

UNIVERSITIES AS SOCIAL ACTORS: RESPONSIBILITY, MISSION, AND INSTITUTIONAL PURPOSE. CASE OF THE UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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Introductaiton to the problem

The role of universities in contemporary societies has undergone a significant transformation, moving beyond their traditional functions of teaching and research toward a broader societal engagement. This evolution, conceptualized as the “third mission,” reflects increasing expectations that higher education institutions (HEIs) contribute directly to addressing social, economic, and civic challenges (Boyer, 1996; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). While this transformation has been gradual in most European contexts, it has been accelerated under conditions of crisis, where institutional purpose is tested against urgent societal needs.

The case of Ukraine provides a particularly salient empirical context. The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 profoundly disrupted the higher education system while simultaneously catalyzing an expansion of universities’ societal roles. Universities were compelled to assume functions traditionally associated with civil society and public administration, including humanitarian coordination, psychological support, and policy advisory functions. These developments suggest that crisis conditions do not generate new institutional roles per se but rather expose latent capacities and structural limitations within existing institutional frameworks.

This concept note advances the argument that the third mission should be understood rather as an organizing principle of institutional behavior, than additional functional domain to university agenda. Based on the experience of the Ukrainian Catholic University during the wartime, it examines how mission-driven strategies enable universities to act as social actors,

particularly under conditions of systemic disruption. The analysis adopts a qualitative analytical approach combining conceptual synthesis with case study evidences derived from prior research on Ukrainian higher education institutions during wartime. The analytical framework is structured around three components:

First, a **conceptual analysis** of the third mission draws on foundational scholarship, including Boyer's (1996) "scholarship of engagement" and innovation system models such as the Triple and Quadruple Helix (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009).

Second, a **policy analysis** situates the third mission within European higher education governance frameworks, particularly the European Strategy for Universities (2022) and Bologna Process communiqués, which emphasize civic engagement and democratic responsibility.

Third, a **case-based analytical reflection** uses the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU, 2023) as an illustrative example of a mission-driven institutional model, enabling examination of how abstract principles translate into organizational practice.

The Third Mission as Institutional Responsibility

The third mission is commonly defined as the contribution of universities to society beyond teaching and research, encompassing social, cultural, and economic engagement (Boyer, 1996). Contemporary literature distinguishes between three dominant models of this mission. The **economic-utilitarian model** emphasizes innovation and knowledge transfer within the Triple Helix framework, positioning universities as drivers of economic growth. The **civic-democratic model** extends this perspective by incorporating civil society actors, aligning with the Quadruple Helix and emphasizing co-production of knowledge and democratic participation. Finally, the **transformational model** conceptualizes universities as agents of systemic change, particularly in contexts of crisis or structural transition.

The existing literature on the third mission is dominated by functionalist interpretations, which conceptualize engagement as an additional domain alongside teaching and research (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). While useful, this approach poses several limitations. First, it treats the third mission as additive rather than integrative, often resulting in fragmented

institutional practices. That logic cause the management to focus on measurable **instruments (e.g., courses, partnerships, outreach projects)** rather than underlying decision-making logics.

The Ukrainian case, on the contrary, demonstrates the convergence of these models. Universities simultaneously contribute to innovation ecosystems, civic resilience, and social transformation. Empirical evidence indicates that the majority of Ukrainian HEIs incorporate elements of societal engagement into their strategic documents, although the degree of formalization varies.

Crucially, the third mission should be conceptualized not merely as a set of activities but as a form of institutional responsibility. This framework allows the third mission to be conceptualized as **institutional behavior under normative constraint**, rather than as a set of activities. It also explains why crisis contexts, such as war, accelerate its emergence: they compress the distance between institutional purpose and societal need. Responsibility in this context entails three dimensions: awareness of societal needs, institutional capacity to respond, and willingness to act. Wartime conditions in Ukraine have activated all three dimensions, transforming societal engagement from a peripheral activity into a core institutional function.

If universities are understood as social actors, mission assumes a central strategic role. In many institutions, mission statements remain symbolic and weakly connected to decision-making processes. In contrast, mission-driven universities operationalize their purpose as a guiding logic that structures institutional behavior. Three mechanisms are particularly relevant for understanding how mission operates as an organizing principle within higher education institutions (Schuetze, 2012).

First, *mission defines strategic priorities*, determining which societal problems the institution chooses to engage with and how it positions itself within broader ecosystems of actors. This mechanism operates through processes of selection and exclusion. Universities do not respond to all societal needs equally; rather, mission functions as a filtering device that distinguishes between “material” and “peripheral” issues. In this sense, mission is not only about engagement, but about strategic focus. For instance, an institution oriented toward regional development will prioritize partnerships with local governments and SMEs,

whereas a university with a global justice orientation may invest in international advocacy networks or humanitarian research. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that under crisis conditions, this prioritization becomes more explicit: universities rapidly reoriented toward humanitarian support, community resilience, and national recovery, thereby redefining their partnership configurations toward municipalities, civil society organizations, and international donors. Mission, therefore, structures not only what universities do, but with whom they act.

Second, *mission shapes organizational architecture*, influencing how institutional resources, structures, and practices are configured. This includes the design of curricula, the orientation of research agendas, and the construction of incentive systems. At this level, mission translates from an abstract normative statement into embedded institutional routines. The critical analytical point is that organizational architecture is not neutral; it encodes priorities. For example, curricula that incorporate service-learning or community-based research signal that societal engagement is integral to learning outcomes, not an extracurricular activity. Similarly, research funding schemes that privilege applied or policy-oriented outputs reshape academic behavior. However, empirical evidence suggests that in many systems, including Ukraine, this translation remains partial. Engagement activities often coexist with traditional academic structures rather than being integrated into them. This results in what can be termed structural dualism, where the third mission exists alongside, but not within, teaching and research. Overcoming this dualism requires not only new programs but reconfiguration of institutional incentives, particularly promotion criteria and workload models, which remain heavily oriented toward publications and teaching hours.

Third, mission structures resource allocation and trade-offs, functioning as a decision-making algorithm under conditions of scarcity. Universities operate in environments characterized by limited financial, human, and temporal resources. Mission provides a framework for prioritization, enabling institutions to decide what to scale, sustain, or abandon. This is particularly evident in crisis contexts, where resource constraints intensify and the cost of misalignment increases. In the Ukrainian case, wartime conditions forced universities to reallocate resources away from certain

traditional activities toward urgent societal functions such as humanitarian coordination, infrastructure sharing, and psychological support. Importantly, this mechanism reveals the political dimension of mission: decisions about resource allocation are not purely technical but reflect normative judgments about institutional purpose. Mission, in this sense, acts as a legitimizing framework for redistribution, allowing universities to justify shifts in priorities to internal and external stakeholders.

These three mechanisms operate across normative, strategic, and operational levels, which together constitute the architecture of mission-driven institutionalism. The normative level defines values and purpose; the strategic level translates these into priorities and positioning; the operational level implements them through programs and practices. A persistent challenge in higher education systems is the misalignment between these levels. Mission statements often articulate ambitious societal roles (normative level), but these are only weakly reflected in strategic planning or operational practices. This misalignment produces a gap between declared mission and enacted behavior, undermining institutional coherence and reducing the effectiveness of engagement initiatives.

Service-learning emerges as a key instrument for bridging this gap, precisely because it operates simultaneously across all three levels. Normatively, it reflects a commitment to civic responsibility and societal engagement. Strategically, it positions the university within local ecosystems as a partner in problem-solving. Operationally, it embeds engagement within curricula, directly linking teaching with societal impact. This multi-level functionality makes service-learning particularly valuable as a mechanism of integration.

However, its effectiveness is contingent upon institutionalization. Without integration into formal curricula, service-learning risks remaining episodic and dependent on individual faculty initiative. Without alignment with incentive systems, it competes with traditional academic priorities and is often deprioritized. Without evaluation frameworks, its impact remains difficult to assess, limiting both accountability and scalability. In many contexts, including Ukraine, service-learning is expanding rapidly but remains unevenly institutionalized, reflecting broader challenges in embedding the third mission within core university structures.

From a theoretical perspective, this conceptualization suggests that the effectiveness of the third mission depends less on the presence of engagement activities and more on the degree of alignment between mission, structure, and practice. Mission-driven institutionalism thus provides a lens for understanding why some universities succeed in acting as social actors, while others remain confined to symbolic engagement.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents a critical juncture in the evolution of the third mission. The dominant majority of universities report significant changes in their engagement models following 2022. These transformations can be categorized into three interrelated domains:

First, universities assumed **humanitarian and community support functions**, including shelter provision, aid coordination, and psychological services. These activities positioned universities as central nodes within local resilience systems.

Second, institutions expanded **applied knowledge functions**, redirecting research and expertise toward immediate societal needs, including technological solutions, policy analysis, and social services.

Third, universities intensified **international engagement**, leveraging global networks to secure resources, maintain academic continuity, and contribute to global knowledge production.

These developments challenge traditional distinctions between local and global engagement. Ukrainian universities became embedded in transnational networks that simultaneously addressed local needs and global challenges. Notably, wartime conditions shifted the emphasis of the third mission from market-oriented activities toward human security and social resilience. This reorientation underscores the adaptability of the engaged university model and its relevance in crisis contexts.

The UCU Model: Institutionalizing the Third Mission

The Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) provides a particularly instructive case of how mission-driven institutionalism can be operationalized through both pedagogical innovation and organizational design. UCU demonstrates a model of **systemic integration**, where societal engagement is embedded into the core architecture of the university – its Strategy 2030 explicitly positions societal service as a core institutional purpose.

At the center of this model is the early formalization of service-learning as a university-wide pedagogical approach, introduced in 2019. This positions UCU as one of the first institutions in Ukraine to institutionalize socially oriented learning as a structural component of education. From a theoretical perspective, this reflects a transition from what may be termed *additive engagement to embedded engagement*. In additive models, universities attach community-oriented projects to existing curricula. In contrast, UCU integrates societal engagement into the logic of curriculum design itself, ensuring that knowledge production and application are co-constitutive processes.

This integration is operationalized through a **multi-stage student engagement pathway**. At the entry level, all first-year students are required to participate in volunteer activities, embedding civic responsibility as a foundational element of academic socialization. At subsequent stages, students engage in more specialized forms of service-learning through structured courses and projects, including those coordinated by the “Volunteer Laboratory.” This staged approach is analytically significant because it transforms engagement from episodic participation into a **cumulative competency-building process**, linking personal development with societal impact.

A second critical dimension of the UCU model is the **redefinition of communities as strategic partners rather than beneficiaries**. Engagement activities span a wide range of domains, including collaboration with territorial communities, support for internally displaced children, development of social enterprises, and environmental initiatives. This reflects a shift toward **co-production of knowledge**, consistent with Quadruple Helix frameworks, where civil society actors actively shape research agendas and learning processes. Importantly, this partnership logic extends beyond individual projects into **inter-institutional and policy-oriented initiatives** (f.e. assisting municipalities with their medium-term strategies as a part of MPA courses).

From an organizational perspective, the UCU model highlights the importance of administrative integration. Engagement is not driven solely by academic staff or student initiatives but is actively coordinated by administrative structures. This addresses a common limitation in higher education systems, where civic engagement

is often confined to individual actors without institutional support. At UCU, administrative personnel play a key role in organizing, sustaining, and scaling engagement activities, contributing to a whole-institution approach.

A third defining feature is the alignment of engagement with institutional governance and performance monitoring. Societal service is explicitly positioned as a core element of the university's strategic development, and progress is systematically tracked at the leadership level. Indicators include the number of service-learning courses, student participation in volunteering, the volume of community-oriented projects, and their impact on communities. This reflects an important shift from activity-based reporting to impact-oriented governance, even if measurement challenges remain. The presence of a designated vice-rector responsible for monitoring engagement ensures that the third mission is not only implemented but also evaluated and adjusted.

Taken together, these elements illustrate a coherent model of mission-driven institutionalization, characterized by three interrelated dynamics:

- *pedagogical integration*, where societal engagement is embedded within curricula and student development pathways;
- *organizational alignment*, where administrative structures and governance mechanisms support and coordinate engagement;
- *ecosystem positioning*, where the university operates as a broker within networks of communities, institutions, and international partners.

However, the UCU case also reveals structural tensions – despite high levels of integration, challenges persist in coordination across initiatives, resource allocation, and especially in measuring long-term societal impact. From a theoretical standpoint, the UCU model supports the argument that the effectiveness of the third mission depends on its integration across institutional functions, rather than its formal recognition as a separate domain. It also demonstrates that mission-driven institutionalism requires not only normative commitment but organizational translation, where values are embedded into structures, incentives, and practices.

In general, the institutionalization of the third mission in Ukraine remains uneven. Three structural challenges are particularly salient. First, **fragmented governance** limits coordination and

accountability. Most universities rely on hybrid or decentralized models, enabling flexibility but reducing strategic coherence. There is evidence of **symbolic compliance**, where engagement activities are reported but not fully integrated into institutional practices. This reflects a broader pattern identified in the literature as “checkbox engagement” (Benneworth et al., 2016). Third, **weak measurement frameworks** hinder evaluation of societal impact. Existing metrics focus on outputs rather than outcomes, limiting the ability to assess long-term effects. These challenges indicate that while the third mission has expanded significantly, its institutional foundations remain underdeveloped.

Conclusion

The transformation of universities into social actors reflects a broader redefinition of higher education’s institutional purpose. The Ukrainian case demonstrates how the third mission becomes central under conditions of systemic disruption, revealing both the potential and limitations of existing institutional frameworks. universities require **dedicated governance structures**, such as engagement offices and leadership positions, to ensure coordination and accountability.

The **capacity-building initiatives** are necessary to equip academic and administrative staff with the skills required for effective societal engagement. The development of **robust evaluation frameworks** is essential for measuring impact and ensuring sustainability. Finally, universities should be integrated into national recovery strategies as key actors in reconstruction, leveraging their roles as knowledge hubs and civic institutions. These implications extend beyond Ukraine, suggesting that the third mission should be considered a central component of higher education systems in contexts of war and post-conflict transformation. The few conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) mission-driven strategies enhance institutional capacity to respond to societal challenges;
- 2) crisis conditions accelerate transformation, exposing latent institutional capabilities and structural gaps;
- 3) the sustainability of these transformations depends on institutionalization through governance, incentives, and evaluation systems.

4) war and crisis contexts should be integrated into higher education theory. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that universities can function as **critical infrastructure for societal resilience**, a role largely absent from existing models.

Universities are inherently normative institutions. Their choices regarding teaching, research, and engagement shape societal trajectories. The key question is whether these choices are made strategically and in alignment with societal needs. The Ukrainian experience suggests that when universities act as mission-driven social actors, they become not only providers of education but also anchors of resilience, recovery, and societal transformation.

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