ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES
◆ The view from Italian third mission national evaluation experience◆

Third mission activities are by no means totally new phenomena (e.g. Liebig’s fertiliser venture in the mid-19th century, see 1; 2). The emergent element is the societal push for interacting with non-academic domains (3; 4; 5) that is leading institutions to reframe and better communicate these activities, i.e. the institutionalization of university-industry linkages.

The new societal demand triggers also growing public accountability, what has been defined an impact agenda (6). In many performance-based research funding systems (e.g. UK, Australia) incentives have been put on scientific results that benefit society. Also in Italy specific initiatives have been carried out at this aim. Since the start of the first national research assessment exercise, Evaluation of Research Quality (VQR) 2004–2010, a pioneering work has been done by ANVUR, using a participatory approach to set a perimeter around the concept of third mission and to develop a wide evaluation model able to ensure fair comparison, suitable data and reliable metrics.

Since its very first experimental evaluation processes on this side, through its participatory-type methodological approach, ANVUR is reinforcing the institutionalization of third mission by triggering an interplay of cultural shifts, institutional rearrangements, and changes in the structure of incentives in Italian universities. As also confirmed by results of the OECD-EC study (9) on the innovative potential of HEIs, universities in recent years have developed a good awareness that third mission is more than tech transfer, stressing their cultural and social role and their contribution for Sustainable and Development Goals. Moreover, academic institutions are showing an “appetite” for third mission evaluation and a demand for performance-based incentives. They are also contributing bottom-up to the construction of the evaluation model proposing their good practices as standard.

REFERENCES