The role of Special Pedagogy for Third Mission and Social Impact between transformative practices and emancipatory processes

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Abstract

The development of inclusive cultures and practices in academia can be substantiated not only in references to the two traditional missions of universities, namely Teaching and Research but can find a generative way through a third mission, namely that of "Third Mission and Social Impact".

Italian universities assume this programmatic horizon to make available and accessible the social value of scientific research that is also carried out in synergy with territories, institutions, and communities.

This paper intends to conduct an action of conceptualization and legitimization of the "Third Mission" in universities and, at the same time, to highlight the transformative practices and emancipatory processes underlying the strategic actions of the universities. In particular, starting from the analysis of the Strategic Plans of 88 Italian universities, this contribution delves into the pedagogical dimensions that characterize the "Third Mission" and, therefore, seeks to highlight the role of Special Pedagogy for the enhancement of knowledge and the creation of new connections of social impact.

Keywords: inclusion, university, innovation, Third Mission, Social Impact.

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1. Conceptualization lines

Universities have traditionally been dedicated to teaching and research, which are known as the First and Second Missions of the Italian Academy. However, Italian universities have increasingly focused on a third dimension, known as the "Third Mission and Social Impact", which involves targeted scientific dissemination and knowledge enhancement in collaboration with territories and communities.

Defining the Third Mission clearly and straightforwardly is challenging, as it arises from the interaction between the identity of a university and its territorial context. It is a complex phenomenon that is constantly evolving and requires dialogue between universities, businesses, government agencies, the public, and the community. Therefore, the Third Mission is a public function and institutional responsibility for each university to foster knowledge valorization and usage to contribute to society's social, cultural, and economic development.

In recent years, the Third Mission's inherent complexity has been characterized by an increased focus on social responsibility. In the Italian context, ANVUR (2018) identifies the Universities' Third Mission as activities related to the "enhancement of research" and the "production of social and cultural public goods". These activities include managing industrial property, spin-off companies, third-party activities and conventions, intermediary structures, heritage and cultural activities, public health, continuing education, lifelong learning, open teaching, and public engagement.

Tab. 1 - Third Mission/Social Impact Strategic Objectives (ANVUR, 2018)

Third Mission/Social Impact Strategic Objectives	
Enhancing research	**Production of social and cultural public goods**
1. Management of industrial property (patents and plant patents)	5. Heritage management and cultural activities (archaeological excavations, museum centres, musical activities, historical buildings and archives, historical libraries and newspaper libraries, theatres and sports facilities)

2. Spin-off enterprises	6. Public health activities (clinical trials, non-interventional studies and empowerment, support structures)
3. Third-party activities and conventions	7. Continuing education, lifelong learning and open didactics (continuing education, Continuing Medical Education, certification of competencies, Alternative Schooling, MOOCs)
4. Intermediation structures (technology transfer offices, placement offices, incubators, science parks, consortia and associations for the Third Mission)	8. Public engagement

The universities' Mission has evolved to encompass the advancement of new knowledge and professional skills, as well as a renewed focus on the Third Mission. This introduces two important objectives: participation and change (Del Gottardo, 2014). Participation refers to the ability to design new strategies for knowledge dissemination within society, with active involvement from the community. The second objective is for universities to take direct responsibility for promoting social change through continuous training and lifelong learning (Varriale *et al*., 2022; Del Gottardo, Rossiello, 2022). By pursuing these goals, universities play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity both within and beyond their institutions (Varriale *et al*., 2022; Giuri *et al*., 2019).

Universities have the unique capability to provide tools and practices, transfer knowledge, and enhance the necessary skills for promoting an inclusive culture. Against this backdrop and in keeping with the goals of the 2030 Agenda, our exploratory survey aims to assess the prevalence of explicit inclusion initiatives among Italian universities as part of their Third Mission.

2. Inclusion as a Strategic Third Mission Action: An Exploratory Study

Each Third Mission initiative follows a life cycle that originates from the identification of innovative ideas to the concretization of products and/or services that are useful for citizens, institutions, entrepreneurial realities and, more generally, for the entire community (Novelli, Talamo, 2014).

Under guaranteeing the quality of these processes, ANVUR has the task of assessing the specific strategic lines and objectives that universities implement. In particular, it is asked to provide information on the positioning of Third Mission within some specific documents (statute, strategic plan, or other

programmatic documents), which represent the starting point of our survey. Specifically, the Strategic Plans of the Universities (L. 43/2005) were analysed for two reasons. The first goes into the programmatic relevance of the Strategic Plan, which defines the mission, policy directions and objectives of the university and departmental structures. The second reason concerns the public nature of these documents, which are available on the websites of academic institutions.

In detail, the research aims to reconstruct the practices activated by Italian academic contexts with reference to strategic Third Mission actions that enhance the social inclusion dimension

For this purpose, a systematic analysis was conducted on the Strategic Plans published in the last five years (2019-2024).

The sample taken into consideration includes Italian universities recognized by the MUR (2024), in a total number of 88 institutions, of which 61 are state universities, 20 non-state universities and 7 special-order institutes.

Graphic 1 - Graphical sample distribution
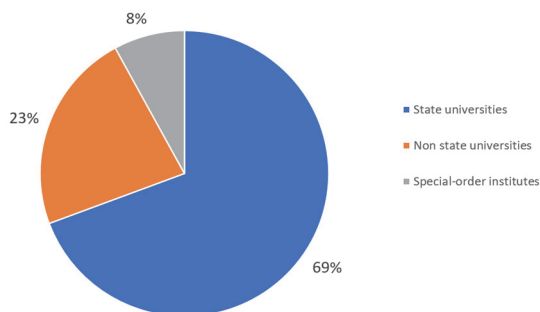
Source: Author's re-elaboration

The specific units of analysis were analysed on certain variables of interest (V.), which are listed below:
-   V.1 Presence of the term "Inclusion" in the Third Mission section;
-   V.2 Presence and characteristics of any social and cultural public goods production activities carried out on inclusion issues (heritage management and cultural activities, public health activities, lifelong learning and open education and public engagement);
-   V.3 Presence/activation of patents, spin-offs, third-party contracts and conventions, intermediation structures adhering to inclusion issues;

- V.4 Presence and characteristics of any regulatory documents issued by universities on inclusion issues within the Third Mission
- V.5 Presence and characteristics of any statements referring to the topics: "Inclusion", "Third Mission", and "Social innovation".
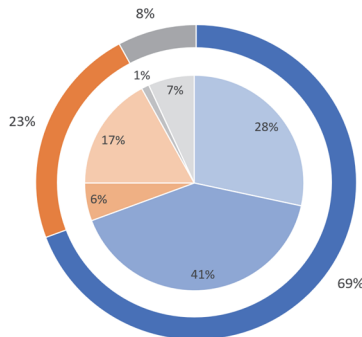
3. Methodology

The search methodology utilized a combination of exploratory techniques, including descriptive and single-variate analysis for quantitative variables, as well as interpretive strategies such as thematic coding for qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). In V.1, the search focused specifically on the "Third Mission" section using the keyword "Inclusion". For V.2, V.3, and V.4, a heuristic approach was taken which involved identifying relevant textual extracts grounded in the sources rather than pre-selecting search keywords. This approach allowed for a broader exploration of results beyond a simple tally of predefined keywords such as "Inclusion", "Third mission", and "Social innovation". Finally, in V.5, the entire Strategic Plan document was searched using the keywords "Inclusion", "Third Mission", and "Social Innovation" to uncover any correlations between them.

3.1 Presentation and discussion of results

The data collected on the variable of interest V.1, which measures the presence of the term "Inclusion" in the "Third Mission" section, is displayed in Graphic 1. Out of all the universities analysed – including state, non-state, and special-order institutions – 35% have included a link with the term "Inclusion" in this section. Of these universities, 28% are state universities, 6% are non-state universities, and 1% are special-order institutions. The remaining 65% of the sample does not explicitly mention "Inclusion" actions in the "Third Mission" section. More specifically, 41% of these universities are state universities, 17% are non-state universities, and 7% are special-order institutes, as shown in Graphic 2.

Concerning point V.2 (Social and cultural activities related to inclusive issues), it is important to note that out of 88 universities surveyed, 31 have included initiatives of an inclusive nature in their Strategic Plan (as shown in Graphic 3). Specifically, 31% of state universities, 11% of non-state universities, and 1% of special-order universities have implemented initiatives that fall under V.2. The remaining 57% of the sample is distributed among 39% of state universities, 11% of non-state universities, and 7% of special-order institutions.

Graphic 2 - V.1 Graphical distribution of percentages

Graphic 3 - V.2 Graphical distribution of percentages
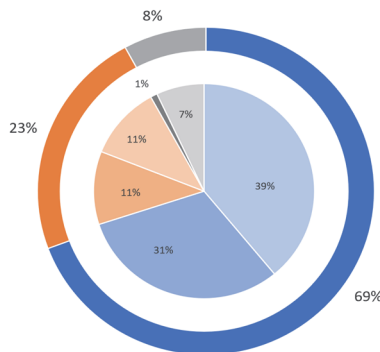
In reference to the data gathered for V.3, which includes the presence and activation of patents, spin-offs, third-party contracts, conventions, and intermediation structures aligned with inclusion issues, it was discovered that 5% of the cases belonged to state universities that have activated said features. The remaining 95% of the sample did not disclose this information, with 64% being state universities, 23% non-state universities, and 8% special-order institutions, as illustrated in Graphic 4.

For V.4 (Presence and characteristics of any normative documents issued by the universities concerning the issues of inclusion in the Third Mission), it can be seen that 8% of the total adopt normative documents, and the remaining 92% do not disclose them. Of these, 61% are state universities, 23% are non-state universities and 8% are special-order institutions (Graphic 5).

Graphic 4 - V.3 Graphical distribution of percentages

Source: Author's re-elaboration
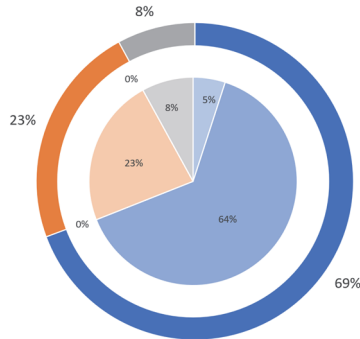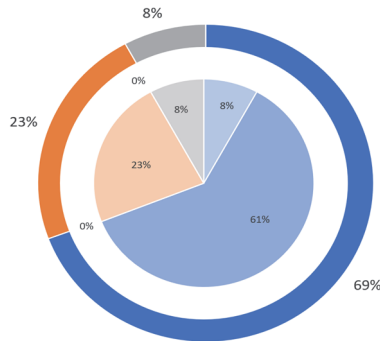
Graphic 5 - V.4 Graphical distribution of percentages

Source: Author's re-elaboration

Regarding the analysis of V.5, which pertains to the presence of statements related to "inclusion", "Third Mission", and "social innovation", 40% of the cases included mentions of these constructs in a general manner. Within the sample analyzed for V.5, 33% were state universities, 6% were non-state universities, and 1% were special-order institutions. On the other hand, 60% of the cases did not include any explicit text related to these themes. Of this group, 36% were state universities, 17% were non-state universities, and 7% were special-order institutions, as shown in Graphic 6.

Graphic 6 - V.5 Graphical distribution of percentages
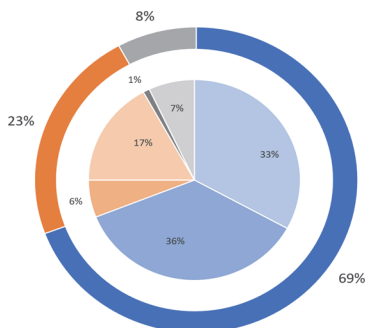
Source: Author's re-elaboration

3.2 Analysis of results

The analysis of keyword searches has yielded some preliminary results that may aid in comprehending how the topic under investigation is gradually emerging in the policy documents of Italian universities. The keyword "Inclusion" appears to be present in the strategic plans of a majority of the state universities analysed (V.1); however, it is found in only one-third of the universities studied, even though its mention is accompanied by a substantial number of concrete initiatives promoted by the universities on the subject of inclusion within the broader Third Mission initiatives (V.2). Although the initiatives promoted by the universities analysed on the subject of inclusion reveal a complex, articulated, and often unclear theme, the observation related to V.3 highlights that one of the universities' primary assets, i.e., the exploitation of research results in terms of entrepreneurship – patents, spin-offs, start-ups, etc., – do not necessarily correspond to the theme of inclusion strongly and directly.

Furthermore, a recent study on the critical issues connected with promoting entrepreneurship in the academic sphere has identified a problem in education, namely, the difficulty of focusing on the challenge of educating new subjectivities, projects, and professionalism in connection with the social and community context to promote human and social development projects, including (but not limited to) the promotion of enterprise projects (Patera, 2023).

Despite this systemic criticality, it is noteworthy that universities that adopt an inclusive vision in their institutional mandate are also beginning to engage in technology transfer, collaborations with businesses, and community services to enhance social, economic, and cultural inclusion practices. In a few

instances, universities that promote inclusive processes appear to be able to maximize their social impact and contribute significantly to Third Mission activities.

However, it is undeniable that, despite the initiatives present in the universities analysed, as highlighted in V.3, only 8% of the universities have passed regulatory documents that institutionalize the Inclusion and Third Mission nexus (V.4). Within the same strategic plans, the co-present reference to the constructs analysed for our analysis, namely, "Inclusion", "Third Mission", "Social Impact" (V.5), is even weaker.

4. Final considerations

The higher education sector is actively anticipating fundamental changes that are expected to drive a more equitable and sustainable society. In this context, the values and actions pursued under the Third Mission initiative are being scrutinized, as they will have a significant impact on the trajectory of educational, cultural, and social planning across the entire territory. The promotion of an "inclusive culture" in higher education settings is aligned with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), and it considers the well-being of the university community as a strategic starting point for achieving this goal (Priestley *et al*., 2022; Giaconi *et al*., 2022; Giaconi, 2015; Piazza, 2016; Palla, Ceccarini, 2007).

Assessing the social impact of research in the field of Special Pedagogy can yield valuable insights into the promotion of inclusive communities. This contribution highlights the critical role of Third Mission activities that are aimed at safeguarding and enhancing diversity and that are promoted by Italian universities (Shogren *et al*., 2022; Giaconi *et al*., 2019). These activities are not limited to research-related pursuits such as patents, spin-offs, third-party activities, and conventions, as well as intermediary structures (Patera, 2023), but also encompass broader societal impacts such as heritage management and cultural activities, public health initiatives, lifelong learning and open education, and public engagement.

As revealed by the data analyzed, a point of reflection undoubtedly lies in the commitment of the universities under consideration to integrate the constructs of Inclusion within their regulatory and guideline documents in the context of the Third Mission. However, there is still a long way to go to better articulate, consolidate, harmonize, and institutionalize the projects, initiatives, biographies, and activities that can be attributed to the "Inclusion" theme within a clear and effective institutional commitment and a vision of medium and long-term strategic and operational guidelines.

From this perspective, the ultimate objective of the Third Mission is to foster a productive dialogue between 'science' and 'society,' establishing links that pass through the valorization of resources, the consolidation of reciprocal competencies, and the recognition of the experiences of the actors that operate in a given territory. In this regard, we concur with Novelli and Talamo (2014) that «within the perimeter of each university there lie, in fact, skills, professionalism, ideas, projects, products that – if addressed 'towards the world' – can have an enormous and to date hidden value: a value of 'reputation,' an economic value, a value of improving everyone's life. Enclosing these competencies within the confines of the Campus and not knowing how to valorize and transfer the work of innovation and knowledge production is a serious shortcoming and a loss of significant opportunities» (p. 2740).

Therefore, it is opportune to promote, even within the Third Mission framework, the activation of innovative and valuable processes that develop according to horizontal trajectories, in relation to territorial realities and local communities, abandoning the traditional top-down processes of research, and enhancing the generative knowledge that arises in networks of purpose, in collaborative alliances, and in community and territorial educational agreements (Giaconi *et al.*, 2023).

In this direction, for the achievement of meaningful paths, also from a strategic viewpoint, the Third Mission of the universities can be rethought by systematizing a "Third Mission vision" already present within the universities that include the various "voices" dedicated and involved (D'Angelo *et al.*, 2020; Giaconi *et al.*, 2019). Defining and sharing, even within the Strategic Plan, Third Mission activities that are spent in the direction of inclusion means, in fact, identifying and placing the opportunities promoted through a "transversal organizational model" (Novelli, Talamo, 2014, p. 2745).

This line of direction calls for the widespread involvement of all those who inhabit the university context, from lecturers to technical staff to the student body. The sharing of Third Mission actions not only enriches the community in terms of knowledge but also emphasizes the intrinsic educational value of working collaboratively for the common good. Academic institutions thus become not only centres of knowledge production but active engines of territorial development (Ibidem), for the creation of sustainable and inclusive communities.

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