



Defining and Delivering the University's Third Mission

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This article is an attempt to describe the outputs of project **E3M – European Indicators and Ranking Methodology for University Third Mission**. The project is funded by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Program. European universities have accepted, traditionally, two main missions: teaching and research. Recently, another mission is being considered to reflect the involvement of universities with society. It is commonly designated in the USA as outreach and engagement. While for education and research there exist several proposals for measuring these activities there are few consistent approaches to evaluate and compare third mission accomplishments.

The measurements in the three missions are most of the times based on indicators. The reasons to propose and adopt the set of performance indicators are various and abridge funding differentiations, quality assurance, benchmarking, ranking and management. The users are also from different origins and comprehend government, universities, researchers, industry, NGOs, global organizations, financing institutions and public in general. This project, facing the complexity of the indicators pool and diversity of its utilization has concentrated on the indicators of three dimensions: continuing education, transfer technology and innovation and social engagement.

In the initial phase of the project the partners and the coordinator discussed the issue of whether the indicators were supposed to be used to create a ranking of universities. This listing would classify the universities based on their third mission performance. Factors in favor and arguments against that endeavor were considered and thoroughly debated. This option, although stated in the project proposal, was abandoned as it became evident that the diversity in missions and activities of the universities in Europe and in other continents is vast. This wide scenario makes impossible a realistic direct comparison unless the institutions were grouped in narrow terms of specified operational structures which would turn the ranking meaningless.

The first phase operational of the project consisted in identifying the important processes by the partners of the project for each of the three dimensions. Then for each of the processes in each dimension it was created a list of indicators in terms of relevance. These indicators were then analysed in terms of relevance, validity, reliability, comparability, data source, timeframe, access, feasibility, data format and usability. Taking into account that the partners were members of the universities it was decided to make a revision and refinement of this list of indicators by a set of experts that included also members from university stakeholders' universe. This approach of quality refinement was based on the Delphi method. The experts for the refinement phase were twenty and were chosen to cover different areas of society like OECD, enterprises, government agencies, NGOs, university researchers and UNESCO.

As example of the project outputs the project proposes to measure third mission activities in the dimension of continuing education (CE) the following six indicators, among the complete set of eighteen:

1. CE is included in the mission of the higher education institutions (HEI);
2. CE is included in the policy and/or the strategy of the HEI;
3. existence of an institutional plan for CE in the HEI;
4. existence of quality assurance procedure for CE activities;
5. total number of CE programmes active in that year for implementation;
6. number of CE programmes delivered which have a major award under higher education system.

To complement the analysis of the set of processes and of indicators it was implemented a set of six case studies. These case studies were composed by the visit to six universities where the proposal was tested. The test was done in terms of verifying the practices of each of the universities in third mission, the discussion of the possible adoption of the proposed set of indicators to each university and the debate about possible improvements of this set of indicators proposed by the visited university.

The final event of the project is a public conference to be held in Dublin on the 2nd and 3rd of February 2012 to discuss a project Green Paper on indicators of the third mission. It is expected that the final conference will be participated by relevant stakeholders that will participate in shaping the policy paper that is considered the major output of the project.

The goal of the policy paper is to propose a comprehensive instrument to identify, to measure and to compare the activities of the third mission of universities. The project did however conclude that there is a place for indicators of third mission if proper third mission initiatives can be identified and if related firm and reliable data can be obtained.

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This project has not done a complete work but it has promoted and started a debate that provided a conceptual framework and a set of indicators. These have been subjected to an intense high degree of examination and debate. There is a consciousness that these types of measurements can create significant impacts especially if the values will be used to condition funding of universities. Therefore the timeframe and implementation of these measurements of third mission have to be carefully chosen to avoid risks of provoking more damages than benefits to third mission activities.

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