

Reimagining Universities' Contribution to Society: the Third Mission in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

The third mission (TM) has emerged as a strategic priority for universities worldwide. This paper examines how the TM is conceptualised and operationalised in Chinese higher education (HE), a context that remains under-researched in Anglophone scholarship on the phenomenon. Adopting a multiple case study approach and a comparative lens, this qualitative enquiry investigates the relationship between stakeholder influence and universities' shifting role in society. Findings suggest that universities have assumed greater responsibilities for socioeconomic progress through external engagement. The TM reflects institutional response to global HE trends, exhibiting both isomorphic and heterogeneous attributes. In China, the state plays a central role in shaping the TM, revealing distinct features that challenge the dominant entrepreneurship-centric framing in the West. I argue that divergences in TM activities are primarily driven by context specific HE governance. This study provides theoretical and practical insights that contribute to our knowledge of universities' expanding contributions to society.

Full paper

The role of higher education (HE) in society has evolved significantly in recent decades. HE institutions are reconfiguring their relationships with external parties, in response to a shifting environment shaped by economic, social, technological and geopolitical parameters. Operating under what Benington and Hartley (2001) call a 'networked governance', HE has assumed greater responsibilities beyond academic functions. Universities' expanded contributions to society are delineated by their third mission (TM). The TM is a rather ambiguous concept involving an

extensive range of activities (Jongbloed *et al.*, 2008; Pinheiro *et al.*, 2015) and heterogeneous operating conditions (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2015; Berghaeuser and Hoelscher, 2020). The TM emerged in the 1980s, alongside the entrepreneurial university model that promotes technology transfer and commercialising research outputs (Etzkowitz *et al.*, 2000). Scholarly debates about the TM remain dominated by the entrepreneurship-oriented growth discourse (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Universities' broader non-economic contributions are increasingly evident (Godonoga and Sporn, 2023), as exemplified by community engagement (Benneworth *et al.*, 2013) and sustainability actions (McCowan, 2020). However, our knowledge of the boundaries, modalities and drivers of the TM remains limited, particularly regarding non-Western systems. This paper fills some of these gaps, addressing this research question: how is the TM understood and operationalised at universities? This study focuses on China, a major non-Western HE system with rising global influence. My investigation makes theoretical contribution to the TM's conceptualisation and offers practical insights into universities' external engagement in a contextualised setting.

Grounded in the interpretivism paradigm and through a comparative lens, this qualitative enquiry adopts multiple case study approach (Merriam, 1988). Three universities were selected based on key features of what I call the "tri-faceted" stratification in China's HE: sponsorship, prestige and locality. Two streams of data were collected: text-based materials – both print and online - and semi-structured interviews with informants involved in TM activities. Formats of textual contents include policy papers at multiple governing levels, institutional brochures, webpages, field notes and pertinent materials in the public domain. Interview participants consist of university administrators, faculty members and external partners. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and content analysis (Stemler, 2000) are employed for processing data. The triangle of coordination model (Clark, 1983) is applied as the main conceptual framework to investigate the coordinated influences on universities' decision-making from the state, the market and the academic community.

Drawing on findings of this research, I argue that the TM reflects the intertwined stakeholder influence on universities' core functions. The emergence of the TM is universities' institutional response to these exogenous and endogenous forces, revealing isomorphic and heterogeneous features. On one hand, the TM has gained tractions as a strategic priority for HE institutions worldwide. Sweeping global trends, such as the rise of the knowledge economy, neoliberalism and sustainability, have compelled universities to play a greater role in meeting the diverse expectations of policymakers, business sector, the media and the general

public. On the other hand, the TM appears in various forms across different HE systems - a phenomenon I argue is primarily ascribed to context-specific governance structure. My findings suggest three implications. First, the TM increasingly manifests itself as a core mission of universities, in addition to traditional teaching and research. Universities are no longer ivory towers but increasingly seen as socially responsible organisations. Key areas to make tangible impact include industry collaboration, community and public engagement, continuing education, open access to campus facilities and volunteering projects. Second, this case study challenges the dominant entrepreneurship-centric TM conceptualisation in the Anglophone literature. In China, the state exerts pervasive power in shaping universities' TM through its centralised HE governance. For example, technology transfer has been largely driven by government policies, rather than industry forces, to fill the market void after the opening-up reforms in early 1980s and more recently to support the innovation-driven national strategy for development. Another example is the paired assistance programmes, a state-led domestic aid scheme aimed at tackling urban-rural disparity. Third, the relationships between teaching, research and the TM are complex and multifaceted, requiring a holistic approach of operationalisation that aligns TM activities with institutional objectives. Policy incentives, administrative infrastructure and organisational culture are among the vital factors that either foster or hinder TM development. While universities are uniquely positioned to make broader societal contributions, I argue that teaching and research must remain central in the mission statements. Academic functions are the defining feature that distinguishes HE institutions from other societal players - thus leaving no room for compromise, despite the evolving roles of universities in society.