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# Development of a Joint Third Mission Strategy – Challenges and Approaches

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**Abstract:** In addition to offering education and conducting research, transferring knowledge from academia to society is the third core task of universities, their so-called Third Mission. A framework for transferring research results from science to society and integrating everyday problems into scientific research is a crucial starting point for academics seeking to generate solutions to socio-economic problems. At the beginning of the European University Alliance EURECA-PRO cooperation there were disparate understandings of Third Mission; as a result, related research and activities were variably conducted. Given that a common Third Mission strategy is a fundamental requirement for the establishment of the European University Alliance, EURECA-PRO is focused on all partner universities coming to a common Third Mission understanding. One way to pursue this goal is presenting EURECA-PRO scientific research from each university in video form. These videos have a clear and targeted focus on being relevant to everyday life; initial results show that this kind of science communication is both well accepted by scientists and supportive of developing a common Third Mission understanding within EURECA-PRO.

**Keywords:** European University Alliance, External science communication, Third Mission, Transfer strategy, EURECA-PRO

**Erarbeitung einer gemeinsamen Third Mission Strategie – Herausforderungen und Lösungsansätze**

**Zusammenfassung:** Neben Lehre und Forschung ist der Wissenstransfer in sowie die Kommunikation mit dem sozio-ökonomischen Umfeld die dritte Hauptaufgabe, die Third Mission, von Hochschulen. Dabei ist es essenziell,

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einen Dialog zu schaffen, in dem Forschungsergebnisse aus der Wissenschaft in die Gesellschaft transferiert werden und alltägliche Problemstellungen als Ausgangspunkt wissenschaftlicher Untersuchungen zur Generierung von Lösungsansätzen in die Wissenschaft integriert werden. Zu Beginn der Zusammenarbeit der an der Europäischen Hochschulallianz EURECA-PRO beteiligten Partnerhochschulen prägte diese ein unterschiedliches Verständnis von Third Mission und eine differenzierte Umsetzung der damit in Zusammenhang stehenden Aktivitäten. Da eine gemeinsame Third Mission Strategie für die Etablierung der Europäischen Universität jedoch ein grundlegendes Erfordernis ist, verfolgt EURECA-PRO das Ziel ein gemeinsames Verständnis von Third Mission über alle Partneruniversitäten hinweg zu schaffen. Erreicht werden soll dies u.a. durch Videoproduktionen, die die Arbeit der Wissenschaftler:innen der einzelnen Universitäten sowie deren Alltagsbezug anschaulich und zielgruppenspezifisch darstellen. Im Ergebnis zeigt sich, dass diese Art der Wissenschaftskommunikation von den Wissenschaftler:innen gut angenommen wird und den Aufbau eines gemeinsamen Verständnisses von Third Mission in EURECA-PRO unterstützt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Europäische Hochschulallianz, Externe Wissenschaftskommunikation, Third Mission, Transferstrategie, EURECA-PRO

## 1. Third Mission between European Education Policy and University Autonomy

Europe is facing profound economic, environmental, political, and social challenges due to the Covid pandemic and climate change. The European Commission considers higher education as a key player in solving these problems:

*The higher education sector has an essential role to play in Europe's post-pandemic recovery and in shaping [...] societies and economies. Excellent and inclusive universities are a condition and foundation for open, democratic,*

*fair and sustainable societies as well as sustained growth, entrepreneurship and employment [1].*

The task of universities to contribute to society is recognized as the Third Mission of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) [2, 3]. By focusing on this task and coordinating communication measures, information transfer to spheres outside the university can be strengthened, a structured dialogue with the outside world can be established, and informed co-decision-making by citizens can be realized.

Universities, and consequently European higher education alliances such as EURECA-PRO, must address societal needs and expectations while serving economic development. This can be achieved by linking educational institution activities with the socio-economic context within which universities operate. One example of such a link is responsible consumption and production, a Sustainable Development Goal of the UN. As an urgent ecological, social, and economic challenge (for both universities and society), responsible consumption and production—the main focus of EURECA-PRO—connects academia with society and contributes to solving a global problem.

The establishment of EURECA-PRO has faced a variety of difficulties. Current structures and processes differ between the partner universities of the alliance, which impedes the building of new, common structures and processes. This is in part due to idiosyncratic features of each university and in part the result of national legal issues and cultural characteristics.

Since the starting point at each university differs, as does the knowledge and implementation strategies present, it is difficult for EURECA-PRO to develop a common Third Mission understanding. Nonetheless, all partner universities consider Third Mission activities an important task of EURECA-PRO. As such, a common Third Mission understanding is essential. In practice, the difficulty lies in combining existing ideas, strategies, and understandings to form a joint EURECA-PRO Third Mission strategy that can be sustainably established and implemented at each university.

## 2. Establishment of Third Mission as a Main Task of Higher Education Institutions

The term “Third Mission” emerged recently in Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff’s analysis [4] of changed innovation processes and evolving university responsibilities. The term’s introduction followed rising calls by political institutions and funding partners, as well as by societal and economic entities, for the public to benefit from university activities [5]. Today Third Mission activities are part of many universities, and, even if the name differs slightly, the concept stays the same: public accounting and the importance of giving back to society by spreading knowledge and scientific findings outside of academia. There are various understandings of the term “Third Mission” but (as yet) no single, common definition [6].

In the scientific discussion of the Third Mission concept, many highly-differentiated concepts have emerged.

At their core, each one addresses the social responsibilities and duties of HEIs, often considering the entrepreneurial university as a foundational concept [7] that developed from simply commercializing research results to being invested in regional economic and social development [8]. Such discourse includes the extent to which HEIs should be considered as economic players [9], the extent of their societal engagement and their duty to contribute to improve social development [10]. Analyses of HEI’s Third Mission approaches are alternately based on economic concepts [11], focus on cultural [12] or social factors [13], on sustainability [14], on the integration of political development strategies for HEI’s [15], or on their economic efficiency [16]. Unlike economically-dominated approaches to Third Mission, participation-oriented concepts emphasize HEI’s dialogical mission to foster social co-creation rather than to simply transfer knowledge to society [14]. Within this participation-oriented approach HEIs are regarded as leaders in both knowledge and innovation transfer [17].

Since there is no universal definition of the Third Mission, EURECA-PRO’s Third Mission work has chosen to use the wording of Compagnucci and Spigarelli [18] as its foundation:

*[Third Mission] refers to an extensive array of activities performed by HEI which seek to transfer knowledge to society in general and to organizations, as well as to promote entrepreneurial skills, innovation, social welfare and the formation of human capital [18].*

Because knowledge and innovation transfer is an essential university task, all EURECA-PRO universities already practiced some form of Third Mission when starting their joint work, but the understanding and activities varied in number and scope as they were influenced by local, cultural, structural, and legal considerations. Consequently, institutional integration of various Third Mission strategies differed among the partner universities. While some universities already had a highly sophisticated and comprehensive Third Mission strategy, others had just started integrating Third Mission into their university development plans or were about to devise such activities after they were required in national Higher Education Development Plans.

Although the importance of Third Mission is widely accepted, descriptions of associated established and planned activities are in some cases not yet sufficiently comprehensive for strategic planning. The level of detail and extent of Third-Mission-related statements is therefore no basis from which to infer quality, implementation status, or perceived importance of Third Mission for individual EURECA-PRO universities. This highly heterogeneous initial position makes the importance of forming a EURECA-PRO Third Mission strategy clear: such alignment is necessary for a sustainable implementation at all alliance partner universities.

### 3. Conception of Video Formats to Raise Awareness and Motivation of Researchers

In order to develop a common understanding and a common strategy for Third Mission activities, a strategy document was created as a basis for discussion. Despite intensive cooperation, it has not yet been possible to establish a common Third Mission understanding throughout all participating universities. Awareness of EURECA-PRO and of the importance of the Third Mission needs to be further developed, both within universities and in communication with external stakeholders. To increase communication, especially with certain external target groups, and to strengthen the perception of the EURECA-PRO alliance as a common European university, specific video formats have been conceptualized and implemented.

With this video format, EURECA-PRO aims to reach external target groups, share knowledge acquired through research and education in an accessible manner, to pique target groups' interest, and to enable their participation in the public decision-making process. In sharing videos, the ideas and knowledge generated within EURECA-PRO are communicated to a broader audience. In addition, it provides impulses relevant to current challenges that can support the general public in discussing and reflecting upon these problems. This in turn feeds scientific research as knowledge transfer creates a basis for dialogue that results in societal ideas and problems being carried back into science for further exploration before researchers again give the fruits of their labour back to society.

An additional objective of EURECA-PRO videos is to enable scientists to bridge the gap between science and society by making external science communication accessible, appealing and without unreasonable hurdles for the researcher. For example, scientists can use all videos free of charge; this allows them to share the videos in their network and thus contribute to spreading knowledge by taking advantage of multiplier effects on social media. Such possibilities benefit EURECA-PRO as well, since videos are then often shared in the networks of scientists' contacts. Even if such distribution is not the primary pillar of EURECA-PRO's knowledge transfer strategy, it does contribute to the spreading of ideas and awareness both within and outside of the scientific community.

Initially, finding suitable scientists to create such videos was a challenge. At the beginning of production, the partner university responsible for Third Mission (Mittweida University of Applied Sciences) had had no direct contact with researchers of other institutions, and therefore it was difficult to reach them. A two-step process was then used to select scientists to share their research in a video. Researchers were suggested by the respective coordinators of each partner university and then collected in a database, which in the end had more than 230 entries of (junior) scientists from across the alliance potentially willing to explain their research. Next a preliminary video interview between the individual researcher and the responsible person at Mittweida University of Applied Sciences took place. If necessary, the coordinator of the partner university was also present to help with translations. These preliminary



Fig. 1: Making of a video for external science communication

interviews allowed participants to get to know each other and sought to eliminate interviewees' potential concerns or fears. At the same time, these conversations established the storyline of a prospective video.

The recording of the real interview took place at the researchers' university and involved the selected researcher, the coordinator of the visited university as well as at least two members of the production crew from Mittweida consisting of a cameraman and one or two interviewers. The interviewers had to have a solid background in video production and story-telling as well as comprehensive English skills. Researchers could also choose between their native tongue and English, with translation support for the native language provided by the university of the researcher (e.g. coordinator). This also reduces reservations and simplifies communication.

The creation of a four-minute video requires a great amount of time and effort: at least 40 working hours, including travel time and post-production. Fig. 1 shows the setting of a filming location where a scientist shows how their research reflects their personality. Similar, yet distinctly personalized scenarios were created with all interviewees to show the general public that scientists are relatable people and their research is relevant to everyday life. Tone wise the participants were encouraged to communicate expressively and understandably to reach and engage the intended target groups.

Due to the heterogeneity of target groups, it is necessary to create multiple video formats to achieve sufficient, effective communication specific to a given target group. For example, the kids ask professors format is primarily used to introduce children and young people (as consumers and future decision makers) to responsible production and consumption as early as possible.

After video production, the portrayed scientist conducted a final review; videos are not published until they have been approved. Approved videos are then shared on EURECA-PRO's own social media channels as well as on those of participating partner universities and on the scientists' own networks.

The number of videos is constantly increasing as more and more researchers want to participate in this type of science communication. In addition, the university alliance continues to grow. With each new partner, new scientists and new research content can be presented. The various video formats are also regularly reviewed and adjusted according to changing circumstances (both within the alliance and externally).

#### 4. Range of Application and Possible Scenarios of Utilization

Although each partner university has a different perception of Third Mission activities and these activities are incorporated at different strategic levels within each university, transfer of knowledge and research results are universally considered important. By profiling scientists and their research and going beyond mere content presentation to share the researchers' personalities, the video production seeks to build on such transfer activities. As a result, these videos present daily scientific work in a vivid, easy-to-understand, and entertaining way that establishes an everyday connection to scientific research.

Since the beginning of EURECA-PRO's collaboration, 20 videos have been created. The scientists' interest in participation has proven to be unexpectedly high. After having the chance to view already-produced videos, numerous scientists expressed interest in presenting their own research to an interested public in this manner. EURECA-PRO's latest partner—the University of Hasselt—also expressed interest in having some of its (junior) scientists filmed in order to encourage its researchers to engage in discussion with target groups outside of their university.

The videos are also used to reach non-scientific target groups and to promote an exchange between science and society outside of EURECA-PRO, for example by the German Academic Exchange Service [19]. Moreover, the short, concise statements scientists make during filming are also used as quotes in publications or social media posts. Another way EURECA-PRO shares research results outside of the scientific communication is by hosting Open Science events. Such events initiate a discussion between science and society focused on a specific topic currently presenting a challenge [20, 21].

#### 5. Third Mission as a Profile-building Instrument of EURECA-PRO

Knowledge transfer must also support the development of common research activities within the EURECA-PRO alliance. Such a collaboration will ensure that solutions and innovations developed in the field of Responsible Consumption and Production will build on previous knowledge and be effectively presented to society. Particularly within EURECA-PRO's five Lighthouse Research Missions, which form the research focus of the alliance, new and innovative research results can be expected. Target group-oriented preparation and communication of jointly-developed con-

tent on these research efforts is an essential Third Mission activity for EURECA-PRO.

It should also be noted that finished videos are currently being distributed and that target-group-specific ways of addressing various audiences continue to be developed. The establishment and application of assessment measures, on the other hand, remains challenging. Initial measures are vague and unspecific; in addition, they lack sufficient criteria to reliably measure activity effectiveness. Accordingly, assessment measures must be established in order to evaluate and continuously develop efficient communication capable of impacting various target groups as desired.

Finally, it is noteworthy that being showcased in a video helped scientists to become aware of the values and guidelines of a common Third Mission strategy. These videos are therefore one way for different starting points to be overcome in the creation of a European university with a common understanding of its Third Mission.

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