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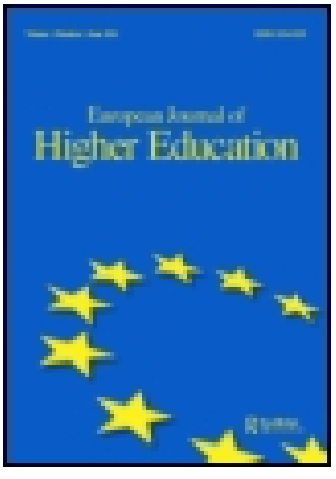

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The institutionalization of universities' third mission: introduction to the special issue

Rómulo Pinheiro[a], Patricio V. Langa[bc] & Attila Pausits[d]

[a] Department of Political Science and Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

[b] Faculty of Education, Institute for Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, Western Cape, South Africa

[c] Department of Curricular Studies and Teacher Training, Faculty of Education, Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique

[d] Department for Continuing Education Research and Educational Management, Danube University, Krems, Austria

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The institutionalization of universities' third mission: introduction to the special issue

Rómulo Pinheiro[a]*, Patricio V. Langa[b,c] and Attila Pausits[d]

[a]*Department of Political Science and Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway;* [b]*Faculty of Education, Institute for Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, Western Cape, South Africa;* [c]*Department of Curricular Studies and Teacher Training, Faculty of Education, Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique;* [d]*Department for Continuing Education Research and Educational Management, Danube University, Krems, Austria*

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Globally, debates on the notion of a third set of activities aimed at linking higher education institutions more closely with surrounding society are not new. In the last decade or so, calls for a re-engagement of the university in helping to tackle the great challenges facing societies and local communities have propelled the third mission to the forefront of policy discussions – this time under the mantra of 'relevance' and 'social impact'. Yet, as some of the articles in this special issue attest, there is a fundamental tension in the notion of a third mission. The chief aim of this special issue is to provide a critical assessment of the extent to which the third mission has become an integral part of universities' core structures and primary activities – from the perspective of institutionalization. The individual contributions provide different accounts and perspectives on internal developments surrounding the third mission, but they all share the notion that major tensions and volitions surrounding its institutionalization remain largely unresolved.

Keywords: higher education; third mission; institutionalization; universities; special issue introduction

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Globally, debates on the notion of a third set of activities aimed at linking higher education institutions more closely with surrounding society are not new. In the last decade or so, calls for a re-engagement of the university in helping to tackle the great challenges facing societies and local communities have propelled the third mission to the forefront of policy discussions – this time under the mantra of 'relevance' and 'social impact' (Gibbons et al. 1994; Benneworth and Jongbloed 2010; Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2002).

Yet, as some of the articles in this special issue attest, there is a fundamental tension in the notion of a third mission. Most university systems have traditionally drawn their internal and external legitimacies from the fact that their activities were somewhat disconnected or decoupled from societal affairs, most notably local politics, but also other socio-economic malaises at either local or national level. This, however, is not tantamount to claiming that the various academic communities hosted by universities do not wish to

*Corresponding author. Email: romulo.m.pinheiro@uia.no

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provide a meaningful contribution to society. Traditional academic norms and values (Merton 1979) view the idea that the knowledge produced by universities should necessarily (and ex-ante) be of instrumental value to society at large with some disdain (Pinheiro 2012a).

There is yet another problem associated with the idea (and 'ideal') of a third mission, namely its inherent ambiguity. External and internal efforts to define what the third mission means for the internal fabric of universities (rules and structures) and the daily life and values/identities of academics (i.e. the intangible side of academe) have, for the most part, proven to be futile (Benneworth 2013). This is part and parcel of the fact that different academic communities and knowledge domains have different conceptions of what 'relevance' or 'social impact' encompasses (Langa 2010; Pinheiro, Normann, and Johnsen 2012). This dilemma becomes more acute when notions of relevance are perceived by some as clashing with two fundamental (deeply institutionalized) academic norms and values, namely autonomy and excellence.

Despite the fact that (local) relevance and (global) excellence are not necessarily mutually exclusive – as persuasively demonstrated by Perry and May (2006) and empirically verified by Schwartzman (2008), Pinheiro (2012a) and others (Pinheiro, Benneworth, and Jones 2012) – there is nonetheless an impression amongst (some) academic circles that, given the 'supply-demand imbalance' inherent in modern higher education systems (see Clark 1998), societal relevance should not be achieved at the expense of scientific excellence (Perry and May 2012; Pinheiro 2012b). What is more, traditional peer-based career progression and incentive systems have had (and still do have) a tendency to reward excellence – judged by one's contribution to major advances in a given knowledge domain – rather than direct social-economic relevance, i.e. the impact of one's work on society/the economy at large (Balbachevsky 2008; Gunasekara 2006).

As loosely coupled systems (Pinheiro and Trondal 2014), most (but not all) universities – particularly in Continental Europe but also elsewhere – have traditionally addressed external calls for increased societal engagement or third mission by decoupling their core teaching and research activities from non core tasks – what Clark (1998) terms the 'extended periphery'. This so-called 'strategic posture' (Oliver 1991) accomplishes two chief objectives in the eyes of internal actors, both academics and administrators. First, it protects core structures and activities from the potential negative effects accrued by the 'opening-up' of the university to outside influences, what in (old-) institutionalism jargon is known as *co-optation* (Selznick 1949). Second, by being symbolically compliant with external demands and expectations (Meyer and Rowan 1991), the university secures critical external support or legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman 2008) for its core functions, goals and structures, an essential ingredient for survival in the increasingly competitive (national and global) organizational field of higher education (Marginson 2004).

Yet, at the same time, recent studies (cf. Pinheiro, Benneworth, and Jones 2015) suggest that there is something else underway other than what is often suggested by traditional accounts associated with the decoupling of strategies, structures and activities. As indicated by the guest editors of this special issue (in their separate paper contribution), there is a gradual but steady move towards infusing third-mission related activities in universities' core (teaching and research) activities. Furthermore, and contrary to what happened in the past, it seems that in the eyes of the central steering core (leadership structures) of universities (Clark 1998), the third mission is nowadays

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too important to be left to the uncoordinated, ad hoc initiatives of individual *academic intrapreneurs* (Shattock 2009). Stated differently, the third mission has become part and parcel of the *rationalization* of the university (Ramirez 2010; Whitley 2008), a process that manifests itself *inter alia* in the form of top-down strategic planning, changes in leadership and organizational structures and institutional profiling (Fumasoli, Pinheiro, and Stensaker 2014; Pinheiro and Stensaker 2014). This, in turn, brings us back to the theme of this special issue, namely to provide a critical assessment of the extent to which the third mission has become an integral part of universities' core structures and primary activities – from the perspective of institutionalization, i.e. deeply embedded in structures of meaning and resources (Olsen 2007). As is often the case, the individual contributions provide different accounts and perspectives on internal developments surrounding the third mission.

In their own contribution, the special issue guest editors sketch out the tensions and ambiguities associated with the concept of the third mission, provide a review of the existing literature on the topic, and shed light on the ways in which scholars – in Europe and beyond – are attempting to interpret ongoing developments in/around the third mission. Their account reveals that, on the one hand, the scholarly field has been rather active in recent years, but on the other hand, work remains to be done before a general consensus on solid conceptual foundations and proper methodologies can be reached.

Based on a case study from Southern Europe, Koryakina et al. illuminate managers' perceptions of existing barriers to stronger engagement with societal actors. Their findings suggest the importance of both endogenous and exogenous dimensions, in addition to the growing tensions between the (largely external) emphasis put on third-mission tasks and their institutionalization within the internal fabric of universities. What is more, this study – perhaps unsurprisingly – points to the importance of the local context in the university's adaptation to changing external demands and circumstances.

Moving North, Benneworth et al. explore the case of a provincial Swedish university with a long-standing commitment to creating social impact. Their starting point is that institutionalizing the third mission is about managing a set of tensions in the context of the 'overburdened university'. The authors suggest a novel framework for exploring those tensions. As far as engagement goes, they report that individual transactions are embedded within academic communities for whom engagement is a regular behaviour, often embodied in projects that may turn out to be strategic for the university as a collective. It is also shown that academic engagement has the potential to strengthen core activities, but that national and institutional funding regimes tend to prioritize blue-sky ('good funding') research to the detriment of less valuable ('nice to have') peripheral tasks like local engagement. This, in turn, lies at the heart of one of the many tensions identified in the paper, namely, that of stimulating and rewarding collaboration between academics and various external audiences.

Staying in Northern Europe, Kohtamaki's study takes notice of the importance attributed to the primary activities of teaching and research in the promotion of third-mission activities across the Finnish university of applied sciences sub-sector. The study suggests the importance attributed to the 'superstructure' (Clark 1983) by shedding light on the role played by the national policy framework in shaping both internal working arrangements – across all the three missions – and stakeholder engagement, in the context of the third mission more specifically. A major finding lies in the fact that, as elsewhere and despite external calls for stronger engagement with regional actors, third mission

endeavours lack proper incentive structures at both the national and institutional levels, thus creating bottlenecks for the successful institutionalization of such types of activities.

Watermeyer's contribution critically assesses the impact of academic engagement – one of the manifold manifestations of the third mission – in the practice, career progression and identity of academics across the UK. Amongst other aspects, the study reveals how attitudes and behaviours surrounding public engagement differ across levels of analysis and stakeholder groups. Most importantly, it is revealed that active academic engagement has negative consequences for one's academic career progression, and that even at the level of the senior leadership there are those who wish to avoid too much engagement – due to fear of it being perceived as non-academic or illegitimate activity. The author concludes by suggesting that public engagement is a byproduct of a system undergoing considerable change or turmoil, and that it risks being 'lost' between the *rhetoric* emanating from policy circles and the *reality* of exercising such a role in the context of a ('baseless') academic space that hardly recognizes, let alone adequately supports, this type of endeavour.

Staying in the UK, Lebeau and Cochrane's contribution links current trends and discourses around regional engagement to the backdrop of major policy shifts in both higher education and regional governance. Amongst other aspects, the authors draw attention to the fact that universities not only have a long history (of significance to the third mission), but are also increasingly locally embedded in a web of relations that makes them more resilient to external events, including the shifting strategic agendas of key stakeholders. On the basis of two case universities operating in relatively distinct city-regions, the authors demonstrate that, despite similarities, the case institutions operate in different policy contexts and reveal contrasting relationships with local actors. What is more, it is argued that the regional logics of action of universities and their discourses of local engagement are intrinsically associated with the high vertical inter-institutional differentiation (and competition) characterizing higher education in the UK, which is increasingly present elsewhere.

Moving beyond the European continent, to China, Cai et al. provide an insightful historical (path-dependent) account of the factors leading to the institutionalization of internal structures supporting the transfer of academic-generated knowledge to the outside world (industry). Amongst other aspects, the study reveals the importance attributed to changes in the regulative framework, as well as decoupling and professionalization as enabling mechanisms. They approach the initial rise and further diffusion (institutionalization) of dedicated structures – Technology Transfer Offices – from the perspective of organizational innovation, thus providing novel insights not only into third mission endeavours, but also into the complex and sometimes opaque process of university adaptation and, consequently, change.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Rómulo Pinheiro is an Associate Professor in Public Policy and Management at the University of Agder, Norway. He is also a Senior Researcher at Agderforskning, Visiting Professor at the Universities of Tampere, Finland, and Danube Krems, Austria, and Associate Member of the 'Expert cultures and institutional dynamics: Studies in higher education and work' (ExCID)

research group based at the University of Oslo. Rómulo's research interests are located at the intersection of the fields of public policy and administration, organisational studies, regional science and innovation studies, and higher education studies.

Patricio V. Langa is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Cape (UWC), South Africa, and Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM), Maputo. He is a Visiting Research Fellow at Danube University Krems in Austria. He is also an Adviser to UEM Rector on strategic planning. Since 2011 he has been the Executive Director of the HE Quality Council of Mozambique (CNAQ). Patricio is also the President of the Mozambican Sociological Association and founder of an NGO *focusing* on higher education studies in Mozambique.

Attila Pausits is Head of the Centre for Educational Management and Higher Education Development at Danube University Krems in Austria and Academic Director of the Erasmus Mundus Master Programme 'Research and Innovation in Higher Education'. Attila is Vice-chairman of 'EAIR – The European Higher Education Society' and an expert for higher education management and change management. He has participated in numerous international research and developments projects related to the modernization and development of European higher education.

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