



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research Policy

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/respol](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/respol)



## Articulating the ‘three-missions’ in Spanish universities

Mabel Sánchez-Barrioluengo\*

INGENIO (CSIC-UPV), Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 3 April 2013  
Received in revised form 16 May 2014  
Accepted 10 June 2014  
Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

One-size-fits-all  
Teaching  
Research  
Third mission  
University

### ABSTRACT

The present paper elaborates a critical reflection on the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model which conceptualizes universities as centres of excellence in education, research and third mission. It is argued that the shortcomings of this perspective are twofold: first, HEIs are treated as homogeneous institutions with equal capacity to perform and contribute to social engagement; and second, missions are undistinguishable from each other. Both features lead to mischaracterizations concerning the role of universities and their contribution to society. In the view proposed here missions are university strategies linked by complex relationship of compatibility, and the paper puts in perspective the persisting gap concerning the nature of and the relations across them.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Over recent decades, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have undergone remarkable structural and functional changes (Wittrock, 1993; Youtie and Shapira, 2008) spurred by the ethos of broadening their remit. By and large this process has been based largely on the addition of a range of (non-strictly) market-oriented and knowledge transfer activities, known as the university ‘third mission’, to the traditional areas of teaching and research. The addition of social and business engagement is seen as reflecting the changing nature of scientific knowledge and the natural tendency for academia to adapt in response to societal changes. In the context of a knowledge-based society, universities are expected to drive the development of regional innovation systems (OECD, 2007) and contribute to society by generating research and consultancy income, embedding knowledge in students and employees, upgrading regional business environments, and potentially improving the process of regional value capture (Benneworth and Hospers, 2007). Almost automatically, and perhaps uncritically, the scholarly discourse has focused on the establishment of efficiency criteria to meet these challenges while policy debates have centred on the “modernization” of HEIs (European Commission, 2006, 2011).

The present paper calls for a careful reflection on conceptual issues before embarking on modernization. A central issue is the persistence of the vision of universities as being, simultaneously, centres of excellence in education, research and third mission activities. In other words, the contribution of HEIs is conceptualized as flowing through three main channels coinciding with the missions of teaching and training, scientific research, and the promotion of university–society synergies. Building on this from a policy and managerial perspective, the theoretical concept of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ university model has emerged through which HEIs are seen as organizations with homogeneous and uniform capacities to perform and contribute to social engagement (Clark, 2001) through their three missions. Moreover, this model assumes that missions are carried out in an interconnected way and combine them to fulfil expectations, without taking into account the differences between higher education systems across different countries and even between institutions within the same educational system (Philpott et al., 2011). In the view proposed here missions are university strategies that are linked by complex relationships of compatibility, and the paper puts in perspective the persisting gap concerning the nature of and the relations across them. We provide an initial critical reflection on whether the expectation that universities can engage in all three missions simultaneously is realistic (David and Metcalfe, 2007; Flanagan et al., 2011).

To accomplish this goal, we first examine the changing role of the university through history. In the archetypical view, the integration of research and third mission relies implicitly on compatibility and even complementarity among missions (Geuna, 1999; Etzkowitz, 2004) and assumes implicitly that both drive

\* Correspondence to: INGENIO (CSIC-UPV), Universitat Politècnica de València, Ciudad Politécnica de la Innovación, Edif. 8E 5<sup>a</sup> Planta, Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia, Spain. Tel.: +34 96 387 70 48; fax: +34 96 387 79 91.

E-mail address: [msbarrioluengo@ingenio.upv.es](mailto:msbarrioluengo@ingenio.upv.es)

the behaviour of universities in the same direction. Arguments in favour of the ‘re-missioning’ are grounded in the belief that HEIs provide significant push to modern knowledge-based economies (Ormerod, 1996). However rather than testing this relation empirically, most studies focus on the relationship among specific activities (used as proxies) as part of an overarching university mission (Landry et al., 2010; Palomares-Montero et al., 2012; Bonaccorsi, 2014). The main limitation of this view is the lack of connection between the rationale of university strategies, and the materialization of practical activities (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). HEIs are complex organizations and performance indicators measure the multitude of different activities in which they engage. The problem is that the core of a university strategy may be reflected by one or more activities and these activities often contribute to an incoherent picture and add to the lack of consensus on the development and use of indicators (Bonaccorsi and Daraio, 2007).

The paper focuses on the connections across university missions through an empirical study of Spanish HEIs. The one-size-fits-all university model in this context goes beyond a theoretical landscape, being explicitly incorporated into the legislative framework that regulates Spanish public universities. This framework, which defines uniform policies and roles characterizing the process of engagement, understands HEIs as isomorphic organizations without drawing attention to the individual capacities and unique operating context of particular universities. We present then an empirical approach to the concept of mission by addressing the following questions:

- How do activities carried out by universities group together to represent a materialization of the university’s strategies?
- Are university missions related? If so, what is their type of relationship?

The paper makes two contributions to the extant literature. First, it highlights the limitations of the one-size-fits-all model based on three channels of universities’ contribution to society, and the contradictions between the theoretical arguments and the empirical evidence (Section 2). This gap is the starting point for our empirical analysis of the connection between the rationale of missions as university strategies, and the practical implementation of activities as the materialization of these strategies. In so doing we check the validity and importance of performance indicators as proxies for the Spanish context. The second contribution is the study of relations in order to assess whether university missions go hand in hand as part of the HEI’s strategy to contribute to society. Section 3 presents the data and methodology used for the analysis in Section 4. Section 5 concludes and summarizes.

## 2. Universities and their missions: an overview

We define the ‘one-size-fits-all’ university model as the conceptual framework which captures uniform policies and management practice under which universities are conceived as homogeneous and isomorphic institutions (Philpott et al., 2011) that combine teaching, research and third mission activities at once. On the basis of the implicit limitations of this university model and the assumption that missions can be considered HEI strategies, this section provides a review of the literature to highlight the controversy between this theoretical approach and empirical evidence of the history of the university re-missioning. The second part of the section discusses activities as materializations of these strategies and emphasizes the ever-growing spectrum of activities being developed by universities and lack of their systematic exploitation to measure performance.

### 2.1. Paradigm shift: the controversial re-missioning of universities

To draw on a biological concept, the modern university can be considered the result of a ‘Red Queen Effect’: they have constantly adapted, evolved and proliferated not merely to achieve competitive advantage, but also to survive. That is, their role of a social institution has evolved over time as a result of structural and functional transformations and changes in the environment (Youtie and Shapira, 2008; Wittrock, 1993).

Universities are purposeful actors that drive growth, produce valuable knowledge inputs to innovation and transfer this knowledge to society (Goddard et al., 2012). They accomplish these expectations through carrying out the three missions of teaching –first mission–, research –second mission– and interaction with the socioeconomic environment (ISEE) – third mission. Although these three university missions are a major issue in the higher education debate, the notion remains ambiguous and differs across universities, depending on the configuration of their activities, their territorial embedding, and the national institutional framework. Larédo (2007, p. 13) argues that “universities do not structure themselves along the three missions, but articulate them differently depending on the functions they fulfil: ‘mass tertiary education’ (focus on the bachelor degree); ‘professional specialized higher education and research’ (focus on the professional master’s and problem-solving research); and ‘academic training and research’ (focus on the PhD and the research articles)”. This alternative mode of understanding university functions would structure their activities in a different way: missions do not exist in isolation, but rather universities’ activities are constructed and adapted to respond to changes in the environment (Wittrock, 1993). Accordingly their positioning is the result of contingent historical factors.<sup>1</sup>

Following the concept of ‘three-university-missions’, traditional teaching and research are part of a more complex nexus of (non-strictly) market-oriented and knowledge transfer activities designed to increase the contribution to local socioeconomic development (Gunasekara, 2006; OECD, 2007; Uyarra, 2010). That is, the current university model includes a simultaneous focus on HEIs as centres of excellence in education, research and ISEE. However, we argue that this theoretical approach has shortcomings. First, it assumes compatibility and even a complementarity between the tripartite university missions. Second it dilutes the variety of university capabilities to respond to societal needs. In other words, it assumes that the three missions go hand in hand, as part of a university strategy to contribute to a social knowledge economy. At the same time, it underplays changes to missions as part of the process of adapting to the environment because it takes no account of the trajectories and historical context of the university, which affects their performance. Recent work has criticized the homogeneous institutional model, by arguing that strategies that work for a particular institution in a particular region may not necessarily work for another institution and/or another region (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013), emphasizing that there is no unique and best way for academic research to contribute to regional economic development (Hussler et al., 2010). These limitations of the policy framework of HEIs in Spain provide the base motivation for the present paper. The literature review goes on to identify contradictions between the theoretical arguments and the empirical evidence.

<sup>1</sup> This view emphasizes the changing nature of the mission. Scott (2006, p. 3) says that “university missions are dynamic and fluid; they reflect the ever-changing philosophical ideals, educational policies, and cultures of particular societies or learned institutions”.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10483158>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10483158>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)