

Abstract

The Third Mission refers to universities' engagement in societal development beyond education and research, encompassing areas such as continuous education, knowledge transfer, and societal engagement. Caucasus University (CU) has incorporated the Third Mission as a goal into its strategic framework and acted in several directions to build University's 3rd mission capacity for societal impact and now prioritizes further investment in dedicated personnel, infrastructure, and long-term support towards this mission. The University's 3rd mission role is highlighted by its participation in the Erasmus+ project 'Strengthening the Quality and Relevance of the Third Mission in Georgian Universities (SQUARE)'. This initiative has strengthened CU's role in connecting academia with societal needs, particularly through its strategic Goal 'P5', which emphasizes sustainable solutions for global and local challenges. CU's dedication to lifelong learning is showcased through its Continuous Education programs, while its Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center facilitates knowledge and technology transfer. The Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (EUPOLTRANS) exemplifies CU's commitment to empowering society through EU policy education, focusing on Georgia's EU integration process. Furthermore, CU fosters global dialogue and local impact by hosting international conferences on the Third Mission, collaborating with diverse stakeholders, and commencing alignment of its activities with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through these initiatives, CU advances societal engagement, reinforcing its role as a civic institution aimed at driving societal progress.

Keywords: third mission, institutional strategy, SQUARE project, Jean Monnet Center of Excellence for EU Policy Transposition, societal engagement.

CAUCASUS UNIVERSITY'S THIRD MISSION: DRIVING SOCIETAL PROGRESS THROUGH EDUCATION, RESEARCH, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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1. Institutional approach to the Third Mission: integrating strategy to build capacity

The third mission of universities, their societal engagement, is foreseen to bring substantial benefits in the cultural, economic, and social fields to Georgian society. In order to contribute through the third mission, thus benefiting the community and increasing the reputation and sustainability of the university itself, it is often necessary for universities to forge good ties with external stakeholders, establish offices or dedicated personnel, and raise funding for outreach activities with the university community—students, faculty, and staff. Recent EUA publication ‘Universities without wall’ (European University Association, 2021) clearly sees modern universities as open, collaborative, and inclusive institutions driving innovation, societal engagement, and sustainability. With the integration of education, research, and engagement into society, Caucasus University (CU) has grown as a leading institution of higher education. Established in 1998, CU had put equal emphasis on the progress of society alongside academic excellence, thus creating a dynamic interaction between the two dimensions. Led by its motto, ‘Studium Pretium Libertatis’, CU tries to serve societal challenges with innovative, inclusive, and sustainable solutions.

The Third Mission is a paradigm shift of higher education, which looks upon universities as crucial actors in solving societal problems, enabling economic development, and ensuring cultural and intellectual development. CU declares this mission into its core strategy, which depicts the institution’s commitment to connecting education and research with the needs of society. CU follows a structured approach in focusing on three main areas: Continuous Education, Knowledge and Technology Transfer, and Societal Engagement. This framework enables CU to systematically plan, implement, and evaluate its contributions to the community.

A defining milestone in CU’s journey was its participation in the Erasmus+ CBHE project ‘Strengthening the Quality and Relevance of the Third Mission in Georgian Universities (SQUARE)’. The SQUARE project has worked towards the university’s third mission as being officially recognized and promoted at the national level through a clear articulation of the integral role of universities and the criteria of assessing its quality. Increased institutional support, resource allocation and strategic planning of the university’s third mission are key requirements for increased quality and relevance of the societal engagement activities of Georgian universities. Via the project, the university gained more understanding of how the third mission activities should be planned, implemented, and evaluated. Strategic Goal P5 was added to the strategic development plan of Caucasus University with a strong focus on the third mission of universities, reflecting CU’s proactive role in bridging academia and societal needs. This goal emphasizes the university’s commitment to addressing pressing global and local challenges by fostering civic responsibility, promoting sustainable development, and cultivating an ecosystem that supports social innovation (Project SQUARE web page, n.d.). Through Goal P5, CU aims to institutionalize practices that enhance community engagement, create meaningful partnerships with local and international stakeholders, and ensure the dissemination of knowledge and

expertise to benefit society at large. By embedding the third mission into its strategic framework, CU not only declares its role as a driver of societal progress but also ensures that its contributions are measurable, transparent, and adaptive to the dynamic needs of the local communities. Regular reviews, stakeholder consultations, and impact assessments provide valuable insights for refining initiatives and enhancing their effectiveness. Metrics such as the number of startups supported, workshops conducted, and societal impact reports published are used to track progress and inform decision-making. This systematic approach ensures that CU's contributions remain impactful and responsive to evolving challenges.

Caucasus University, in collaboration with Turku University in Finland, has demonstrated its leadership in advancing the Third Mission by co-authoring two seminal guidebooks: 'Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Management and Evaluation', and 'Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Strategic Planning'. These comprehensive resources provide a roadmap for universities to effectively conceptualize, implement, and sustain their societal engagement efforts. The guidebooks reflect CU's commitment to not only fostering its own Third Mission activities but also contributing to the development of best practices across higher education institutions in Georgia and beyond. The 'Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Management and Evaluation' focus on creating robust frameworks for operationalizing and assessing Third Mission initiatives (Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Management and Evaluation, 2024). They include practical tools for identifying key stakeholders, setting measurable objectives, and utilizing both quantitative and qualitative metrics to track societal impact. The document emphasizes the importance of continuous feedback loops and evidence-based decision-making to refine activities and maximize their effectiveness. The 'Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Strategic Planning' provide a blueprint for integrating societal engagement into an institution's overall strategy (Guidelines for Third Mission Activities Strategic Planning, 2024). The guide highlights the importance of aligning Third Mission initiatives with institutional goals, national priorities, and global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It underscores the need for clear prioritization, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration in designing impactful and sustainable programs.

2. Continuous education, technology and knowledge transfer, and societal engagement

As mentioned, Caucasus University has elaborated 3M Declaration through which the university declared that CU would direct its commitment to three major directions: Continuous education; Technology and knowledge transfer, and Societal engagement.

CU's Continuous Education programs underscore its dedication to lifelong learning. These initiatives provide diverse audiences with opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge, empowering individuals to adapt to changing societal demands. For instance, Caucasus School of Architecture hosted the 'What if' competition, bringing together architects and graphic designers to showcase innovative ideas. During the 2022–2023 academic year, the Caucasus Training Center conducted 15 training courses, attended by

a total of 204 participants. In the same period, the center developed seven new training courses, further strengthening the university's focus on continuous education. Additionally, through the Marketing and Public Relations Department's 'Teach for Georgia' project, a six-month intensive English language course was offered to students who received their secondary education in Abkhazia, supporting accessibility to education and fostering youth development.

Knowledge and Technology Transfer is another cornerstone of CU's Third Mission. Through its Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center, CU facilitates collaborations between academia and industry, driving technological advancements and supporting economic development. The Architecture School organized an outreach training cycle, 'Material Science', and facilitated student visits to the company 'Dio', where participants attended a training session and a workshop. Additionally, the school hosted a workshop for Green School students, featuring a lecture on the integration of architecture into daily life and a hands-on activity where students collaboratively designed a model. The Caucasus Business School and Guria Entrepreneurship School co-developed and delivered an entrepreneurship course at the Ozurgeti Tech Park, fostering local business skills. Through a collaboration with UNICEF, the School of Law established a Children's Rights Center at the university, marking a significant milestone in social advocacy. The Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship participated in 15 activities focused on KTT, while the Marketing and Public Relations Department initiated impactful projects such as the literary competition 'Let's Talk About Abkhazia', the European Day of Languages, and language courses in Abkhazia for school students. Additionally, the Project Management Department contributed to Third Mission objectives through initiatives like developing a Green Tourism concept under the ENRICHER-HUBS project. These diverse activities showcase CU's dedication to bridging academia and societal needs.

Societal Engagement remains at the heart of CU's activities. The university has undertaken numerous initiatives to promote cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and community health. For example, CU has partnered with cultural organizations to safeguard Georgia's heritage through workshops and exhibitions that celebrate traditional crafts and arts. These efforts not only protect cultural identity but also create educational and economic opportunities for local communities. Environmental projects, such as reforestation campaigns and climate change awareness programs, further exemplify CU's commitment to sustainability and societal well-being.

3. Empowering society through EU policy education and research: the Third Mission of Caucasus University's Jean Monnet Center of Excellence

Promotion of Europeanization and knowledge sharing has been a flagship direction of Caucasus University through its participation in Erasmus+ projects. Since 2016 Caucasus University has been actively involved in Erasmus+ educational projects, implementing Jean Monnet modules, Jean Monnet Chairs, and now the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence project (2021–2024).

The Jean Monnet Center of Excellence for EU Policy Transposition (EUPOLTRANS) at Caucasus University has been dedicated to enhancing the teaching, research, and policy discourse on EU-specific policies related to the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). These agreements cover critical areas such as environment, consumer protection, competition, labor, public administration, and foreign and security policy, which were slated for transposition into Georgian law between 2022 and 2024.

Project EUPOLTRANS' aim was to contribute to evaluating Georgia's alignment with EU regulations, addressing gaps, delays, and progress in the transposition process. In doing so, it aimed to enhance the capacity of Caucasus University and the wider society to participate in and assess Georgia's EU integration.

The project aligned closely with the third mission role of Caucasus University, which emphasizes its responsibility to contribute to society beyond teaching and research. Project EUPOLTRANS has addressed societal need, which is Georgia's Europeanization. Here's how EUPOLTRANS answered the 3rd mission via its activities:

EUPOLTRANS promoted the spread of knowledge about EU policies and values, ensuring that Georgian citizens and society at large are informed about the ongoing process of EU policy transposition. By developing accessible educational content and delivering six training courses across, discussion briefs and sources made openly available with MOOCs forthcoming, the project empowered individuals who may not have had the opportunity to engage in full-time studies on EU-Georgia. This contributed to democratizing the access to vital information about Georgia's integration with the EU, encouraging broader participation and fostering an informed and active citizenry.

Through its research and policy debate activities, EUPOLTRANS played a significant role in shaping public discourse on EU policy transposition. By conducting rigorous research on the implementation of EU laws in Georgia, the project provided evidence-based insights that serve as resource for policymakers at local and national levels. Policy roundtables and seven expert interviews completed under the project have contributed to the third mission's focus on influencing public policy and societal development (Caucasus University, 2024 and 2022).

The project also served as a bridge between the academic world and broader society. By organizing public events, and roundtables, and using digital platforms to disseminate findings and outcomes, EUPOLTRANS fostered a two-way dialogue where academic knowledge informs societal debates, and real-world challenges inform academic research. This interaction strengthened the university's role as a civic institution contributing to the common good and addressing the practical needs of the community.

The project took deliberate steps to make its educational resources available not only to students in Tbilisi but also to those in other regions of Georgia. This inclusivity extends the university's reach and impact beyond traditional academic settings, contributing to regional development and capacity-building. By providing education on EU policies to a diverse range of participants, EUPOLTRANS supported local stakeholders in understanding and engaging with national EU integration processes. So far, the project has directly

reached 160 individuals via trainings and around 60 representatives of professional and policy circles via policy roundtables. The multiplication effect of the trainings delivered and materials shared will reach several hundred.

The project's ongoing plan to develop micro-credential course shows a commitment to inclusivity by providing learning opportunities to individuals who cannot commit to full-time study. This aspect of the project supports the third mission's goal of ensuring that higher education institutions cater to diverse groups in society, including working professionals, civil society members, and marginalized communities. This aspect of the EUPOLTRANS project will be an example for universities across Georgia to be socially responsible by offering learning pathways for all members of the society to engage with key issues like EU integration.

In conclusion, Caucasus University's project EUPOLTRANS delivered by the Caucasus School of Governance is a project aimed at academic support of Europeanization, effectively embodies the third mission of the university by engaging with society, fostering active citizenship, promoting policy dialogue, and building capacity at both regional and national levels. It also ensures that academic research and educational programs contribute to solving societal challenges, particularly in the context of Georgia's European integration, enhancing the university's role as a dynamic, engaged institution within society.

4. Caucasus University as a platform for global dialogue and local impact

CU's commitment to the Third Mission is further exemplified by its role as the host of the international conference 'Third Mission: From Global to Local'. This event brought together academics, policymakers, and practitioners to explore the evolving role of universities in societal engagement. By providing a platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration, CU underscored its leadership in fostering dialogue on critical issues. The conference highlighted best practices and innovative strategies, demonstrating how universities can act as intermediaries between global insights and local needs. The annual international conference was attended by representatives from universities in over ten countries, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of Georgia, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, local and international donor organizations, the EU Delegation to Georgia, businesses, and civil society. Throughout the conference, attendees participated in panel discussions and parallel sessions, gaining insights and sharing experiences on best practices from both local and European institutions. Participants also discussed the current needs for improving the quality of social engagement activities at Georgian universities. At the conclusion of the conference, participants had the opportunity to attend a seminar for doctoral students titled 'Shaping the Future: Doctoral Education and Citizen Science in Georgia'.

As mentioned above, Caucasus University (CU) has made significant strides in institutionalizing the Third Mission, establishing itself as a leader in integrating education, research, and societal engagement. The latest achievement for CU could be considered the publication of its first report aligning its Third Mission activities with the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This report highlights how CU's initiatives contribute to addressing global challenges such as quality education, gender equality, and climate resilience. The SDG alignment has elevated CU's role in supporting sustainable development. By systematically mapping its activities to these goals, CU will ensure that its societal contributions are measurable and globally relevant.

5. Conclusions

To ensure the sustainability and scalability of its initiatives, CU intends to prioritize further investment in dedicated personnel, infrastructure, and long-term support. Strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and engaging a broader range of faculties in Third Mission activities will enhance the diversity and impact of its programs. Equally important is deepening partnerships with underrepresented groups, including marginalized communities and representatives from rural areas, fostering inclusivity and addressing broader societal challenges. A structured approach to stakeholder feedback and project co-creation will enable CU to tailor its initiatives more effectively, ensuring they are responsive to the dynamic needs of the community.

To further declare its societal impact, CU plans to refine its monitoring and assessment frameworks, incorporating qualitative metrics such as social cohesion, cultural preservation, and environmental outcomes alongside quantitative measures. Integrating societal engagement into academic curricula through service-learning and community-based research will further embed civic responsibility and practical skill development into student learning outcomes. The visibility of CU's Third Mission initiatives will be enhanced through broader dissemination strategies, including publications, international collaborations, and accessible knowledge-sharing platforms. Future plans include expanding continuous education programs to address emerging challenges like AI ethics and global health crises, and aligning all activities with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By enhancing international collaborations and advancing research on Third Mission practices, CU is determined to deepen its role as a transformative force in societal progress, setting a benchmark for universities in Georgia and beyond.

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