed in the academic literature (Abreu *et al.*, 2016; Urdari, Farcas and Tiron-Tudor, 2017; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020; Hîntea, Hamlin and Neamțu, 2022). Scholars have emphasized universities' pivotal role in transferring knowledge and technologies to public administration (Profiroiu and Negoită, 2022), to the economic sector and to society, positioning them as key drivers of economic, social, institutional, and cultural development (de Jong *et al.*, 2014; Secundo *et al.*, 2017; Agasisti, Barra and Zotti, 2019). Beyond these contributions, universities fostered the development of new concepts, models, and solutions that supported entrepreneurial skills, innovation, social well-being, and human capital formation (Di Berardino and Corsi, 2018; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020).

Building on this foundation, today universities serve as central actors in the dialogue among government, the economic environment, and civil society (Giuri *et al.*, 2019). Their strategic mission involves creating environments where barriers to collaboration and development are minimized (Vakkuri, 2004). Education in terms of teaching and research has evolved into a strategic tool aligned with the community needs (Kapetanious and Lee, 2017). This strategic orientation enables contemporary universities to promote synergies, interdependencies, and shared values through co-creation and cooperation with stakeholders, thereby addressing contemporary economic, social, technological, and environmental challenges (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020).

Universities also hold a prominent place in debates about their dual liberal and vocational responsibilities in fostering individual and community development, a reflection of their enduring status as 'one of the most successful and long-lasting institutional forms' (Tight, 2024). Economic, social, and technological transformations, coupled with the need to build resilience against external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, have re-defined the contemporary university's role (Načinović Braje *et al.*, 2022; Mina-Raiu and Oprea, 2023; Negoită, 2015; Nastacă and Ploae, 2023). Institutions now employ diverse and blended approaches to teaching and research, incorporating transdisciplinary, problem-focused, and collaborative frameworks (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994; Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001; Tight, 2024).

Redefining the role of universities underscores their position as key contributors to their communities. Universities function as hubs for 'joint learning spaces that enable continuous re-orientation and reinvention at individual, group, and institutional levels' (Profiroiu and Brișcariu, 2021; Stark, 2024) allowing them to act as transformative agents fostering vibrant and actively engaged communities. From a pedagogical perspective, universities' mission has traditionally revolved around two core objectives: (1) disseminating knowledge through teaching, reaching both students and the broader community, and (2) generating new knowledge through research (Engwall, 2020). For practitioners and policymakers, universities are seen as public service institutions, actively contributing to

societal transformation by producing ideas and solutions to address pressing challenges (OECD-CERI, 1982; Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008; Negoită, 2015; 2022).

Thus, this multifaceted role positions universities as key actors in shaping the future of communities, aligning their educational, strategic, and collaborative missions to support community growth and resilience.

2. Community university: A collaborative partnership

The Humboldtian idea of the university serving science (through teaching and research) with the aim of benefiting the community and society remains relevant today, especially in a world shaped and transformed by science and technology (Mittelstrass, 2020). This model places a stronger emphasis on the university's connection with the community, aligning its mission with the economic and social interests that drive the generation of fundamental values, ideas, and knowledge for the benefit of society (Gibbons, 1999; Sterling, Maxey and Luna, 2013; Mittelstrass, 2020).

The partnership and collaborative relationship between universities and communities has been continuously redefined through various models and approaches, reflecting the context and the role assigned to education in different societies and historical periods (Hințea, Hamlin and Neamțu, 2022; Ellis, 2023). The functional role of universities remains closely tied to their geographical 'location', sitting at the intersection of socio-demographic, economic, cultural, institutional, and political characteristics (Brennan *et al.*, 2018).

Today, universities have developed their own identity as part of the community, reproducing cultural traditions and social values (Delanty, 1998). This connection underscores in our opinion the contribution, relevance, and efficiency of education, training, and specialization processes, with direct implications for quality of life, public services, economic well-being, and social mobility (Brennan *et al.*, 2018).

The two-way relationships between universities and communities—at local, regional, and national levels—express a social contract responding to the demographic, economic, social, institutional, technological, digital, and environmental transformations communities face (Duderstadt, 1999; Profiroiu and Brișcariu, 2021; Profiroiu *et al.*, 2024).

Since the late 19th century, educational institutions and communities have become 'inextricably intertwined and interdependent' (Benson *et al.*, 2009, p. 22). Influenced by neoliberal ideologies and New Public Management (NPM), universities' missions have been integrated into a market-oriented and managerial agenda. Their role now encompasses economic, social, and civic dimensions, aiming to become leaders of competitiveness while incorporating the public good (Owen-Smith, 2018; Liddle and Addidle, 2022). In a 'knowledge society' (Stehr, 1994; Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008), the mission of universities is correlated with the transfer and exchange of knowledge and technology, as well as research and innovation, to foster economic, social, cultural, institutional, and regional development (OECD-IMHE, 2006; Liddle and Addidle, 2022).

This model, oriented around research, teaching, and learning, has been redefined in modern universities to emphasize a growing role within the community. This sphere has gradually expanded, with universities assuming increasingly diversified responsibilities (Albulescu and Albulescu, 2014). As a result, universities have been characterized in the literature as ‘engines of economic development’ (Crawley *et al.*, 2020) and drivers of innovation (Profiroiu *et al.*, 2024; Adesola and Datta, 2020).

Through their emerging role, universities are today embracing transformative learning and teaching, marking a significant paradigm shift by engaging higher education institutions in addressing future challenges and opportunities for societal transformation (Stark, 2024).

The academic environment collaborates with the economic sector, public administration, media, and civil society to address structural transformations and foster innovation in response to emerging challenges that extend beyond traditional boundaries (Carayannis and Campbell, 2012; European Commission, 2015; Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2023; Profiroyu *et al.*, 2024). This collaboration between the ‘community—university’ and the ‘university—community’ promotes a deeper understanding of the university’s evolving role in relation to its partners and stakeholders (Goddard, 2018; Hinte, Hamlin and Neamtu, 2022; Negoita, 2015; Gutierrez, Fox and Clifton, 2024).

Thus, we consider that redefining the university’s mission within the community must be framed in the context of the transformations impacting both communities and higher education institutions, as well as their interconnected relationships with key stakeholders.

Today, universities are also integrated anchor institutions (Owen-Smith, 2018) within a complex governance environment, where they exercise strategic leadership to drive innovation, development, and the reduction of societal gaps (Fonseca *et al.*, 2021; Liddle and Addiddle, 2022). This multidimensional perspective contributes to the co-creation and redesign of civil society (Stark, 2024), aiming to strengthen and promote local identity and dimensions (Goddard, 2018).

Embedding universities within their local contexts generates positive externalities and relationships that support economic, social, cultural, and institutional activities in the community (Goddard, 2018). Anchoring universities within economic, social, cultural, and urban spaces enables them to produce outputs, foster externalities, and build relationships relevant to community needs. This includes responding to the demands of citizens, the market, and public administration by effectively managing and capitalizing on resources (Goddard, 2018; Profiroyu and Negoita, 2022).

A comprehensive and integrated approach focuses on managing barriers and addressing both academic and non-academic concerns, on and off campus, to shape individuals who are resilient, productive, and committed to a shared set of principles and values through teaching and learning processes (Ellis, 2023).

On the one hand, the social responsibility of universities addresses the need to conduct research that has a positive impact on the community and society, responding to emerging opportunities, challenges, and threats. This contribution to community development is achieved through the training of graduates who are ethically, socially, and environmentally

responsible, as well as through volunteer activities, internships, and partnerships with public administration and the private sector (Kagan and Diamond, 2019).

On the other hand, the openness and accessibility offered by the academic environment provide a strong foundation for universities to become spaces where the voices and knowledge of marginalized communities can be expressed (Wilson, Manners and Duncan, 2014; Costea, 2020; Negoită, 2015) and where common cultural values are transmitted and shared (Albulescu and Albulescu, 2014; Costea, 2020). Within new governance and accountability arrangements, the main challenge for universities is managing stakeholder relationships and preventing ‘mission overload’ by effectively classifying and differentiating these stakeholders (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008).

Through mutually beneficial civic and institutional partnerships, higher education institutions aim to address universal issues within their communities. Universities contribute to healthy democratic societies (Harkavy and Axelroth Hodges, 2012) by advancing research, teaching, learning, and service missions that generate valuable knowledge on national and global levels (Hale and Palmer, 2023). The civic and democratic responsibility of universities emphasizes the training of young students and providing the education necessary for them to fulfill their roles as citizens in a democratic society (Negoită, 2022; Albulescu and Albulescu, 2014).

3. The mission and role of universities across communities:

A case study of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies

With over 110 years of history, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) has established itself as ‘a fundamental pillar of economic thought and action at the national level’ (ASE, 2024a). Its reputation is further reflected in its recognition as ‘the national leader in the fields of economic sciences, business administration, and public administration’ (ASE, 2024a). Consistently ranked first in Romania for six consecutive years, BUES also holds a global position within the 801–1,000 range in the 2025 edition of the World University Rankings. Moreover, it is nationally ranked first and internationally placed within the 301–400 range in the Economic field category of the Shanghai Global Ranking of Academic Subjects, 2024 edition.

To reinforce its standing, BUES has implemented a comprehensive strategy informed by an analysis of programmatic documents from the world’s top 500 universities specializing in economics. This part of research underscored the crucial role higher education institutions play in engaging with their communities and the broader socio-economic environment. Specifically, it highlighted the importance of conducting studies and developing public policies aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness. In alignment with this mission, BUES focuses on addressing societal challenges through diagnostic, comparative, multidimensional, and applied analyses (ASE, 2019).

3.1. BUES strategic vision and community engagement

Looking toward 2030, BUES has articulated a clear mission for community engagement, emphasizing its role in tackling challenges at local, national, and regional levels. To promote economic, social, and cultural progress, BUES develops a portfolio of creative and innovative services tailored to the needs of the socio-economic environment (ASE, 2019).

Educational programs, including doctoral studies and research initiatives, are designed to address topics of interest identified by the business community. BUES also actively participates in social projects aimed at educating citizens and engaging in public debates, contributing well-informed perspectives to discussions of national importance (ASE, 2019). Furthermore, the university collaborates within strategic partner networks, which include some of the most prominent companies in Romania (ASE, 2019).

3.2. An entrepreneurial university

As a community-engaged institution, BUES fosters a culture of involvement among students, faculty, and partners, emphasizing its commitment to serving local, national, and international communities. The university's strategic vision integrates academic, multicultural, and alumni communities into a cooperative environment with diverse stakeholders. This collaborative approach directly contributes to enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of the Romanian economy (ASE, 2019).

BUES's multi-year strategic plan highlights its profile as an entrepreneurial university. Key elements of this plan include preparing future leaders, conducting applied research projects requested by businesses, and fostering partnerships with the socio-economic environment. Initiatives such as the creation of an innovation hub, mentoring programs for students (e.g., the 'Becoming a Leader' project), and strengthened relationships with local authorities demonstrate BUES's commitment to fostering innovation and leadership. Additionally, as a leading member of the Association of Universities in Bucharest, BUES promotes collaborative initiatives such as the 'Study in Bucharest' campaign (ASE, 2024).

3.3. A university that addresses the emerging challenges with AI

BUES's mission in community relations focuses on addressing economic, social, technological, and environmental changes. A significant example of this commitment is the university's involvement in pilot projects related to literacy, learning, and experimentation with artificial intelligence (AI).

BUES offers specialized AI courses and programs, such as the master's program Informatics Technologies for Data Engineering and Applied Data Analytics. Organized by the Faculty of Cybernetics, Statistics, and Economic Informatics, this program equips participants with expertise in AI principles and technologies, covering topics like Big Data, Social Networks Analytics, and business process management using AI (ASE, 2022).

In February 2020, BUES collaborated with Microsoft to launch Romania's second cloud technologies laboratory in Bucharest. This €50,000 investment underscores the university's partnership with the business community and its shared commitment to

training future specialists. The integration of AI in the lab provides students with opportunities to develop new applications and platforms, contributing to the adaptability and competitiveness of the business environment in the technological era (Romanian Smart City Association, 2020). Currently, BUES' smart labs offer online learning paths in fields such as AI, advanced robotics, cybersecurity, and digital agriculture (ASE, 2024b).

BUES faculties and students engage in impactful AI-related research, providing valuable insights into consumer behavior. For example, the NRRP-funded 'aiTrust' project explores consumer trust in AI avatars used by companies online and in social media. Researchers develop empirical models to examine user interactions with AI, offering best practices and policy recommendations for regulating and monitoring AI-generated content (ASE, 2024c).

BUES exemplifies the potential of universities to act as transformative agents within their communities. Through its strategic initiatives, entrepreneurial vision, and focus on AI-driven innovation, BUES demonstrates how higher education institutions can contribute meaningfully to economic, social, and technological progress.

4. Conclusions:

Bridging knowledge and shaping communities

The relationship between universities and the communities they serve is pivotal, as it defines the institution's role and place in societal life (Ellis, 2023). Across diverse perspectives, a shared understanding emerges: universities are indispensable in fulfilling essential functions such as education, guidance, and support for students, families, and local communities. As educational resources, universities have increasingly fostered collaborative relationships with communities, enabling the transfer of knowledge and expertise to address societal needs effectively (Ellis, 2023).

In this dynamic, communities articulate their educational and training needs, while universities respond with tailored offerings. Collaborative initiatives aim to harmonize and streamline these interactions, resulting in tangible benefits such as workforce development and enhanced support for the public and private sectors. By doing so, universities serve as strategic drivers of community transformation, emphasizing the value of partnerships that transcend social, cultural, institutional, and political barriers. These efforts contribute to the modernization and development of local communities and society at large, fostering medium- and long-term change through innovative ideas, mechanisms, and tools (Negoiță, 2015; 2022; Costea, 2019; Ellis, 2023; Popescu, Sabie and Truscă, 2023).

Moreover, universities' missions now extend beyond traditional roles of educational supply, adopting a broader framework for societal transformation. This proactive approach involves promoting models aligned with the social contract, addressing economic, social, and institutional needs. By objectively understanding and diagnosing community challenges, universities develop proposals, models, and solutions that facilitate meaningful development. Such efforts underscore the necessity of partnerships and public policies

that integrate universities as key actors benefiting from and contributing to community development programs and resources (Ellis, 2023).

Collaboration and partnership remain central to driving societal transformation, emphasizing the interdependence of institutional, economic, private, and social stakeholders. The university's role intersects with public administration, the economic sector, media, and civil society at local, national, and international levels, as these actors collectively pursue shared goals. These partnerships enable structural, innovative, and adaptive transformations that address emerging challenges, leveraging the shared values, resources, and expertise of stakeholders.

Finally, efforts toward fostering community development and resilience reflect a consensus on reimagining organizational and interactional models. Universities, alongside other actors, carry a critical responsibility to design, implement, and evaluate these models. Institutional mimetism (Negoiță, 2015; 2022), prevalent in public institutions and universities, often leads to the replication of practices without sufficient consideration of their contextual relevance. However, continuous adaptation informed by community feedback is vital for bridging the gap between inputs, outputs, and outcomes. This approach enables universities to refine their strategies, ensuring they stay responsive to the changing needs of society while fostering meaningful innovation and alignment with stakeholder expectations. Universities' deep integration into the economic, social, cultural, and institutional fabric of their communities offers direction and perspective for long-term transformation (Negoiță, 2015; 2022). This integration signifies active participation in shaping a community's identity and ethos at local, national, and international levels. As anchors within their communities, universities collaborate with public administration, the economic sector, media, and civil society to uphold shared values and objectives, ensuring continuity, innovation, and resilience.

Ultimately, beyond partnerships, universities exert a transformative impact on identity, culture, and the potential for local development through the promotion of values and models that align with community needs. These contributions enhance economic, social, cultural, and institutional characteristics by embedding them within learning, teaching, and research activities. In doing so, universities solidify their role as both agents and beneficiaries of societal progress, driving innovation and fostering meaningful change within the communities they serve.

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