The Disclosure of University Research for Societal Demand: 
A non-market perspective on the Third Mission

Michelina Venditti, 1 Emanuela Reale 2 & Loet Leydesdorff 3

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In 1998, the UK government introduced wealth creation as a “third mission” for universities in addition to teaching and research, and backed it with £50 million a year (Klein, 2002; Martin & Tang, 2007; Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). The idea of organizing a third mission—in addition to research and higher education—however, is much older, for example, in the case of agricultural universities in Europe, the landgrant universities in the United States (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2002), and also the museum functions sometimes attributed traditionally to universities, including zoos and botanical gardens. In recent decades, the emphasis on knowledge-based innovation has featured the economic function of the university as focal among the third missions, for example, in terms of technology transfer offices, intellectual property, “valorization” programs, university-industry-government relations, etc. (e.g., Sanchez & Elena, 2006).

The development of Third-Mission indicators has been the subject of a number of European Projects such as E3M (“European Indicators and Ranking Methodology for University Third Mission”) and SIAMPI (“Social Impact Assessment Methods for research and funding instruments through the study of Productive Interactions”; cf. Spaapen et al., 2007). The OECD and national (or regional) governments tend to narrow the third mission to university-industry relations and the entrepreneurial university. Most case-study research focuses on “best” practices of transfer and institutional relations between universities and government such as the MIT and Stanford or European entrepreneurial universities (e.g., Etkzowitz et al., 2000; Jacob et al., 2003; Saxenian, 1999).

In our opinion, one should not at forehand narrow the “third mission” to best-practices and private demand for innovation as articulated by industry. In a knowledge-based economy, variation on the demand side is as important as variation on the supply side (cf. Laredo, 2007). Before one focuses on success stories of “building bridges,” the rich varieties on both benches of the river could be made visible so that more options for relating demand and supply in innovations can be explored. One should keep in mind that only 10% of the innovative ideas lead eventually to successful innovations. Leaving the pre-selection in this process only to private (consumer or industrial) demand thus seems counterproductive. The notion of “government” in university-industry-government

1 Gabriele d’Annunzio University, Department of Business Economics and Management, Chieti-Pescara, Italy; mvenditti@unich.it
2 CERIS CNR, Via dei Taurini, 19, 00185 Rome, Italy; e.reale@ceris.cnr.it
3 University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Klovenierburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands; loet@leydesdorff.net.
relations provides room for additional democratization in terms of access to research capacities.

To this purpose, we elaborate an idea that was originally developed in the context of the Dutch science shops in the late 1980s. One of us participated in a project at the time called the development of a “Science Bank” (Leydesdorff, 1988). In collaboration with the Boards of the two Amsterdam universities all tenured staff was questionnaired in the context of gathering information for the annual report with two additional questions:

1. Can you, please, provide a few keywords which would function to disclose your current research to third parties in society?
2. Do you perhaps have other expertise (from previous research projects) which can be made relevant for third parties in society?

In a pilot study, it had first been found that the order of these questions is sensitive: asking the latter question first tends to obscure the answering to the first one additionally. At the time (1988), we collected 4,495 keywords and 810 expertise specifications from 894 research projects which were made available with a search engine on a single CD-Rom. Users could query the system and then receive relevant telephone numbers and address information of staff members. The CD-Rom was thoroughly test and very positively evaluated by the Amsterdam Innovation Center in the year thereafter. However, the project died because of lack of funding thereafter.

In this new project, we envisage to do a similar effort for disclosing the third mission, but using the internet. Universities are highly visible at the internet, but their webpages are structured from the perspective of the institute; for example, one provides curriculum information and research information for the evaluation evaluation, but not with the purpose of making these rich potentials accessible to wider audiences other than for PR purposes. We constructed a similar survey; after consultation of the local Chamber of Commerce and the local branch of Confindustria, the Italian industrial development foundation, this questionnaire will be sent (electronically) to the approximately 700 tenured staff members of the Gabriele d’Annunzio University in Chieti and Pescara, Abbruzzi, Italy. The results will be brought online at http://www.unich.it/

We wish to communicate about this project in this early stage in order to sound out interest for participation or extension in other universities (in Italy or elsewhere) and to let us influence by critical comments, feedback, and suggestions from the audience of the conference. The objective is to make the issue of the third mission of the university an empirical subject of study and not only one of legitimation and normative debate.

References:


