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Embedding Social Responsibility in Higher Education Institutions: Towards a Measurable and Impact-Oriented Third Mission

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the Third Mission (TM) of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a constitutive dimension of academic life, situated at the intersection of knowledge production, governance, institutional accountability, and the generation of public value. Moving beyond the traditional dual focus on teaching and research, the TM reflects a "Social responsibility turn" in academia, whereby institutions are increasingly evaluated for their societal impact. By integrating accountability and impact assessment mechanisms the TM fosters transparency, strategic learning, and legitimacy, embedding social engagement into institutional governance. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature review and international policy frameworks, the study analyzes how the TM has been conceptualized and institutionalized across diverse contexts, highlighting tensions between its strategic recognition in some systems and its marginalization in global rankings. The paper argues that measurable, impact-oriented approaches to the TM can bridge social and political paradigms, thereby reinforcing the public role of universities as actors of collective responsibility and democratic value creation.

Keywords: Third Mission, Higher Education Governance, Social Responsibility, Accountability

Sommario. *Integrare la Responsabilità sociale nelle istituzioni di istruzione superiore: verso una Terza missione misurabile e orientata all'impatto*

Questo studio analizza l'evoluzione del ruolo della Terza Missione (TM) nelle Istituzioni di alta formazione quale dimensione centrale della vita accademica, all'intersezione tra produzione di conoscenza, governance, accountability e creazione di valore pubblico. Oltre alla tradizionale dicotomia didattica-ricerca, la TM riflette una "svolta accademica verso una responsabilità sociale", ove le università sono valutate in maniera crescente per la loro capacità di generare impatto sulla società. Attraverso un'impostazione di misurazione e di rendicontazione dell'impatto, la TM rinforza e giustifica la trasparenza, l'approccio strategico e di validazione, istituzionalizzando l'impegno sociale all'interno della governance. Attingendo a fonti scientifiche interdisciplinari e a policy internazionali, lo studio evidenzia come la TM sia stata concettualizzata e istituzionalizzata in maniera differente nei vari contesti, lasciando emergere contrasti tra il riconoscimento strategico in determinati sistemi e, nel contempo, una marginalizzazione nei ranking globali. Il presente lavoro sostiene che approcci di TM misurabili e orientati all'impatto possano integrare paradigmi sociali e politici, rafforzando il ruolo pubblico delle università quali attori di responsabilità collettiva e di creazione di valore democratico.

Parole chiave: Terza Missione, Governance nell'istruzione superiore, Responsabilità Sociale, Rendicontazione sociale

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the so-called *Third Mission* (TM) of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has progressively gained recognition as a central pillar of academic life, alongside teaching and research (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Zomer and Benneworth, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2016). Originally considered a residual or auxiliary function (Görason *et al*., 2009; Jongbloed *et al*., 2008; Vorley and Nelles, 2008; Tuunainen, 2005), the TM is over time recognized as a strategic space where universities interact with society, addressing

complex socio-economic, cultural, and environmental challenges through knowledge co-production, public engagement, and societal impact initiatives. This paradigm shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of the academic institution's identity − from an idealized "ivory tower" model of knowledge preservation to a dynamic node in a global network of stakeholders.

The evolution of the TM responds to systemic transformations in the global landscape: digitalization, ecological transition, demographic shifts, and the rise of new forms of public accountability have reshaped expectations of universities' roles in society. From the Lisbon Strategy[1] (Ivan-Ungureanu and Marcu, 2006) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2025)[2], policy frameworks increasingly call on HEIs to contribute to inclusive growth, lifelong learning, and participatory governance. These demands highlight the urgency of embedding Social responsibility into university strategies, not as an add-on, but as an integrated, transversal function that enhances the relevance and responsiveness of academic institutions.

A growing body of literature emphasizes the need for HEIs to systematize their TM activities through institutional governance, stakeholder ecosystems, and evaluative frameworks capable of capturing intangible yet impactful dimensions of academic work (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Bornmann, 2013; Sivertsen and Meijer, 2020). In this perspective, the TM acts as both a mirror and a sensor of societal needs, generating public value while nurturing a culture of continuous improvement. The introduction of impact assessment mechanisms – promoted by quality assurance agencies such as ANVUR in Italy – has further fostered a measurement-oriented approach within academia, strengthening transparency, accountability, and strategic learning.

Drawing on interdisciplinary research, this paper discusses the TM not merely as a policy category but as a field of innovation, experimentation, and value creation. Attention is also paid to the organizational challenges and transformative potential of embedding Social

[1] *The Lisbon Strategy* (2000) aimed to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy globally, combining sustainable economic growth with improved employment, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

[2] *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) is a global action plan focused on people, planet, and prosperity, while fostering peace and freedom, with the eradication of poverty in all its forms as the central prerequisite for sustainable development.

responsibility within university structures, offering recommendations for future development and institutional self-reflection.

2. From "Ivory Tower" to Social Actor

The traditional conception of the university as a self-contained realm of intellectual pursuit – rooted in the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* and later institutionalized through the Humboldtian model – (Miyamoto, 2022; Anderson, 2004; Backhaus, 2015) has long shaped the academic imaginary in Western thought. In this view, universities were primarily responsible for the autonomous production and transmission of knowledge, largely insulated from societal pressures and external expectations. However, this model has progressively lost traction in an era characterized by global interdependence, accelerated technological change, and deepening social and environmental crises. As Hazelkorn (2023) and Burawoy (2005) contend, the classical notion of the university as an "ivory tower" no longer suffices to capture the institution's evolving role in the 21st century.

Today, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to act as embedded and impactful social actors. They are evaluated not only by their scientific output but also by their ability to generate societal value – through public engagement, knowledge co-production, and contribution to global and local challenges. This shift, commonly referred to as the "Social responsibility turn", as illustrated in the following paragraph, is not merely rhetorical: it entails a reconfiguration of governance structures and relationships with stakeholders and a redefinition of the university's purpose within contemporary society (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Watermeyer, 2019).

This paradigm shift is both reactive and proactive. It is reactive in that it responds to external demands for relevance, accountability, and contribution to the common good – demands articulated through policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the European framework for Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) (Owen *et al.*, 2012; Felt, 2018; Murget *et al*., 2017), and national quality

assurance systems like ANVUR[3] in Italy, playing a critical role in reinforcing this shift. These frameworks promote a stakeholder-driven governance approach, demanding alignment between academic outputs and societal impact (Sivertsen and Meijer, 2020; Robinson *et al*., 2021). It is proactive insofar the internal culture of universities is also evolving. Students, especially those from Generation Z, bring with them new expectations of transparency, participation, and ethical engagement. Their preferences reflect a digital-native mindset attuned to environmental and social challenges, and universities that embrace student agency as a driver of innovation tend to enhance both their legitimacy and responsiveness (Sharma and Sharma, 2019). Similarly, faculty and staff are increasingly involved in initiatives that prioritize community engagement, participatory research, and civic responsibility – reshaping academic norms and values in the process (Benneworth *et al.*, 2016; Ward *et al.*, 2021).

In sum, institutions are reimagining themselves as agents of transformation, capable of forging alliances with communities, industries, and policy-makers through co-creation, open science, and engaged scholarship (Reed and Rudman, 2023; Ward *et al.*, 2021).

The rise of the TM marks a critical inflection point in this evolution. Once considered peripheral or residual compared to teaching and research, the TM has emerged as a cross-cutting logic that infuses academic functions with a renewed orientation toward public relevance and Social responsibility (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011; Privitera, 2019). As highlighted by Benneworth *et al*. (2016), the TM involves not only technology transfer and commercialization but also public engagement, lifelong learning, cultural dissemination, and inclusive knowledge valorization. It is through this lens that the university is increasingly perceived as a platform for democratic participation, civic dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving.

In short, the university is undergoing a profound identity transformation, from a guardian of disciplinary knowledge to an active partner in societal progress (Bornmann, 2013; Sivertsen and Meijer, 2020). This new role entails a cultural transition within academia itself, one that privileges openness, responsiveness, and strategic alignment with societal

[3] ANVUR is the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research in Italy (Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca).

needs. Realizing this vision requires embedding Social responsibility, measurable impact, and continuous organizational improvement into the academic core**.**

3. The Social Responsibility Turn

As highlighted in paragraph 2, the evolution of the TM in higher education reflects a broad institutional and cultural reorientation that integrates academic excellence through teaching and research with the ability to generate societal value – through public engagement, knowledge co-production, and contribution to global and local challenges. This expectation, often summarized as the "Social responsibility turn", builds on the decline of the ivory tower model and the rise of universities as embedded social actors (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Watermeyer, 2019).

The growing expectation that higher education institutions (HEIs) act as socially responsible agents stems from a convergence of global pressures. These include rising public scrutiny, intensified demands for transparency and impact, and the need for academia to respond to pressing socio-environmental issues that defy disciplinary and institutional silos (Hazelkorn, 2023; Reed and Rudman, 2023). In this context, the TM functions as a catalyst for institutional change (Privitera, 2019; Bornmann, 2013).

By linking accountability with societal engagement, the TM strengthens legitimacy and creates opportunities for universities to redefine their governance, align with stakeholder expectations, and innovate in teaching and research. A comprehensive understanding of the relevance of an accountability approach to assessing the social impact of a HEI requires an examination of the conceptual roots of Social responsibility, as outlined in the following paragraph 3.1.

3.1 Social Responsibility and Third Mission

In their seminal article *Corporate Social Responsibility Theories: Mapping the Territory*,

Garriga and Melé (2004) provide a useful framework for understanding the complex and often contradictory landscape of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). They classify CSR theories into four broad categories: instrumental, political, integrative and ethical, each reflecting a distinct way of understanding how organizations relate to society. Their analysis begins with a historical observation; since the 1950s, CSR has expanded from a rather focused discourse on business ethics (Kotler and Lee, 2008; Chandler, 2019; Crane, Matten and Spence, 2014; Crane *et al.*, 2008) to a multidisciplinary field. This diversification has enriched the debate but also generated fragmentation and conceptual ambiguity. Despite its richness, the field remains fragmented and conceptually ambiguous, with similar terms being used to express very different assumptions and expectations (Garriga and Melé, 2004, pp. 51–52). Indeed, a shared understanding emerges: CSR refers not only to compliance or philanthropy but to the ethical obligation of organizations to contribute actively to the social good, often beyond legal or contractual requirements.

Although developed in relation to the business world (Chandler, 2019; Crane *et al.*, 2008; Crane, Matten and Spence, 2014), this understanding of CSR offers a relevant lens through which to revisit the contemporary role of universities, particularly their so-called *Third Mission*. Traditionally, universities have been defined by two primary functions: the production of knowledge (research) and the transmission of knowledge (teaching). However, in recent decades, a growing awareness has emerged that universities are not, and cannot be, insulated from the social and ethical realities around them. The TM refers precisely to this expanded role: engaging with society in ways that are responsive, transformative, and socially embedded. Here, the parallel with CSR becomes not only possible, but necessary. Like any organisation, universities are institutions entrusted with power, resources, and influence; they are increasingly being asked to justify their presence, not just through measurable outputs, but through their contribution to the common good.

Melé (2008) further develops CSR theory by emphasizing not only what organizations do but also how they are governed and how they relate to stakeholders. CSR, in this sense, is not a set of activities but a mode of institutional conscience, a way of thinking and acting that foregrounds ethical responsibility and relational accountability. For universities, this means rethinking their governance structures, decision-making processes, and strategic

priorities in light of their social mission. It implies shifting from a model of occasional outreach to a continuous, reciprocal engagement with the communities they serve, locally and globally.

The *Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility* (Crane *et al*., 2008) reinforces this perspective, noting that CSR today involves directing increasingly complex social expectations. Institutions are asked not only to "do good", but to do so transparently, legitimately and with a capacity to engage diverse publics. These demands resonate deeply with the contemporary challenges facing higher education, particularly as universities are called upon to act as agents of sustainable development, equity, and democratic renewal. The more recent psychological and organizational perspectives gathered in the *Oxford Handbook of CSR: Psychological and Organizational Perspectives* (McWilliams *et al*., 2019) further underscore that CSR is most effective when embedded in institutional culture and leadership rather than added externally**.** The same applies to universities: the TM is meaningful only when rooted in institutional life, reflected in governance, identity, and long-term vision, not limited to project-based initiatives.

Finally, CSR and the TM share more than a vocabulary, they share a vision. Both invite institutions to recognize their interdependence with society and to understand their legitimacy as contingent on their ability to respond meaningfully to collective challenges. In this light, CSR provides not just theoretical guidance but also practical tools for universities: approaches to impact assessment, community engagement, inclusiveness, and trust-building. Integrating CSR into the TM is not about adopting a corporate mindset but reaffirming the civic vocation of the university in a plural and interconnected world.

3.2 Public Engagement and Co-Production of Knowledge

Confirming the tight connection between CSR and the TM, Hazelkorn (2016) argues that HEIs are being urged to reconceptualize themselves as institutions not only of knowledge production but also of public value generation. This implies the integration of social goals – such as inclusion, sustainability, and civic participation – into the core missions and

everyday practices.

Public engagement is not a secondary function of the university – it is a constitutive element of the TM. As Watermeyer (2019) notes, the university must be reconceived as a "public sphere institution", facilitating meaningful dialogue between academia and society. Engagement activities span a wide spectrum, from science communication and open days to citizen science, collaborative research, and co-designed policy solutions. These practices relocate knowledge production from closed academic settings to more participatory arenas.

The co-production of knowledge has gained traction in disciplines and sectors where collaboration with external actors enhances both relevance and legitimacy. Fields such as public health, sustainability science, and urban development increasingly rely on stakeholder involvement to define research questions, methods, and outcomes (Troiano *et al*., 2024; Reed and Rudman, 2023). This collaborative approach not only improves the applicability of academic work but also aligns it more closely with societal needs and values.

However, this turn toward engagement and co-production is not without tensions. It challenges conventional hierarchies, incentive structures, and modes of academic evaluation. As Burawoy (2005) and Bornmann (2013) suggest, measuring the societal impact of such activities requires moving beyond bibliometric indicators toward frameworks that can capture influence, use, and change. When embedded into institutional logics, however, engagement becomes a catalyst for trust-building, knowledge democratization, and long-term legitimacy.

Based on this consideration, in the next paragraphs 4 and 5 the concept of Social Impact is examined.

4. Measurement and the Third Mission of Universities: Towards Social Impact

The discussion on CSR highlights a crucial point: commitments to Social responsibility require not only principles but also tools of transparency and accountability. In the university context, this translates into the need to measure the TM and its societal impact.

However, while the TM has gained recognition in theory and policy, its assessment remains contested and complex. In the comprehensive definition of the TM provided by Altintas and Kutlu (2021), its aim is best understood not in isolation, but in terms of how universities integrate societal needs into their core operations, especially at the urban and regional level. They emphasize the importance of social contributions, ranging from addressing the effects of immigration, lifelong learning and environmental awareness, to cultural preservation and economic partnership with local industries. However, many of these actions remain difficult to quantify, especially those involving cultural values or civic consciousness. Moreover, efforts to standardize measurement face inherent tensions. Dassoler *et al*. (2023) highlight a key distinction between the European concept of "Third Mission" and the Latin American notion of "university extension". While both refer to university-society engagement, the former often adopts an economic-development lens, and the latter emphasizes Social responsibility and inclusion. This divergence has implications for what gets measured: technology transfer and innovation outputs on one hand; social services, cultural programming, and community-based education on the other.

Several European projects have aimed to operationalize the TM through performance indicators. For example, the E3M Project (European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme, 2008) identifies three core dimensions: Continuing Education (CE), Technology Transfer and Innovation (TTI), and Social Engagement (SE). Secundo *et al*. (2017) proposes an intellectual capital framework in which Human Capital (e.g., staff qualifications), Organizational Capital (e.g., patents, incubators), and Social Capital (e.g., partnerships with civic actors) serve as proxies for measuring TM performance. This model has inspired metrics such as number of patents, spin-offs, public events and stakeholder involvement in curricula development.

In this complex and diversified scenario, Haj Taieb (2024) underscores three different strategies observed in the literature: the first, is to embed TM within overall university performance rankings. It has to be said, however, that global rankings like QS or ARWU largely ignore TM criteria, reinforcing a narrow academic conception of excellence (*ibid*.); the second, is to measure it as a distinct activity; the third, is to disaggregate and assessing its specific dimensions independently (e.g., university and industry collaboration, social

outreach, innovation ecosystems). It is therefore evident how the lack of standardized indicators and reliable data hampers comparative analysis.

Technical limitations, however, are not the only obstacles to a full acknowledgment of the TM as part of the HEIs identity, culture and strategies as several ideological tensions persist. Centralized funding and policy regimes often exclusively prioritize excellence in research over community engagement. As Benneworth *et al*. (2015) and Frondizi *et al*. (2019) argue, for TM activities to be fully legitimized, they must be tied to accountability systems that reflect societal value, not just economic returns. Moreover, measuring the TM requires a conceptual and methodological shift aligned with the fourth-stage intellectual capital (IC) perspective (Edvinsson, 2013; Secundo *et al*., 2016; Secundo *et al*., 2017; Secundo *et al*., 2020), which emphasizes ecosystem-level knowledge creation rather than merely internal processes. In this view, universities are not just producers of knowledge but active nodes in networks of innovation, social development, and sustainability. Therefore, evaluation systems must reflect this complexity by moving beyond traditional output metrics (e.g., patents or spin-offs) to assess the processes and relational dynamics involved (Frondizi *et al*., 2019). Their study notes that despite efforts from international projects (such as E3M or the Observatory of European), there remains «little agreement on a set of indicators to evaluate quality in university's third mission activities» (Frondizi *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).

As mentioned above, major international university rankings, ARWU, QS, and THE (Ahmad, 2025)[4], evaluate institutions using different combinations of indicators like research output, citations, academic reputation, and internationalization. Among these, only THE includes a third mission-related indicator: industry income (knowledge transfer), and it holds a marginal weight of just 2.5% in the total score. This narrow focus on university and industry collaboration overlooks the broader societal aspects of third mission activities.

To address these limitations, U-Multirank (EHESO) was launched by the European Commission as a multi-dimensional ranking system. Unlike traditional rankings, UMR

[4] ARWU (*Academic Ranking of World Universities*, also known as the *Shanghai Ranking*), QS *World University Rankings*, and THE (*Times Higher Education World University Rankings*) are the three most influential global rankings. While ARWU and QS primarily emphasize research performance, citations, and international reputation, THE includes a marginal indicator related to Third Mission activities (industry income/knowledge transfer, weighted at 2.5% of the total score). This difference highlights the limited but growing recognition of societal engagement in international evaluation frameworks.

avoids weighted aggregate scores and allows institutions to be compared within similar activity profiles. Importantly, UMR includes social and regional engagement indicators alongside knowledge transfer, offering a more comprehensive view of third mission activities (Ahmad, 2025).

Multiple international initiatives have been developed to better define and measure the TM of universities. The Russell Group framework outlines twelve types of engagement, such as commercialization, advisory work, and student placement, focusing on observable activities rather than long-term outcomes. The Observatory of European University (OEU) distinguishes between economic (e.g., patents, spin-offs) and societal (e.g., cultural outreach, policy involvement) dimensions, proposing 36 indicators, though it notes persistent data limitations. In the UK, the HE-BCI (EHESO, 2025) survey collects annual data on a wide array of university–community exchanges, from consultancy to cultural engagement. The above mentioned E3M Project, supported by the European Commission, produced 54 indicators across continuing education, technology transfer, and social engagement. Unlike traditional rankings, it aimed to capture the diversity of university roles using institutional survey, and bibliometric data. The OECD-European Commission's Guiding Framework (OECD 2022; 2025) adds a self-assessment tool to support strategic alignment with societal needs and regional development.

Still, no shared international methodology has been established. In this scenario, Italy provides an example of how a country-specific model can evolve to embrace qualitative variables of social engagement. Initially reliant on quantitative outputs like patents and spin-offs, ANVUR's VQR (ANVUR, 2025)[5] system has expanded to include qualitative peer-reviewed evaluations and broader interpretations of engagement. This shift includes both economic and cultural dimensions, framed within the Intellectual Capital (IC) model, which considers human, structural, and relational capital. By adopting this approach, Italian universities are positioned to document the value they generate beyond academia, in alignment with their territorial and social contexts (Frondizi *et al*., 2019).

In conclusion, measuring the TM is not only a technical exercise but also a political and

[5] *The Research Quality Evaluation* (VQR) is the national assessment conducted by ANVUR to measure the quality of scientific output in universities and research institutes, aimed at enhancing competitiveness and contributing to national scientific and technological progress.

institutional choice. A plural and context-sensitive mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators, rooted in territorial missions and stakeholder expectations, may offer the most meaningful path forward. The challenge lies in balancing transparency and comparability with the diversity and complexity of university-society relations. In this light, accountability becomes a key premise for a comprehensive evaluation process.

5. Accountability and Third Mission

In the last two decades, accountability has become a central concern in higher education worldwide, driven by massification, rising costs, and increasing expectations from governments, markets, and civil society. As Stensaker and Harvey (2010) argue, this growing emphasis on accountability reflects a profound shift in how higher education is perceived and governed: no longer solely as a self-regulating academic domain, but as a sector embedded in a global knowledge economy, subject to external evaluations, performance indicators, and quality assurance regimes. Accountability has thus acquired a dual function – not only providing information to stakeholders but also transforming institutional practices, power relations, and the very meaning of autonomy, quality, and trust within the academic field (Stensaker and Harvey, 2010, pp. 1-3).

This transformation is not uniform across contexts. As the 2018 NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) volume highlights (Brill *et al*., 2018), national approaches to accountability vary significantly depending on historical, cultural, and regulatory frameworks. In some systems, accountability is tightly linked to performance-based funding and national accreditation schemes; in others, it functions more as a mechanism for fostering institutional improvement and responsiveness to local needs (Ewell, 2018, pp. 5-8). Despite this diversity, common tools – such as outcomes assessment and learning analytics – signal a global convergence in language, even as implementation remains divergent.

Building on this context, Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) conceptualize accountability as a social relationship structured around roles, expectations, and obligations. Within their

framework, accountability is articulated through three core elements: the actor, the forum, and the obligation to give account. This relationship may be hierarchical, contractual, or voluntary, and can take political, social, legal, administrative, managerial, or professional forms. The multiplicity of types and forums explains why no consensus exists on how accountability is best delivered; it always depends on context and stakeholder expectations (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, p. 80).

In their literature review, Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) identify and analyze the types of changes within higher education (HE) that have contributed to the emergence and transformation of accountability. They categorize these changes into five main areas: efficiency, market orientation, quality assurance, technology, and governance, each interacting with accountability in distinct but often overlapping ways. The pursuit of efficiency has been a central driver. Institutions have increasingly focused on improving performance, operations, and cost-justification mechanisms, responding to growing student numbers, globalization, and consumer-like expectations from students. These shifts are often reinforced by external pressures, such as accreditation demands and performance measurement systems, which align institutional priorities with quantifiable outputs (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, pp. 84-85). This has led to the development of student services, benchmarking practices, and an emphasis on employability – all of which frame students as clients and institutions as providers accountable for measurable outcomes (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, pp. 85-86).

Closely related is the emphasis on quality assurance. Driven by globalization and competition, HEIs are increasingly subjected to rankings, external evaluations, and accreditation procedures. These mechanisms aim to assure stakeholders – including students, parents, and funders – of institutional quality, but also function as tools of control and comparison across institutions (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, pp. 85-86).

Technology has introduced further changes, especially through digitalization and online education. These developments affect not only the delivery of education (e.g., MOOCs[6], e-learning, blended learning) but also the internal management and bureaucratization of HEIs. Accountability now extends to ensuring effective digital infrastructure, equitable access and

[6] Massive Open Online Courses.

innovation in teaching and learning (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, pp. 86-87). Lastly, governance reforms have deeply altered accountability structures. HEIs are increasingly expected to adapt quickly to external demands, involving shorter decision cycles, managerial restructuring, and the inclusion of new stakeholders such as businesses and accrediting agencies. These governance changes affect the autonomy of institutions, shift power from faculty to administrators, and link accountability to sustainability goals and global policy agendas (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, pp. 87-88). The Authors argue that these changes are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper structural transformations that are progressively institutionalizing new forms of accountability. These shifts constitute what the Authors term a process of "accountabilization": a formal and informal restructuring of HEIs around accountability norms (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021, p. 92).

6. Conclusive remarks: Organizational Implications of Social Responsibility

This study has discussed how the evolution of the TM in higher education reflects a broad institutional and cultural reorientation. As confirmed in recent literature on the TM, HEIs accountability has expanded beyond traditional domains of teaching and research to include universities' broader societal contributions. As Dassoler *et al*. (2023) argue, measuring TM activities – such as social engagement, technology transfer, and continuing education – has become crucial for ensuring transparency, responsibility, and legitimacy.
The challenge lies in the diversity and intangibility of these activities, which vary by regional context and institutional profile. Still, frameworks like those proposed by Secundo *et al*. (2017), based on intellectual capital (human, organizational, and social), offer promising avenues for developing key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with TM objectives. These include not only economic outputs like patents and spin-offs, but also indicators of social inclusion, public service provision, and knowledge co-production with local communities. In this sense, accountability represents both a driver and a test for the institutionalization of the TM. It requires universities to document their societal impact systematically, while also reshaping their internal cultures and governance to align with

expectations of public value creation.

This process leading to an operationalization of Social responsibility entails significant organizational adaptation. HEIs must develop cross-cutting governance models that integrate TM activities with teaching, research, and strategic planning. Offices dedicated to engagement, impact evaluation units, and third mission coordinators are becoming increasingly common within institutional architectures (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011; Sursock, 2015). However, the challenge lies not in creating parallel structures, but in embedding Social responsibility across the organization. Fragmented or *ad hoc* efforts risk incoherence, whereas effective models promote collaboration across departments, administrative units, and external partners, promoting shared ownership of impact goals (Souza *et al*., 2025). Additionally, performance assessment tools must evolve. Traditional metrics often fail to capture the diverse and context-sensitive nature of social impact. Emerging indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, seek to account for knowledge transfer, behavioral change, capacity building, stakeholder satisfaction, and societal outcomes (Bornmann, 2013; Reed and Rudman, 2023).

In conclusion, the shift toward a socially responsible university is both a normative imperative and a strategic opportunity. Embedding Social responsibility into structures, cultures, and missions allows HEIs not only to meet societal expectations but also to strengthen legitimacy and ensure long-term relevance. This transformation is sustainable only if supported by a robust culture of accountability and measurement, enabling universities to document, analyze, and continuously enhance their contributions to public value.

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