



Current trends in higher education and its third mission: Partnering for social and economic development in HERE countries

July 2025

Current trends in higher education and its third mission:
Partnering for social and economic development in HERE countries

July 2025

—

Cover photos copyright, trademarks, designs and other intellectual property on
www.shutterstock.com (Shutterstock, Inc.)

The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Commission.
The Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this study. Neither the Commission nor any person acting on the
Commission's behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).
Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025

PDF ISBN 978-92-9416-018-8 doi: 10.2797/ 5089367 EC-01-25- 136-EN-N

© European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2025



The Commission's reuse policy is implemented by Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents
(OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39 – <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2011/833/oj>).

Unless otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the EU, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders.
The EU does not own the copyright in relation to any images which do not carry the copyright indicator © European Union.

Your gateway to the EU, News, Highlights | European Union

Discover how the EU functions, its principles, priorities; find out about its history and member states; learn about its legal basis and your EU rights.

Table of contents

1. Executive summary	05
2. Methodology	07
3. Introduction	09
4. Relevant HERE activities in 2024	12
5. EU policy context	14
6. Bologna Process policy context	20
7. Focus groups	22
8. Online survey	26
9. Conclusion and recommendations	28
Annex: two institutional case studies	31

1

Executive summary



The network of Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) has been in existence since 2007, when it was part of the TEMPUS programme. Its role is to help build the capacity of higher education institutions in **third countries not associated to the Erasmus+ programme, in four neighbourhood regions**: the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo^[1] and Montenegro); Neighbourhood East (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine^[2]); South-Mediterranean (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine^[3], Tunisia); and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan). Each of these countries has a team of HERE nominated by the National Erasmus Office (NEO).

This publication is based on a combination of desk-based research, focus group dialogue and online survey. It set out to examine the different ways in which policy makers and higher education systems conceive and stimulate community engagement by higher education institutions.

In the third countries the profile of the third mission is low and fragmented, although the level of activity is higher than might be assumed. This disjunction indicates how difficult it is to map social interventions. The ‘third mission’ is not a term in regular usage; nor is it an established category of higher education policy. ‘Community engagement’, ‘service to society’, or simply ‘outreach’ are better received and more easily understood. The drivers of the third mission appear to be less in evidence in the third countries than in the EHEA. In descending order of importance to the respondents were employability, digitalisation, greening, citizenship and student well-being.

Recommendations are made in four categories: data collection, definition of terms, dialogue, and strategy. In which order a national government and academic community should approach these tasks depends on the particular context in which they operate. The recommendations are addressed to all stakeholders.

[1] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

[2] The territory of Ukraine as recognised by international law.

[3] This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

1. Executive summary

Not enough is known at national level about how and what individual institutions contribute to community engagement. Even within institutions there may be no widely shared awareness of the extent of outreach. **Data collection** is a necessary first step.

- Ministries are recommended to request institutional audits, in order to gain a sense of the scope and range of activities and to devise an over-arching methodology for supporting and assessing these activities.
- Institutions are recommended to conduct third mission audits in a whole-institution perspective. Internal mapping will give a sense of the volume of social interventions, their degree of integration, and the opportunities to generate synergies. Without a detailed overview, institutions lack the resource to effectively incentivise, target and evaluate community engagement.

A clear and accepted **designation**, such as the third mission, is required - to circumscribe the disparate activities, to give direction to eventual policy thrusts and, where appropriate, to create dedicated funding streams and budget heads.

- Ministries are recommended to monitor the evolving discourse of the Bologna Process and the European Union and, in national policy statements, to embed the relevant terminology in the national higher education culture.
- Ministries and institutions are recommended to participate in international projects and peer learning activities, contributing to the building of a stronger supra-national consensus on the third mission.
- Institutions are recommended, within the bounds of their autonomy and their commitment to their localities and regions, to align their governance and infrastructure on internationally accepted definitions of the third mission as they emerge.

Higher education institutions are repositories of intellectual and professional capital. They are national assets. Their capacity to foster social cohesion and economic growth at local and regional levels needs to be activated and optimised. This implies **dialogue** between all segments of the 'quintuple helix': higher education sector; business; government; other education sectors, notably VET; civil society. The goal of dialogue must be to ensure that the national and the local, the general and the particular, inform and reinforce each other.

- Ministries are recommended to set up regional / local stakeholder forums: for information exchange; dissemination of good practice; peer learning opportunities

- Public authorities at all levels are recommended to establish dedicated public communication channels designed to inform, promote, foster, and gather feedback on third mission activities.
- Institutions are recommended to ensure that their governance structures include representation of all relevant external and internal stakeholders, as well as accommodating top-down and bottom-up contributions to policy making.
- All parties are recommended to remain abreast of developments and debates in peer constituencies located in other EHEA and HERE countries.

Without clear and explicit **strategy** at system and institution levels, third mission activity is bound to be haphazard and uncoordinated. None of the sampled six country-based focus groups was able to confirm the existence of mature national strategies. Ministries are recommended

1. To formulate national third mission policy in broad terms which allow institutions to take the targeted initiatives most relevant to the needs of their locality and region;
2. To ensure that the necessary academic and financial autonomy are in place in the institutions and that dedicated third mission funding is accessible;
3. To introduce individual learning accounts for citizens to acquire new knowledge and skills appropriate to their needs;
4. To ensure that national quality assurance agencies regularly evaluate the delivery of third mission activities by the institutions, as well as the change management and staff development structures that may be required.

Institutions are recommended:

- to elaborate a whole-institution strategy, bringing the third mission into synergy with learning and teaching, research and innovation;
- to give employability, citizenship and student well-being equal priority;
- to incorporate into competence-based curricular design, where feasible, the provision of learning labs, service learning, volunteering, internships, and the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal prior learning;
- to develop a portfolio of micro-credentials which are discipline- and occupation-related, as well as extra-mural programmes in carbon, digital, financial and media literacy;
- to ensure that third mission activities are credit-bearing for students and fully recognised in the career pathways of academic and administrative staff;
- to institute effective processes of third mission monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment;
- to exchange information and good practice with the national peers and international partners. ●

2

Publication's Methodology

The prominence of citizenship in European Union policy, together with the need to follow up the Bologna ministers' endorsement (in Rome in 2020) of the Principles and Guidelines to strengthen the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA, suggested that a study of the third mission in the HERE countries would be timely and useful. This publication aims for an up-to-date overview of the policy space at national and institutional levels.

Desk research has been productive up to a certain point, but supplementation by national multi-stakeholder focus groups and by online survey has sharpened perspectives and added valuable on-the-ground material. The focus groups were convened by the NEOs in the third countries and conducted online. Their conclusions indicated where HEREs might concentrate their efforts in coming years, in terms of projects, initiatives, training and policy dialogues.

This SPHERE publication has **three intended readerships**. First and foremost, the European Commission, notably the Directorate-general Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and its associated European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), under the contractual auspices of which the SPHERE consortium operates, the Directorate-general European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), and the Directorate-general Research and Innovation (RTD).

For these DGs, the publication affords insight into the ways in which designated third countries are stimulating the third mission in their higher education systems. The intended beneficiaries are policy makers and programme designers at European level.

The second set of readers belong to the HERE community – that is to say, National Erasmus Offices (NEOs), national teams of Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs), policy makers and practitioners at national, sub-national and institutional levels. For them, it provides an overview of the European policy instruments in which their community engagement is situated. It allows national groupings to gain a sense of what is happening elsewhere. It constitutes what SPHERE trusts will be a valuable **resource and vademecum**, informing the requests for technical assistance missions (TAMs) filed by the NEOs and their teams of HEREs. Rather than a work of pure research it has practical applications which can help higher education systems and institutions articulate the third mission.

2. Methodology

The wider public of interested stakeholders – academic, students, researchers, administrators, policy makers and employers committed to socio-economic and community interventions, wherever they may be – constitute the third group.

Following an introduction (section 3) which sketches the context and the drivers of the third mission, there comes a backward glance (section 4) at the relevant activities of the HEREs in 2024. There then follow in sections 5 and 6 tabulations of the interlinked key policy documents emitted by the EU and by the Bologna Process.

In order to complement desk-based research with the testimonies of academics, students and researchers, SPHERE convened six 90-minute online focus groups, involving relevant stakeholders and activists nominated by the NEOs. The selection of six countries from the 22 participating third countries in the four regions was as follows: Lebanon and Tunisia (South-Mediterranean); Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Central Asia); Ukraine (Neighbourhood East) and Kosovo (Western Balkans). The choice was determined primarily by which NEOs were in place and fully operational. Section 7 examines what transpired when the following questions were discussed:

How is third mission defined in your country? Is it expressed in national HE policy? Is it supported by public funding?

- Does national strategy inform institutional strategy? Is it mediated through regional/local authorities?
- How is institutional strategy delivered? What are the modes of intervention? Which are the target populations?
- Who is it delivered by? What categories of staff? What student groups? Which external stakeholders?
- How is it assessed – in terms of delivery and impact?

A supporting open online survey drew responses from 15 countries; the results are set out in section 8. Although low in number, they confirm the sense that the third mission is gradually being energised – to a point at which clearer codification and stronger support become feasible.

Section 9 concludes with recommendations deriving from the findings. They are intended to give direction to future HERE activities, those planned by the SPHERE consortium under the guidance of EACEA and those conceived in-country by NEOs and HERE teams. ●



3

Publication's Introduction



The SPHERE Consortium (OBREAL and EUA) undertakes annual publications which address the needs of the national HERE teams and reflect the strategic priorities that they share with the EU. The topics are discussed with, and approved by, the European Commission's DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). In 2025, the focus is on current trends in higher education and its third mission: partnering for social and economic development in HERE countries.

The publication's principal focus is the higher education institution, with its capacity for outreach and its potential contribution to local and regional development. It is where the action taken on the ground is most visibly in or out of line with European and national policy. HEIs are the 'anchor institutions in their regions, fostering better circulation of knowledge, ensuring human capital development, and more involvement with local communities' [with] 'positive effects on family life, health, citizenship, civic engagement, social justice, and public discourse.'^[4]

The "third mission" of universities - their community engagement and their commitment to social cohesion and well-being - has many dimensions and is evolving rapidly. In contrast, the definitions of their first and second missions are secure and well-established, backed by a strong pan-European consensus. Learning and teaching (L&T) and research and innovation (R&I) feature in the prospectuses of virtually all institutions, albeit in varying proportions and with different styles of delivery.

The triangular formulation is not current everywhere. The French speak of the *carré de la connaissance*, separating research from innovation to generate a four-pronged policy approach to the higher education mission. Suffice it to note that 'service to society' is typically the last-listed priority in both the triple and quadruple models.

[4] [Staff working document](#) accompanying the EU's [Commission Communication on a European Strategy for Universities](#), p.4

3. Introduction

Rather than a lower level of importance, this may simply suggest later adoption. The oldest European universities were cloistered communities located in cities where the disjunctive distinction between ‘town and gown’ was a powerful reference. Historically, they educated an elite which, while it was called to rule, jealously guarded its separate status. While vestiges of this structure may remain, the world has moved on. The last sixty years have seen the growth of mass higher education systems responsive to complex labour market needs and, as a result, increasingly concerned with social inclusion. Universities tend still to speak of their graduates ‘going out into the world’, but the institution/society interface has become much more porous than the phrase suggests. In the twenty-first century, the educational vocation and economic function of HEIs converge. Universities now know that they are the servants of society.

So significant has been this development, that the third mission is not necessarily given explicit expression in universities’ strategic thinking. It may simply be taken for granted. Or it may be absent – but this is unlikely. It can be implicit, underpinning and informing policy decisions in L&T and R&I. What is clear is that it can take many forms. Its content may be dependent on the institution’s catchment – whether its student and staff bodies and influential stakeholders are predominantly international, national, regional or local. In some cases it depends on the existence of a national/regional strategy and its attendant funding arrangements. Where it relies on discrete external funding streams, such as the European Social Fund^[5] and the European Regional Development Fund, it may be managed by an extra-mural entity distant from mainstream institutional strategy. The degree of institutional autonomy afforded by the national higher education system is also a major factor, determining the policy space available to rectorates and senior managements.

These variables indicate that the third mission is extremely history- and context-dependent and is difficult to reduce to a useful summary description. Mapping its prevalence is challenging. This is what makes further examination worthwhile.

That being said, this overview tends firmly towards the position adopted by the Council in respect of higher education’s contribution to sustainability: “whole institution approaches [...] incorporating all areas of activity are not always sufficiently present. Such approaches can include teaching and learning; governance; research and innovation; and infrastructure, facilities and operations, and should engage learners, staff, parents, and local and wider communities”^[6]. Service to society should be so well integrated into core business that it is no mere adjunct, but a set of policies and actions which cross-refer and mutually support learning and teaching, research and innovation, to the clear benefit of the ambient community.

[5] All EU member states are currently required to commit at least 25% of their European Social Fund Plus (2021-27) allocation to the elimination of social exclusion.

[6] Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition, 2022, preamble 18

The drivers

This publication is particularly relevant at the present time. Many EU programmes have addressed issues related to the social and economic engagement of universities: COMETT, LEONARDO, TEMPUS, GRUNDTVIG... But the current drivers are either new or have higher priority than before. Climate change is the obvious example. No university is an island. The green transition becomes more urgent by the year. The higher education sector is well aware of the contribution that it can and does make, whether by R&I, focused curriculum development, creation of exemplary green campuses and off-site environmental projects.

In recent years, EU policy has given the green and digital transitions equal priority, while advancing the latter more rapidly than the former. The exponential acceleration of artificial intelligence (AI) is claiming the full attention of all policy-makers, uncertain of its impact on labour demand. Its reliance on heavy energy consumption mean that it can be a barrier to decarbonisation – a challenge to which R&I will be expected to respond.

The potentially dramatic changes in labour markets consequent on these pressures call for rapid response and step changes in skills development, up-skilling and re-skilling, on a lifelong basis. Employability becomes a transversal imperative, not just for post-secondary students but for all generations prior to retirement. The role assigned to higher education is called upon to extend its reach far beyond its traditional core recruitment of on-campus full-time students.

The rise of populism and authoritarian governments within and beyond the EU is a further factor sharpening the focus on the third mission. Social cohesion, the primacy of the rule of law, anti-corruption measures – all of these have intra- and extra-mural implications for universities, whether resisting incursions into academic freedom or committing human and financial resources to wide-ranging and collaborative citizenship education programmes. Combatting disinformation will loom large in the latter. Among the third countries not associated to the Erasmus+ programme in the four neighbourhood regions it is the candidate countries which are the most directly affected by EU policy on the rule of law; the *acquis communautaire* sets a premium on good governance.

A third major driver of the third mission is well-being. COVID-19 proved beyond all doubt that the academic community cannot isolate itself from the wider community of which it is a part. The pandemic brought into the open the urgent need for higher education institutions to do more to promote student mental health, now at greater risk given the shift to virtual learning. There are many opportunities to sustain students’ social interaction: physical mobility, traineeships, volunteering, participation in environmental projects conceived in conjunction with student associations and civil society partners. All these can contribute to a well-articulated third mission.

3. Introduction

In many higher education systems, therefore, universities face increasing pressure to provide solutions to societal and economic challenges, compete for relevance, and demonstrate their engagement. Wherever universities are formally accountable to ministries, funding bodies and regulators, they are expected to demonstrate that their activities are beneficial and impactful in the wider community. This trend has been growing in Europe, where many institutions have established partnerships with business and civil society. The third mission features innovative institutional transformation strategies, such as inter- and trans-disciplinarity of L&T and R&I, lifelong and challenge-based learning approaches, as well as open access to research and education.

Within the EHEA these pressures are preoccupying university leaderships, but how far are they driving higher education reform in the third countries? This publication aims to:

- Explore the multifaceted contributions of universities to their local ecosystems and to broader social and economic development in HERE countries
- Examine strategies of 'engagement' at national and institutional levels – how they are structured, targeted, implemented and measured
- Explore the role of external stakeholders, public and private, in governance, policy and funding
- Identify trends in different dimensions of the third mission, including L&T innovation, digitalisation, outreach, volunteering, inclusion, lifelong learning provision and industry collaboration
- Explore whether and how the third mission is integrated in the evaluation of universities' performance
- Provide recommendations on how the third mission can be enhanced to address economic and social challenges at local and international levels ●



4

Relevant HERE activities in 2024



The HERE schedule in 2024 contained a number of events in which the theme of community engagement was addressed. Their salient features – familiar to the HERE focus groups convened in early 2025 – are set out in the table below:

DATE	EVENT	PRINCIPAL THIRD MISSION ISSUES ADDRESSED
March 25 and 27	Virtual study visit to University College Cork, Ireland: <i>'Institutional approaches and strategies for greening'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Potential positive impact of green curricula and research on ambient community— Outreach: capacity building in, e.g., carbon literacy, vertical farming techniques, arboretum— Obligation on external service providers to go green
May 13-14	Seminar hosted by the International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Samarkand, Uzbekistan: <i>'Universities' third mission: partnering for social and economic development'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Importance of socio-economic context in shaping institutional third mission— Effective strategy: dependence on integration of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, as well as on student engagement— Need to develop innovative curricula, notably featuring inter-disciplinary studies— Crucial contribution of knowledge transfer, duly monitored and impact-assessed
September 3-4	Study visit hosted by Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland: <i>'Enhancing university-industry collaboration for current and future employment, innovation and sustainable ecosystems'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Good practice in innovation and knowledge transfer, via collaboration with industry, start-ups and spin-offs— Benefit to employability and to development of sustainable innovation ecosystems— Need to involve full range of stakeholders, including public authorities— Priority of work-integrated learning: learning labs, internships, volunteering

4. Relevant HERE activities in 2024

DATE	EVENT	PRINCIPAL THIRD MISSION ISSUES ADDRESSED
October 3-4	Study visit hosted jointly by Ghent University, the Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO) and Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Belgium: <i>'Inclusive internationalisation: from good intentions to measurable outcomes'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to integrate incoming international students in the host city at induction and also by ongoing activities such as volunteering Particular opportunities open to cities with diverse and multicultural populations Synergies between internationalisation and commitment to inclusion in home catchment area Inter-cultural and international competences seen in a lifelong perspective, contributing to citizenship and social cohesion
October 22	Virtual HERE networking meeting	Break-out group discussion: the evolving definition of third mission; national frameworks and legislation; regional differences and similarities. Preparation for the national focus groups to be convened in spring 2025.
November 18-19	Public online seminar: <i>'European University Alliances as models for transnational cooperation and means for policy reform'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role of Alliances in consolidating trans-European links in higher education and, by extension, in their catchment areas Contribution to cross-border socio-economic cohesion and labour market integration Development of language and inter-cultural competences
December 3-4	Annual conference held online	Break-out groups: reflections on the year's study visits and seminars, covering some of the points above
Throughout 2024	Technical Assistance Missions (TAMs)	28 TAMs were either delivered in 2024 or, for circumstances beyond control, left pending until 2025. Of these, two examined aspects of greening, two addressed inclusion, while four considered ways of making higher education provision more flexible (by the use of micro-credentials and the recognition of prior learning, for example) and thereby opening it up to non-standard students. ●

5

The European Union policy framework



The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (2021) consists of inter-dependent principles, many of which require a direct contribution from the higher education community: lifelong learning, gender equality, support for employment, work-life balance, healthcare, inclusion of people with disabilities, access to essential services.^[7] The [Action Plan](#) attached to the Pillar lays down specific targets, including the resolve to see 60% of all adults in some form of annual training by 2030. The objective has an explicit labour market focus, as is typical of the EU's policy initiatives for higher education. A selection of the most relevant, with their implications for the third mission, is tabulated below:

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
ECTS Users' Guide	2015	Section 5.2 of the Guide concerns 'the recognition of prior learning and experience'. RPL (or RPLE, as it would better be known), facilitates lifelong access to higher education by non-standard and mature students, including those already in the labour market. It thus enriches an institution's opportunities for community engagement. The EU's desire to promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning goes back at least 20 years. However, its implementation has fallen short of expectations (see also the table in section 6 below). The Guide is to be reviewed by 2027 and a revised edition is likely to appear thereafter.
Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025	2020	The Communication set out a comprehensive 5-year agenda for the EEA which, with only fleeting mentions of 'service to society', nevertheless contained relevant policy initiatives directly committing the higher education sector: inclusion; gender equality; skills and employability (including graduate tracking); teacher training; green and digital transitions; recognition. In 2022, a mid-term review stressed the importance of civil society participation in policy delivery; it promised to seek funding to secure this. A full report is due in 2025.

[7] The Pillar is in line with the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG) adopted unanimously by United Nations member states in 2015. SDG Goal 4 aspires to Quality Education for all citizens. Goal 11 aims 'to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', thus inviting third mission interventions by higher education institutions.

5. The European Union policy framework

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Commission Proposal for Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts	2021	<p>The 5-year agenda spawned other action plans, notably the European Skills Agenda (2020-2025) and the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. These have a significant bearing on the third mission. In particular, they emphasise the lifelong dimension of skills development, given the rapidity of scientific advances and labour market transformation.</p> <p>Individual learning accounts give citizens a framework and a budget within which they can undertake such training as their individual socio-economic positions and career aspirations require. The framework allows them to validate their prior learning, whatever its degree of formality. The dedicated budget brings opportunities, for example, to obtain micro-credentials, for which the Commission has proposed a parallel draft Recommendation. The accounts are a national initiative and their regulation falls outside the legal competence of the EU. The French <i>compte personnel de formation</i> has been up-and-running for many years. The state of play across the EU in 2023 indicates that other member states are engaged in a peer learning process.</p>
Commission Communication on a European Strategy for Universities	2022	<p>This Communication reformulates the 2020 EEA agenda specifically for higher education, leaving aside all that pertained to the primary and secondary sectors. It foregrounds the four flagship measures (European University initiative, a legal status for university alliances, a European degree, and the European Student Card) which confirm the key role to be played by higher education institutions. 'Universities have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research, innovation, serving society and economy'; learners' access to industrial ecosystems via traineeships and Living Labs is regarded as crucial.</p> <p>The accompanying staff working document is a valuable overview of the state of play in each of the relevant policy lines – what is already in place, what next needs to be done. The university's local ecosystem is defined as a "quintuple helix", embracing HEIs, business, government and public authorities, other educational providers, citizens and civil society organisations, in highly collaborative, open, flexible, sustainable, and ecologically sensitive ways' (p.30). Universities are regarded as 'anchor institutions in their regions, fostering better circulation of knowledge, ensuring human capital development, and more involvement with local communities' [with] 'positive effects on family life, health, citizenship, civic engagement, social justice, and public discourse.' (p.4)</p>
Erasmus +: implementation guidelines	2021-2027	<p>The Programme's 2025 work plan stresses its relevance to the themes of macro-social resilience and solidarity, as well as its synergies with other EU funds such as the European Social Fund. Labour market considerations are prominent, but so too is the concept of citizenship – variously qualified as 'active', 'European', 'global', and 'digital'.</p> <p>Citizenship education, in conjunction with inclusion, informs many of the Programme's actions, particularly in respect of European values. The Work Plan recalls that EU policy 'acknowledges that enhancing critical thinking and promoting civic, intercultural and social competences, mutual understanding and respect, ownership of democratic values and fundamental and human rights is crucial for the society as a whole, and should be linked to education for global citizenship, education for sustainable development and education for digital citizenship.' (p.24)</p>

5. The European Union policy framework

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
<u>Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025</u>		<p>The Work Plan also covers the Youth chapter of Erasmus+. It notes the strong citizenship role assigned to the network of resource centres operating under the umbrella of SALTO (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities). These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <u>SALTO Inclusion & Diversity</u> (Belgium-Flanders) ● <u>SALTO Participation & Information</u> (Estonia) ● <u>SALTO Training and Cooperation</u> (Germany) ● <u>SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus</u> (Poland) ● <u>SALTO EuroMed</u> (France) ● <u>SALTO South-East Europe</u> (Slovenia) ● <u>European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre</u> (Austria) <p>SALTO also supports the <u>Beyond Borders</u> project, in which Erasmus+ programme countries work with peers in the Eastern Partnership, Southern Mediterranean and Western Balkans.</p> <p>UNA EUROPA's <u>Future Unilab</u> works on a foresight basis. Its 'visionaries' recommend that "Universities should be committed to community-wide, lifelong learning and challenge the 'myth of meritocracy' through expanding access programmes and admissions. Narrowly defined metrics of intelligence and success need to be reconsidered, particularly as the idea of 'expert knowledge' is being redefined as universities diversify and decolonise. Partnerships with 'non-academic' organisations should be encouraged [...] in order to ensure the real world applicability and relevance of research. The European academic community should also be aware of linguistic variety and communicate with wider audiences in ways understandable for them both avoiding its jargon and academic slang and by cherishing local languages</p>
	2025	<p>In the absence of the term 'third mission, it is instructive to search the 2025 E+ Programme Guide for references to 'community'. There are 51 such occurrences. Many of these are generic, designating broad professional or generational groupings. Many are concentrated in actions targeting adult education and youth.</p> <p>More pertinent is the expression 'wider community', which tends to be used in connection with explicit programme priorities, notably inclusion and greening. The Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) chapter invokes it to foster positive impact in third countries, since it "supports the relevance, quality, modernisation and responsiveness of higher education in third countries not associated to the Programme in addressing socio-economic recovery, growth and prosperity and reacting to recent trends, in particular economic globalisation but also the recent decline in human development, fragility, and rising social, economic and environmental inequalities." [p.311]</p> <p>The CBHE chapter goes on to offer support to "modernised HEIs which will not only transfer knowledge but also will create economic and social value through the transfer of their teaching and research results to the community/country" [ibid]. This impact is conceived primarily in terms of inclusion, satisfying labour market needs, entrepreneurial innovation, citizenship and the digital and green transitions.</p>

5. The European Union policy framework

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
		<p>The Programme Guide assigns these priorities on a regional basis, as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Central Asia (CN): green deal; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs ● Neighbourhood East (NE): green deal; digital transformation; integration of migrants; governance, peace, security and human development; sustainable growth and jobs ● South Mediterranean (SM): green deal; digital transformation; integration of migrants; governance, peace, security and human development; sustainable growth and jobs ● Western Balkans (WB): green deal; digital transformation; integration of migrants; governance, peace, security and human development; sustainable growth and jobs <p>Clearly, these priorities are not third mission specific. They traverse learning and teaching, research and innovation. Of the listed eligible activities, those with the strongest outreach focus are arguably best assigned to the second mission rather than the third, e.g. those featuring technology transfer, incubation and start-ups, and broader aspects of university-business cooperation.</p> <p>However, one eligible activity stands out as a third mission imperative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● development and testing solutions to pressing social demands not addressed by the market and directed towards vulnerable groups in society; addressing societal challenges or relating to changes in attitudes and values, strategies and policies, organisational structures and processes, delivery systems and services <p>How has this priority been expressed in terms of grant allocations?</p> <p>A search for keyword ‘community’ in the E+ current CBHE project listings, filtered for the four relevant regions, captures 86 projects. Here are some recent examples, mostly coordinated by HERE countries, grouped by a selection of third mission sub-themes for easy reference. The list also includes two Jean Monnet projects:</p> <p>CITIZENSHIP AND INCLUSION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● EDUIVE (European Union: promoting cultural diversity and tolerance). A Jean Monnet module on European values, delivered by Ualikhhanov University in Kazakhstan. ● Disability as Diversity: a Palestinian project, one of the outcomes of which is the NEO-HERE publication EDU4ALL- Disability as diversity: The inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education ● The TEFCE Toolbox: an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement, located on a platform which gathers community-related good practices in curriculum development, research, and academic staff and student involvement. <p>EDUCATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● DERECKA (Development of Doctoral Education and Research Capacities of Kyrgyzstani Academia), with local coordinator ● ECEC (Enhancing Education and Care in Early Childhood in Palestine), with local coordinator

5. The European Union policy framework

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
		ENTREPRENEURSHIP <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SE.TC (Social Entrepreneurship in Time of Crises), with Lebanese coordinator • W3IH (Web3 Innovation Hub), with Montenegrin coordinator
		GREENING <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern Eco-Technologies of Sustainable Development: the Experience of the EU and Kazakhstan. A Jean Monnet module on European values, delivered by Karaganda Economic University. • SWaTH (Sustainable Wastewater Treatment for Hospitals), coordinated in Lebanon • Framing citizenship in the context of sustainable development is the UNICOM project. The 18-member partnership has very strong Ukrainian representation.
		HEALTH <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Medicine Diploma Program, coordinated in Jordan • ECNAD, Enhancement of Clinical Nutrition and Dietetic Practice in Palestine , coordinated locally
		MIGRATION AND REFUGEES <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing Modernized Curricula on Immigrants Lives, an Israeli project, now completed. • RESCUE (Refugees Education Support in MENA countries), a Lebanese project, now completed.
		SERVICE LEARNING <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ServU aims to enhance synergy between Ukrainian higher education institutions and local territorial communities to jointly contribute to the recovery of Ukraine through the implementation of service-learning education. • ECEM (Enriching Communities through Engaged Mobilities). ECEM focuses on the value and validation of student learning deriving from volunteering and other outreach activities. It has recently published a Handbook for Service Learning in Erasmus+. (ECEM is a cross-European consortium with no published coordinator; it has Armenian and Bosnian participants.)
		TRANSPORT <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DGTRANS (Transport of Dangerous Goods – Modernization of Curricula and Development of Training for Professionals in the Western Balkans HEIs), with Kosovan coordinator
		VETERINARY MEDICINE <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AquaVET (Knowledge Exchange in Aquatic Animals Medicine and Ecosystem Health in the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Regions), coordinated in Egypt • VETPRO (Development of Veterinary Faculties at Georgian HEIs to Create a New Pool of Young Veterinary Professionals in Georgia), with local coordinator

5. The European Union policy framework

DOCUMENT	DATE	EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO THE THIRD MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
		COMPREHENSIVE (WHOLE INSTITUTION) FOCUS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <u>ENHANCE-GSL</u> – building sustainable community engagement in Georgia and Sierra Leone, with Georgian coordinator
<u>Union of Skills</u>	2025	<p>Early in the text, footnote 2 insists that “skills should be understood in a broad sense through the entire Communication. It encompasses skills, knowledge and competences for life, well beyond the skills needed for the labour market.” Its focus is nevertheless firmly set on labour market needs. These are specified at EU level. So too are broader policy considerations such as European values, societal challenges, and lifelong learning. The third mission is implied insofar as it can enhance employability. Higher education systems and institutions are invited to widen their outreach by delivering adult education to, for example, the disabled, women and the elderly and by recognising non-formal and informal learning. A further indication of potential social intervention is the observation that the “share of rural young people with a higher education degree is limited in comparison to urban areas”. But these are hints. The Union of Skills Communication, conceived as a paradigm-shifting policy instrument, refrains from addressing the third mission in a programmatic manner. There is a clear expectation that implementation measures will be fleshed out at national and regional levels. ●</p>

6

The Bologna Process policy context



The policy frameworks of the Bologna Process and the EU overlap and intertwine. This is partly because the two groupings (49 and 27 countries respectively) have member states in common, partly because the European Commission is itself a member of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). The Bologna group is larger and constitutes the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Its overview of the definition and implementation of the third mission is more granular. In recent years Bologna ministers have underlined the importance of the service that higher education should give to society at large.

The ministerial conference held in Paris in **2018** committed the Bologna countries to ‘developing policies that encourage and support higher education institutions to fulfil their social responsibility and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society through enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement and ethical awareness, as well as ensuring equitable access to higher education.’

The follow-up group, the BFUG, accordingly established a Working Group on the social dimension which, in **2020**, published a set of Principles and Guidelines to strengthen the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA. (PAGs). These were adopted by the Bologna ministers at their 2020 meeting in Rome.

THE PAGS ENUMERATES TEN PRINCIPLES INFORMING THE THIRD MISSION, ALBEIT WITHOUT USING THE TERM:

1. Social dimension strategies at system & institutional levels
2. Regulatory frameworks giving higher institutions sufficient autonomy to develop effective social dimension strategies
3. Priority to inclusion throughout the education system, from primary to lifelong learning
4. Relevant data collection
5. Counselling service provision
6. Funding
7. Inclusive learning environments
8. Inclusive internationalisation
9. Inclusive community engagement
10. Effective stakeholder policy dialogue

6. The Bologna Process policy context

Each principle is supplemented by guidelines which justify the principle, recommend ways to implement it and indicate who might best take action.

In **2022** the European Commission's Eurydice Unit published [Towards Equity and Inclusion in higher education in Europe](#), which proposed a range of performance indicators for each of the PAGs. It included a traffic light scoreboard summarising the state of play in all EU member states plus Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Türkiye. In the period covered, 2020-21, the best performer was Italy, with 28 points out of 40. Principle 1 was the most widely implemented, Principle 10 the least.

The **2024** edition of the [Bologna Process Implementation Report](#) post-dates the Eurydice report by one year. Based on 2022-23 data, it carries traffic light implementation maps for eight of the ten Principles, with supplementary colour-coded country maps covering issues such as quality assurance, RPL, funded staff development support – as they relate to the third mission.

More recent still is *Trends 2024*, published by the European University Association, one of the eight consultative members of BFUG. Its findings derive from 489 institutional responses to a survey conducted in the spring and summer of 2023. A large majority of the *Trends* respondents (83%) declared that the third mission was of high importance. Its existence as a discrete strand of institutional strategy was perceived to be on an upward curve, although construed in different ways. It is no surprise that labour market servicing is the dominant imperative. The percentage responses – 61% engage in relevant skills development and in employability (38%, with possible duplication) – are nevertheless lower than might be expected. Regional and local development (51%) has a reasonably high profile, as does environmental sustainability (51%). Cooperation with partner institutions in comparable socio-economic and cultural contexts is cited by 32% of respondents.

The integration of immigrants is of high importance for only 9%; this figure must be taken as low, in view of the volume and wide distribution of unforced and forced immigration throughout the last decade. Also low (21%), despite consistent prompting by EU policy documents, is citizenship education. Service to the community, meanwhile, elicited 33% of responses. This last may have been ticked by institutions in which the various strands are not clearly segmented; a holistic approach to the third mission does not easily lend itself to setting mutually reinforcing strands in rank order.

Trends 2024 also explored the obstacles encountered by willing institutions: under-funding (24% of the 489); lack of recognition (20%); shortage of relevant staff (20%); difficulty in mapping third mission activities (15%); and meeting the demand from external sources (13%).

When the Bologna ministers met again in Tirana in 2024 they drew up a list of five 'fundamental values'. The text elaborates extensively on the public responsibility of higher education. At its core is the statement that the "higher education community should continuously inform broader society of its work and results. It should engage in the identification, analysis, and understanding of the problems that confront broader society and individual constituencies. The higher education community should also participate in designing solutions to these problems and provide expertise to meet these challenges, in accordance with its own standards and values."

At this point it is worth mentioning two useful websites. The recently concluded Erasmus+ project *Peer Learning Activities and Resources to Underpin the Principles and Guidelines for Social Dimension across the European Higher Education Area* (PLAR-u-PAGS) developed a tool-kit consisting of three items:

1. [An online self-assessment tool](#) enabling institutions to assess their third mission profile and capacity for action.
2. [A Manual for Higher Education Institutions](#) which complements each pair of Principles and Guidelines with advice on how best to operationalise them; illustrative examples of good practice are included.
3. [A Manual for Public Authorities](#) which covers the same ground from a top-level policy perspective. The two Manuals are designed to be mutually reinforcing.

An earlier Erasmus+ project coordinated by the Zagreb-based Institute for the Development of Education – *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement of Higher Education* (TEFCE) – produced a number of [policy briefs](#) and longer publications examining the constraints and challenges of developing a comprehensive third mission policy framework.

At their meeting in Tirana in **2024**, Bologna ministers also requested a revised version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) by 2026 and an updating and strengthening of the *ECTS Users' Guide* by 2027. The current editions of both date from 2015. It is not yet clear whether the third mission will fall within the remit of the former. The latter has provision for work-based learning and work placements, both of which constitute forms of community engagement. Volunteering, however, is assigned to the category of informal learning. There is an opportunity here to recognise that it might also feature in formal curricula and have credit-bearing potential. Volunteering is supported by the adult education and youth chapters of Erasmus+, as well as by the higher education actions of the Welsh [Taith](#) mobility programme.

Finally, third countries will find it worthwhile following the agendas, minutes and other papers produced by the BFUG [Thematic Peer Group D on Social Dimension](#). The Peer Group as currently convened has a three-year mandate from **2024 to 2027**. ●

7

Focus groups

Some institutions, notably those on the polytechnic / applied science side of binary systems, have long regarded community engagement as integral to their mission and do not regard it as a discrete or ancillary venture. Over recent years, however, the increasingly defensive posture of other HEIs – faced with falling budgets and the erosion of cherished academic values – has led them to forge stronger links with their local and regional communities. It has prompted wider collaboration with the business sector and efforts to demonstrate their social accountability by actions to promote public well-being.

This picture was broadly confirmed by six national focus groups convened by the NEOs in the spring of 2025. Participants included members of the HERE team, as well as ministry officials and representatives of significant stakeholder groups. Countries were selected to ensure geographical spread: two from Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), two from the Southern Mediterranean (Lebanon and Tunisia), one each from the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine) and the Western Balkans (Kosovo).

The average group size was six but would have been larger had it not been for connection problems (signal or hardware). Although few institutions could be represented, participants had a clear overview of their national situations and were able to illustrate their points with eloquent examples, whether of legal lacunae or of good academic practice. This section details their perceptions.

THE ISSUES ADDRESSED WERE THE FOLLOWING:

- ✓ Third mission strategy established at national or regional level
- ✓ Targeted support to institutions by national or regional authorities
- ✓ The degree of institutional autonomy in third mission activities
- ✓ The institutional outreach profile
- ✓ Institutional agents of third mission delivery
- ✓ Quality assurance of third mission activities
- ✓ Impact assessment
- ✓ Contribution to sustainability

7. Focus groups

Third mission strategy established at national or regional level

None of the six countries could testify to the existence or effective delivery, at national level, of a third mission strategy.

In general, national legal frameworks lacked any specification of the third mission or of community engagement as a necessary feature of university profiles. There was nevertheless a growing recognition that this represented a real shortcoming: Kosovo plans to update its HE law of 2011; in the Kyrgyz national Action Plan (2021-23) local interventions have lower priority than labour market needs and regional development; in Lebanon, a five-year strategic plan features service to society, civic engagement, partnership with the business sector and civil society, and lifelong learning, yet still a need is felt for a more targeted approach; in Tajikistan and in Tunisia, most HEIs have explicit commitments and would welcome the development of a national third mission strategy; in Ukraine, the third mission has risen up the national agenda and government has promised to issue guidelines within three years.

Targeted support by national or regional authorities

While the higher education sectors are conscious of community needs and opportunities, they evidently feel that they would be assisted in their efforts by a mature national strategic framework. They would hopefully be less dependent on their own resources and would be able to engage in longer-term planning. The third mission policy space would be clearly demarcated; incentives could be offered and recognition of community engagement assured.

Currently, while in some countries pilot programmes and discussion of performance-based funding models exist, by and large institutions act on their own initiative. Many turn to Erasmus+ and to funding bodies such as the World Bank in order to give some continuity to their activities. The difficulties are hugely magnified in Lebanon and Ukraine, where the scope for government intervention has been severely constrained by financial crisis and military intervention.

The degree of institutional autonomy in third mission activities

The extent to which HEIs engage in third mission initiatives, whether or not defined as such, indicates that they do indeed enjoy the necessary autonomy. However, the situation is less clear than might appear. In Kyrgyzstan, Tunisia and Ukraine, the degree of institutional autonomy is variable and dependent on factors such as prestige, formal status, location, as well as – within the institution – academic discipline. In Kyrgyzstan, the public universities are said to have a high level of autonomy. The Kyrgyz national Programme of Education Development 2021-2040 nevertheless notes that HEI autonomy is insufficient; a new law is in preparation which will boost it in order to further facilitate collaboration with business and society.

The institutional outreach profile

Here the picture is one of greater variety. Given that the third mission is heavily context-dependent, this is hardly surprising. In Kosovo, industry boards, alumni associations, and innovation hubs all have an influence on curriculum design. Interdisciplinary programmes exist, for example in computing and the creative industries. Internships are available, including in other Western Balkan countries, but thus far there is no recognition of prior learning (RPL) or of volunteering. New programmes are required to satisfy only criteria of quality and labour market need.

Kyrgyz universities deliver extra-mural short courses for agricultural workers on a part-time basis (or two weeks full-time), sometimes staffed by outsiders. Examples of third mission-relevant programmes include business incubation, e-commerce, computer literacy, and drone management. Volunteering in social services sector is well established. In addition, micro-credentials are under discussion; however, the development of provision beyond the curricular core is still at an early stage.

In **Lebanon** there are civic engagement courses, entrepreneurship centres, social science research projects, lifelong learning provision and other initiatives designed to open up the universities to society, but different interpretations of the third mission in teaching and learning make it hard to draw precise conclusions.

Tajikistan offers perhaps the most elaborated expression of the third mission. All students have 32 credit-bearing hours per academic year dedicated to civic engagement;

7. Focus groups

these are typically guided by themes or are “free topics” such as peace building or financial literacy. Each student is assigned an academic coordinator. The hours can also be used for volunteering and community projects. Internships are obligatory for all students in years 2, 3 and 4 of studies. Vice Rectors, faculty and student bodies, regional governments and stakeholders are said to share a commitment to social well-being, particularly in respect of rural and agricultural communities.

In the **Tunisian** higher education sector, institutions have a directorate of internships as well as a directorate of studies. Third mission activities exist in both, without being securely embedded in either. Universities typically excel in research production but less so in knowledge transfer, according to international metrics. Some have taken a leadership role in the community on specific issues such as greening and used the intelligence gathered to lobby for national policy changes.

The war in **Ukraine** imposes particular priorities on curriculum design, as it does in all aspects of higher education provision. Programme development has involved, for example, business courses for discharged veterans, history and memory studies, and urban studies with a strong focus on resilience. Outreach is largely dictated by the needs of the displaced universities and, more critically, of displaced persons; these are emergency responses to cases in which HE expertise can be called upon. Funding comes top-down: for example, special grants exist for students in emergency need.

The varied nature of national profiles nevertheless confirm the general picture: curriculum development, both internal and extra-mural, seeks to respond to local need; labour market considerations are well to the fore, as the availability of internships testifies; institutions tend to act on their own initiative in the absence of national strategies.

Institutional agents of third mission delivery

Generally speaking, third mission initiatives thrive when top-down and bottom-up efforts are coordinated. Institutional leadership of course has a key role – in generating the necessary internal regulatory structures, guiding access to funding and liaising with influential external stakeholders. In the absence of leadership at institutional level, faculty structures can also support bottom-up community interventions.

In **Tajikistan**, universities have a Vice Rector for Upbringing and Work with Society; the brief covers both student well-being and engagement with society. The role of Vice-Rectors for Research in **Lebanon** is not as broad.

The focus group pointed out some of the difficulties: the prioritisation of research means that tenure-track academics are evaluated in terms of research output and therefore lack incentive to devote time to community service.

Students, too, require appropriate recognition for volunteering and other forms of social service. Where local extra-mural projects operate effectively and at scale, they may be delivered by academics, students, external stakeholders and even international partners, depending on the focus of the activity.

Quality assurance of third mission activities

All six countries have various forms of national quality assurance. Coverage of third mission activities, however, is typically partial or absent. This is reportedly the situation in **Tunisia**, in **Kyrgyzstan**, where national licensing and accreditation procedures monitor core curriculum provision, and in **Lebanon**, where coverage may fall within the remit of internal quality assurance and may also figure in the institutions’ pursuit of international accreditation. Detailed policy is currently in draft in **Ukraine**. Two national entities operate in **Tajikistan**: the relevant ministry delivers licences and the independent agency of education control accredits quinquennially. Neither have particular regard for the third mission. The focus group expressed concern that there is no recognition of the transversal skills that may be relevant to it. The fact that these are not always captured in learning outcomes is an area of concern.

Impact assessment

It follows that, where national strategy and quality assurance mechanisms are absent or lack third mission focus, there is no systematic impact assessment of community service. This is true of all six countries which accepted to convene focus groups. Graduate employment rates, green institutional rankings, impact assessments of research and innovation – all cited by one or other of the countries – fall short of what is required.

Contribution to sustainability

The same is true of efforts to sustain programmes of civic intervention. In the absence of well-established national funding mechanisms and appropriate recognition in academic career structures, institutions’ service to society is inevitably circumstantial and at risk of early exhaustion.

Summary overview of focus groups

It must be stressed that the observations summarised above are precisely that: observations made by individual members of a very small and not comprehensively representative set of institutions. They do not constitute objective overviews of national higher education approaches to the third mission. Instead, they are indicative of current attitudes and perceptions, as well of the scope for future actions.

They suggest the vision of an optimal situation, in which:

- ✓ Third mission strategies, backed by appropriate funding and recognition mechanisms, exist at national level;
- ✓ These strategies may be operationalised by institutions in ways which are locally context-sensitive and which enjoy the buy-in of leaderships, academics, administrators and students;
- ✓ They are quality assured and impact assessed;
- ✓ Third mission projects synergise with core curricular provision, as well as with research and innovation commitments, in a whole-institution approach;
- ✓ They are guaranteed support for duration sufficient to achieve their immediate objectives and to create a basis for sustainability.

Complementing the contribution of the Kyrgyz focus group is an instructive [article](#) authored by the NEO and three academics in May 2025. It is a detailed study of the visibility on the main social media platforms of the third mission profile of Kyrgyz universities. It points to the need to convert “passive followers into an active community” (p.9), concluding that institutions must “go beyond ad-hoc posts and develop a content strategy aligned with third mission goals” (p.10). The authors provide a set of ten practical recommendations which HERE teams in all countries will find relevant and valuable.^[8]

In addition, two illustrative case studies, from Lebanon and Ukraine, are to be found in the Annex, p.31 below. The American University of Beirut has adopted what may be regarded as a ‘whole-institution’ approach to community engagement. In contrast, the Melitopol State Pedagogical University shows how a selection of university departments can act together in a targeted and circumstantially defined third mission initiative. ●

[8] A brief overview of the implementation of the third mission in Uzbek higher education can be found in no.16 (2024) of the *Journal of Higher Education Reform Experts*, pages 105-110.



8

Online survey

As a supplement to the focus groups, an open online survey drew 41 responses from 15 countries. The focus group countries all featured among the 15. This suggests that the responses tabulated in this section are best regarded as an amplification of the focus group outcomes, with some variations of emphasis. Eight NEOs were among the respondents, but the majority represented higher education institutions: four members of rectorates, 11 academics, and eight administrators who were mainly from international relations offices.

SYSTEM-LEVEL RESPONSES

How do you perceive the social role of higher education?

Increasing	19
Stable	9
Decreasing	2

How intense is higher education's service to society?

Strategic and systematic	7
Moderate level of activity (but not backed by strategy and not of high priority)	8
An emerging trend	14
Uncommon	1

Is the service to society recognised by the public authorities?

Yes, by virtue of a national strategy	10
To some extent	18
No	2

Is the term 'third mission' current in your system?

It is not widely used, but it is widely understood. It may be placed under the headings of civic engagement, service to society, community service, etc. It may also cover research and innovation and the meeting of labour market needs, but it clearly goes beyond these, to include broader social and cultural commitments.

8. Online survey

Do national authorities prescribe or propose particular issues?

Yes, but broadly defined – e.g. entrepreneurship, greening, inclusion, etc _____ 14
 No _____ 5
 Don't know _____ 11

The top two national policy prompts are greening and employability. But responses indicated that at institutional level, the two were inverted: 14 HEIs prioritised employability, against eight which prioritised greening.

INSTITUTION-LEVEL RESPONSES

How would you characterise your third mission targets?

Local _____ 9
 National _____ 15
 International _____ 1

What is your principal mode of community intervention?
 (Respondents were invited to rank the three most important)

Information events _____ 7
 Public lectures _____ 6
 Research collaborations _____ 4
 Lifelong learning _____ 2

How would you describe your infrastructure / perspectives?

Priorities and structures exist – e.g. vice-rectoral mandates _____ 16
 Currently planning expansion of third mission activities from a low base _____ 8
 Difficult to map activities across the institution _____ 1

Which are your principal social partners?

Private sector, but with public sector participation _____ 16
 Public sector, including NGOs _____ 9

What is your principal source of funding?

Own resources are the largest element in the mix _____ 17

Are your third mission activities quality assured?

Yes, via internal QA procedures, but in some cases also international rankings _____ 19
 No _____ 7

Are third mission activities recognised internally?

Yes, with a status equal to that of teaching and research ____ 7
 Yes, but with a status lower than teaching and research ____ 17
 No _____ 2

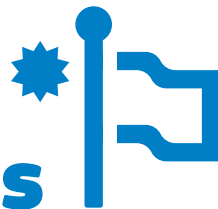
What is the prime benefit of your third mission strategy?
 (Respondents were invited to rank the three most important)

Enhances learning and teaching _____ 12
 Too early to say _____ 7
 Positive impact on staff _____ 3
 Enhances campus life _____ 2
 Enhances research (cited by seven respondents as the second ranked benefit) _____ 1
 Public visibility _____ 1



9

Conclusion and recommendations



The Manual for Higher Education Institutions and the Manual for Public Authorities (see above p.21) contain detailed recommendations on how to implement the principles and guidelines addressing the social dimension. Their intended readers are stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area. This does not mean that they have no relevance for systems and institutions outside the EHEA. On the contrary, their coverage of Principle 9 on inclusive community engagement should be regarded as essential reading, particularly as regards the legal, policy and funding frameworks of the third mission. This section takes up these points, in the perspective of the third countries not associated to the Erasmus+ programme.

What is the profile of the third mission that emerges from the focus groups and the online survey? Its profile is low and fragmented, although the level of activity is higher than might be assumed. This disjunction indicates how difficult it is to map social interventions. The reasons are clear. The 'third mission' is not a term in regular usage; nor is it therefore an established category of higher education policy. 'Community engagement', 'service to society', or simply 'outreach' are more easily understood.

The drivers of the third mission appear to be less in evidence in the third countries than in the EHEA. In descending order of importance to the respondents were employability, digitalisation, greening, citizenship and student well-being.

The recommendations below are set out in four categories: data collection, definition of terms, dialogue, and strategy. In what order a national government and academic community should approach these tasks will depend on the particular context in which they operate.

The recommendations are addressed to all stakeholders.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

Data collection

Not enough is known at national level about how and what individual institutions contribute to community engagement. Even within institutions there may be no widely shared awareness of the extent of outreach. If this is the case, effective policy making is compromised, the number of beneficiaries lower than it might be, and reputational gain unduly limited.

- Ministries are recommended to request institutional audits, in order to gain a sense of the scope and range of activities and to devise an over-arching methodology for supporting and assessing these activities.
- Institutions are recommended to conduct third mission audits in a whole-institution perspective. Internal mapping will give a sense of the volume of social interventions, their degree of integration, and the opportunities to generate synergies. Without a detailed overview, institutions lack the resource to effectively incentivise, target and evaluate community engagement.

Definition of terms

A designation, such as the third mission, is required – to circumscribe the disparate activities, to give direction to eventual policy thrusts and, where appropriate, to create dedicated funding streams and budget heads.

- Ministries are recommended to monitor the evolving discourse of the Bologna Process and the European Union and, in national policy statements, to embed the relevant terminology in the national higher education culture.
- Ministries and institutions are recommended to participate in international projects and peer learning activities, contributing to the building of a stronger supra-national consensus on the third mission.
- Institutions are recommended, within the bounds of their autonomy and their commitment to their localities and regions, to align their governance and infrastructure on internationally accepted definitions of the third mission as they emerge.

Dialogue

Higher education institutions are repositories of intellectual and professional capital. They are national assets. Their capacity to foster social cohesion and economic growth at local and regional levels needs to be activated and optimised.

This implies dialogue between all segments of the ‘quintuple helix’: higher education sector; business; government; other education sectors, notably VET; civil society. The goal of dialogue must be to ensure that the national and the local, the general and the particular, inform and reinforce each other.

- Ministries are recommended to set up regional / local stakeholder forums: for information exchange; dissemination of good practice; peer learning opportunities.
- Public authorities at all levels are recommended to establish dedicated public communication channels designed to inform, promote, foster, and gather feedback on third mission activities.
- Institutions are recommended to ensure that their governance structures include representation of all relevant external and internal stakeholders, as well as accommodating top-down and bottom-up contributions to policy making.
- All parties are recommended to remain abreast of developments and debates in peer constituencies located in other EHEA and HERE countries.

Strategy

None of the focus groups was able to confirm the existence of mature national strategies. Some governments had set up discussion forums; others were contemplating or conducting legislation. Given the current geo-strategic, economic and political turbulence, it is clearly in the interests of all countries to maximise their resilience speedily as possible; a coherent and effective third mission strategy for higher education can play an important part in this process.

MINISTRIES ARE RECOMMENDED

- ✓ to formulate national third mission policy in broad terms which allow institutions to take the targeted initiatives most relevant to the needs of their locality and region;
- ✓ to ensure that the necessary academic and financial autonomy are in place in the institutions and that dedicated third mission funding is accessible;
- ✓ to introduce individual learning accounts for citizens to acquire new knowledge and skills appropriate to their needs;
- ✓ to ensure that national quality assurance agencies regularly evaluate the delivery of third mission activities by the institutions, as well as the change management and staff development structures that may be required.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

INSTITUTIONS ARE RECOMMENDED

- ✓ to elaborate a whole-institution strategy, bringing the third mission into synergy with learning and teaching, research and innovation;
- ✓ to give employability, citizenship and student well-being equal priority;
- ✓ to incorporate into competence-based curricular design, where feasible, the provision of learning labs, service learning, volunteering, internships, and the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal prior learning;
- ✓ to develop a portfolio of micro-credentials which are discipline- and occupation-related, as well as extra-mural programmes in carbon, digital, financial and media literacy;
- ✓ to ensure that third mission activities are credit-bearing for students and fully recognised in the career pathways of academic and administrative staff;
- ✓ to institute effective processes of third mission monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment;
- ✓ to exchange information and good practice with the national peers and international partners. ●

Annex: two institutional case studies

These two studies were selected from several submitted by respondents to the survey summarised in section 8.

CASE STUDY 1: LEBANON, OFFICE OF RESEARCH, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

Third Mission Initiatives

OVERVIEW

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut (AUB) is a teaching-centred research university based on the American liberal arts model of higher education. AUB has over 8,000 students and 800 faculty members. The University encourages freedom of thought and expression and seeks to graduate men and women committed to creative and critical thinking, lifelong learning, personal integrity, civic responsibility, and leadership. AUB is an institution accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). It was first accredited in June 2004 and this accreditation was reaffirmed in 2009, 2014 and 2019. AUB includes seven faculties: Agricultural and Food Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Engineering and Architecture (Maroun Semaan Faculty), Health Sciences, Medicine, Nursing (Rafic Hariri School), and Business (Suliman S. Olayan School), offering more than 140 programs leading to the Bachelor, Master, MD and PhD degrees.

STRATEGIES

In line with the University's vision, AUB strives to improve all aspects of the human condition through teaching, service and research, and by preparing students to become empowered citizens who play a transformative role in confronting the challenges that communities and individuals face at global, regional and local levels, thereby serving the Middle East and beyond. AUB has long embraced a robust "third mission", a strategic priority that extends academia into active community service and societal engagement, addressing local issues, promoting public good, and fostering community development. It involves service to the community; societal impact and empowerment; cooperation with partner higher education institutions in Lebanon; environmental sustainability and greening; education and integration of refugees; education for citizenship; local development; employability; and skills development relevant to the labour market. In accordance with this strategy, AUB has established structures and allocated resources for a systematic approach to implementing its third mission.

ACTIONS AND PRACTICES

AUB actively pursues a wide range of community-oriented actions and practices, reinforcing its role as a regional hub for knowledge, service, and social responsibility. Service learning is embedded within several majors and academic programs across all faculties and schools, providing students with hands-on experience in addressing real-world challenges. In addition, AUB champions student volunteer programs that benefit surrounding communities and address their most pressing needs. The University regularly organises events and public lectures, to raise awareness and foster dialogue on pressing societal, environmental, and health-related issues. In addition, AUB values collaborations with a diverse set of partners, engaging in joint events and projects alongside other higher educational institutions, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private companies. Finally, considering lifelong learning as a key pillar, AUB offers tailored educational opportunities to professionals as well as to adult and senior learners.

STRUCTURES AND EXISTING INITIATIVES

AUB has established several institutes and centres to support, implement, and fulfil its third mission, notably:

- 1. The Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS):** At the core of AUB's third mission, the CCECS coordinates volunteering, community-based learning, and other service projects and is heavily engaged with the community in Lebanon. It has a comprehensive strategy for impactful civic engagement rooted in community-university partnerships, equipping students with the tools needed to analyse and respond to the most pressing needs facing Lebanon, the region and beyond. The CCECS oversees programs such as the Engaged Scholars Program (ESP) involving more than 700 undergraduate and graduate scholarship recipients from the Middle East, Africa, and Afghanistan who take part in a four-track journey beginning with community engagement skills workshops, volunteering rotations, extending to internships, and culminating in the development and implementation of a Community Support Project (CSP).
- 2. The Nature Conservation Center (NCC):** The NCC focuses on environmental research and advocacy, and is dedicated to promoting sustainable development and conservation. Through innovative research, education, and community-based initiatives, it addresses pressing environmental issues, including climate change. Collaborating with partners at local, regional, and global levels, the centre develops effective solutions to support a sustainable future.

Annex: two institutional case studies

3. The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship:

At the forefront of initiatives to promote effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab region, the Asfari Institute focuses on realistic solutions and engages in dynamic discourse, contributing to the development of a vibrant and informed community. By providing a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange, it strives to catalyse positive change, promoting a deeper understanding of civil society dynamics, mobilizing stakeholders for policy change, and fostering active citizenship in the Arab world.

4. The Continuing Education Center (CEC): In line with AUB's commitment to lifelong learning, the CEC strives to meet the educational and training needs of all learners in Lebanon and the region. It offers a variety of certificates and diploma programs, non-certificate courses, intensive professional and corporate courses, customized soft-skills workshops, and special programs for people of all ages, as well as educational and professional levels.

5. University for Seniors: The University for Seniors is a life-long learning initiative, the first of its kind in Lebanon and the Middle East. It gives older adults (50 years old and above) the opportunity to share their wisdom and passion, to learn what they have always wanted to learn in a friendly academic environment and to interact with other seniors, AUB faculty and students.

6. The AUB Neighbourhood Initiative: Established in 2007, the AUB Neighbourhood Initiative encourages AUB faculty and students to engage with issues of concern to our neighbours in Ras Beirut (the area where the University is located in Beirut) through a mix of research, outreach, and advocacy activities. The initiative team works collaboratively across the university with faculty, students, staff, and administrators, and with neighbourhood residents, businesses, and public sector decision-makers.

7. University Scholarships: AUB offers several scholarship programs, including those specifically for refugees and Lebanese citizens, through partnerships with organisations like the MasterCard Foundation. Providing comprehensive support to students, the scholarships emphasize leadership and civic engagement, with students participating in leadership development programs, community service projects, and internships.

8. Center for Women in Business: Located in the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business, the Centre is dedicated to the societal and organisational advancement of women in the Arab MENA region through various activities and projects. It represents the culmination of various efforts dedicated to making AUB the centre of knowledge creation and dissemination for women's development in business, as well as contributing to the development of relevant organisational cultures. ●

CASE STUDY 2: UKRAINE, BOGDAN KHMELNITSKY MELITOPOL STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY (DISPLACED TO ZAPORIZHZHIA)

Media literacy: a key to countering misinformation and building resilience

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University (BK MSPU) is one of the oldest universities in the South-East of Ukraine. Since May 2022, as a result of Russian aggression, BK MSPU has become a temporarily relocated higher education institution and now operates on the site of the Khortytsia National Training and Rehabilitation Academy of the Zaporizhzhia Regional Council.

BK MSPU is a community of researchers and educators united by innovative ideas and open dialogue. The activities of its scientific and pedagogical staff are highly appreciated at the state and international levels, but what makes it special is its commitment to the third mission and its constructive cooperation with the regional communities, especially those which were relocated and/or remain in the front-line area. In this way, BK MSPU contributes significantly to the harmonisation of the social and cultural space of the region.

One of the ways of making communities more resilient in wartime is the promotion of media education among citizens. The “Hub of Media Literate Citizens” is a university initiative aimed at developing a media and information literate society. Its mission is to provide citizens with the knowledge and skills that will help them understand how the media function, critically evaluate information, and make informed decisions. Through education and practical tools, the Hub seeks to create a community of people capable of navigating the media landscape responsibly, contributing to the formation of a well-informed and engaged society.

In the context of Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine, which began long before the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas, an urgent need emerged to form conscious citizens able to counteract disinformation and hate speech, and to resist hostile propaganda.

The goal and objectives of the Hub are the development of a media and information-literate society, the successful functioning of which depends on citizens’ awareness of the specifics of the functioning of the media and their ability to evaluate them.

The university departments involved are the Department of Methods of Teaching Germanic Languages; Department of Ukrainian and Foreign Literature; Department of History and Archaeology; Department of Sociology and Philosophy; Department of Informatics and Cybernetics; Department of Mathematics and Physics.

In the initial stage, a range of activities were delivered by the Hub. From November 2020 to February 2021, it undertook a sociological study of the level of infomedia literacy in the general population – “My Navigation in the Infomedia Space” – as well as 14 public events (online activities involving the target audience: webinars, training sessions, web quests, workshops, master classes, interactive lectures, game-debates, etc.) In addition, a teaching and methodological manual “Ecology of the Infomedia Space” was compiled; accompanying hand-out illustrative material was created; an educational board game “Information Bullfight” was developed; and advertising and campaign products were created (a set of calendars and stickers with quotes from famous people about the importance of infomedia literacy). These materials were distributed free of charge to schools and libraries in the city and district.

The Hub also delivered an All-Ukrainian interactive webinar on “Media literacy as a guardian of national security”, a joint initiative with the State Scientific Institution “Institute for Modernisation of Educational Content”. Its aim was to highlight the critical role of media literacy in ensuring Ukraine’s national security, especially in the context of hybrid warfare and the exposure of information to threats emanating from external sources.

The main result of the All-Ukrainian interactive webinar was to bring together representatives from different regions of Ukraine, more than 80 people – heads, teachers of secondary education institutions, teachers of vocational and technical, professional pre-higher and higher education institutions and all interested parties. Participants learned about methods of combating information attacks, means of increasing resistance to fake news and other key aspects related to national information security.

Annex: two institutional case studies

A feature of the webinar was its interactive format, which allowed participants not only to listen to experts, but also to actively participate in discussions, analyse real examples of media manipulation, work with fact-checking tools and learn to apply this knowledge in everyday life. The webinar became an important stage in continuing work on the formation of a media-literate society capable of protecting its information space. In this way, the university not only fulfils its educational and scientific mission, but also takes an active part in the formation of a media-conscious society, which is a significant contribution to the development of civic position and social responsibility.

During the first weeks of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the occupiers blocked Ukrainian mass media, internet and mobile connections. This was done in order to spread Russian propaganda, disinformation and to manipulate citizens' consciousness. The Hub held events for the citizens aimed at battling disinformation and resisting propaganda and other manipulations.

The Hub coordinators and participants continue to address various audiences. One of the most important events was a three-day offline intensive training course, the "Media Literacy Academy" held in November 2024 in Lviv's Open Space for Help, Melitopol is Right Here: Lviv. The event was organised for 30 participants: teachers of pre-school educational institutions, teachers of secondary educational institutions, higher education institutions (of which 87% are internally displaced persons [IDPs]; 83% work in displaced educational institutions). The aim of the event was the effective dissemination of information and media competences. The programme consisted of a Video Meeting with a journalist speaking on "Medical Collaboration during War"; an interactive lecture on "Social Myth as a Cultural Phenomenon"; workshops on "Strategies for Countering Hostile Propaganda", "Countering Hate Speech: Tools, Strategies, Responsibility", "Integration of Media Literacy into School Subjects as a Tool for Developing Critical Thinking", "Visual Storytelling and Infographics", "Algorithms for Effective Work with Information", "Principles of Forming a Safe Information and Media Space of the Personality", and "Visual Literacy in the Conditions of Information Warfare".

The activities of the Hub impact 2000 people. The target audience is mainly young people and educators who subsequently share their experience with students, friends, colleagues. The Hub also organises events for the wider audience especially affected by the war. All participants receive information and develop skills related to fact-checking, critical thinking, working with information, etc. Dedicated pages in social networks perform an informational and educational function through the distribution of useful infomedia materials: posters, videos, photos, infographics, etc. ●

**Current trends in higher education and its third mission:
Partnering for social and economic development in HERE countries**

OBREAL and the European University Association

July 2025



Publications Office
of the European Union