

**Maja Bosanac**

Faculty of Philosophy,  
University of Novi Sad,  
Novi Sad, Serbia  
e-mail: maja.bosanac@ff.uns.ac.rs  
ORCID 0000-0002-0185-3473

**Gorana Vojčić**

Faculty of Philosophy,  
University of Novi Sad,  
Novi Sad, Serbia  
e-mail: gorana.vojcic@ff.uns.ac.rs  
ORCID 0009-0004-0285-439X

**Jovana Turudić**

Faculty of Philosophy,  
University of Novi Sad,  
Novi Sad, Serbia  
e-mail: jovana.turudic@ff.uns.ac.rs  
ORCID 0000-0001-5939-2238

**Original scientific paper****Article info:**

Submitted: 19.05.2025  
Accepted: 11.07.2025  
UDC: 378-052:65  
DOI: 10.38190/ope.15.1.2

## THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF COEXISTENCE OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL AND CIVIC DIMENSIONS OF THE THIRD MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY FROM THE STUDENTS' POINT OF VIEW

**Abstract:** *The third mission of universities is an increasingly relevant topic of study, often promoted through global educational policies and approached from a top-down perspective. This paper offers a bottom-up view by exploring student perceptions of the third mission, with a focus on its civic and entrepreneurial dimensions. The study is based on qualitative research involving twelve students from the University of Novi Sad, using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The section on students' perceptions of the third mission forms the basis of the analysis. Several factors were identified as relevant to how students understand the university's role in society. While existing research often treats the civic and entrepreneurial dimensions as separate, this study suggests their integration is both possible and valuable. Both dimensions emphasize engagement beyond the academic context. Social entrepreneurship, as noted by several participants, may serve as a way to humanize the third mission and reconcile its economic and social roles.*

**Keywords:** *Third mission; Civic dimension; Entrepreneurial dimension; Social entrepreneurship*

**JEL codes:** I23; O35; L26

### 1. Introduction

In addition to teaching and research as the university's core functions—commonly referred to as the first mission (teaching) and the second mission (research)—there has been growing scholarly debate on the so-called third mission, which, in its broadest sense, refers to the university's relationship with its external environment and its contribution to society (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Although this broadly defined concept may encompass a variety of aspects, scholarly debates most often unfold within the dichotomy of its two frequently opposed dimensions—the entrepreneurial and the civic (Ćulum & Ledić, 2011). The growing interest in the third mission of the university has led to a reexamination of the traditional idea of the university. Namely, the conventional understanding of the university as an *ivory tower* has been challenged by a modernist view of the university as an active participant in knowledge application and a driver of social development (Branković, 2021). However, as noted by Lungulov and Kišjuhas (2021), although the third mission may be considered important or relevant in the context of contemporary discourse and education policy, universities have always played a role

in social engagement within their communities, while also functioning as social institutions in their own right.

When discussing the role of the university in contemporary society, Betts and Lee (2005) emphasize that universities are expected to assume multiple roles, including not only providing education and training but also fostering innovation, developing partnerships, attracting regional talent, and facilitating the networking of public and private sectors. Processes such as internationalization and globalization have encouraged modern universities to adopt entrepreneurial approaches, which can be interpreted through the lens of (neo)liberal capitalism (Lungulov & Kišjuhas, 2021). Some authors (Kitagawa et al., 2016) point out that, despite external pressures to adopt a universal model, universities are developing their own approaches and models of the third mission. In this regard, the previously mentioned authors examine the role of institutional third mission strategies that contribute to balancing between homogenizing isomorphic forces and heterogeneous practices. They categorize key third mission activities into the following domains: innovation and entrepreneurship, skills development and



employability, employer engagement, community involvement, and civic participation (Kitagawa et al., 2016).

Other authors (Leko Šimić et al., 2022) equate the third mission of the university with the concept of the socially responsible university, emphasizing that it represents a variant of the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility. In this context, some scholars (Vallaey, 2014) point to the importance of distinguishing among three fundamental types of responsibility—moral, legal, and social—as a philosophical task that prevents confusion when analyzing university social responsibility (USR) and corporate social responsibility (CSR), particularly in avoiding their reduction to purely philanthropic activities. Furthermore, Kouatli (2018) emphasizes that although social responsibility serves as an umbrella concept for any organization—whether corporations or universities—that takes into account its impact on society and the environment, the techniques of implementation differ between commercial corporations and universities. Based on the university social responsibility model proposed by Vallaey (2014), four key types of impact can be identified: organizational impacts—internal impacts related to the functioning of the university as a community; educational impacts—academic impacts associated with teaching and learning; cognitive impacts—those arising from the university’s research activities; and social impacts—external impacts that the university has on the broader community. In this context, Vázquez et al. (2015) argue that educational and cognitive impacts derive directly from the university as an organization, whereas organizational and social impacts are similar across universities, public institutions, and private enterprises.

The complexity of the university’s third mission has also been confirmed through comparative analyses encompassing diverse cultural and institutional contexts. In a systematic literature review conducted by Fedato et al. (2025), 21 empirical studies from various parts of the world were analyzed, with the majority focusing on European universities. The findings revealed that the most frequently examined third mission activities included knowledge and technology transfer, continuing education, social engagement, regional development, and the promotion of entrepreneurship. In addition to these dominant dimensions, some studies also addressed activities related to social innovation, research networks and collaboration,

as well as sustainability and social responsibility—highlighting the diverse approaches to the third mission found in contemporary academic literature.

Starting from the premise that numerous efforts to actualize and even institutionalize the third mission of universities are part of initiatives originating from the top (top-down approach), this paper aims to shed light on the opposite perspective, namely a bottom-up approach. The fact that the third mission is often advocated as part of global educational policy suggests that the initiatives for its implementation frequently come from representatives of the broader societal community. The aim of the approach adopted in this study is to gain insight into the perceptions of those most directly affected by the new expectations placed on higher education institutions—students. While university faculty are, to a greater or lesser extent, familiar with the terminology, potential frameworks, and mechanisms for incorporating and evaluating such activities, student perceptions of this topic remain significantly underexplored. Furthermore, in accordance with the paradigm of student-centered learning, the research treats students as key participants in the realization of the university’s third mission, whether in its entrepreneurial or civic form. In this context, Gaete Sepúlveda (2021) also highlights the importance of students as priority stakeholders in relation to social responsibility, which likewise entails the development and identification of future leaders based on their unique characteristics. The findings of a qualitative study (Pribižev Beleslin et al., 2024) reinforce these claims, showing that students emphasize the importance of personal participation in society, which they perceive as a means of improving conditions within the community. Similarly, other authors (Leko Šimić et al., 2022) underscore that students are the most important stakeholders within the university.

In order to explore students’ perceptions of the university’s third mission, the paper is structured so that, following the introductory considerations, a review of existing research is presented. As the study forms part of a broader previously conducted qualitative research project, it is characterized by a narrower analytical focus, which is discussed in more detail in the methodology section. This is followed by the interpretation of results and a discussion of the study’s limitations, after which the paper concludes with final reflections and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Previous research on the third mission of the university

Based on previous research, several approaches to studying the university's third mission can be identified.

The analytical approach to the university's third mission is predominantly conducted through theoretical analyses, but it is also evident in cases where the third mission is advocated within the framework of global education policy. Building on this, Trippi et al. (2012) draw upon four conceptual frameworks to structure their comparison of national case studies: (i) the entrepreneurial university paradigm, (ii) the idea of regional innovation systems, (iii) the "Mode 2" model of knowledge production, and (iv) the notion of the university as an engaged societal actor. Furthermore, a conceptual framework based on intellectual capital approaches for measuring third mission activities (Secundo et al., 2017) represents another line of inquiry through which a generic approach is established for the systematic analysis of third-stream activities in universities. Drawing on the goals of the third mission—technology and innovation transfer, lifelong learning, and civic engagement of members of the academic community—the third mission can also be analyzed in terms of its contribution to various forms of capital (Secundo et al., 2017). Research activities correspond to organizational capital, teaching to human capital, and civic engagement to social capital, all aligned with the needs of regional and national development. This type of research can be valuable for establishing theoretical foundations or a broader framework for studying the third mission of the university.

Quantitative studies (Bosanac, 2021; Ćulum & Ledić, 2011; Karlsdóttir et al., 2022; Spânu et al., 2024; Vázquez et al., 2015; Leko Šimić et al., 2022) are also numerous. For instance, Karlsdóttir et al. (2022) analyze individual and organizational factors that influence academics' engagement in third mission activities. The activities analyzed are grouped into the following categories: (a) Community-related activities – collaboration and communication with earlier levels of education, volunteer contributions to the community, organization of conferences and workshops, contribution to public policy, public lectures, debates, or discussions with non-academic organizations; (b) Scientific communication – interviews for print media, online media, television programs, radio programs, podcasts, and writing newspaper articles; (c) External teaching or training – training or mentoring of company employees; joint courses

or programs with industry or public organizations; participation in lifelong learning activities; (d) Applied contract research – joint funding applications with industry or public organizations; formal research and development collaborations such as contract research or joint research projects; (e) Commercialization – patent publications or applications as co-founder or applicant; licensing; participation in or initiation of cluster development, science park development, or technology transfer offices; creation of or participation in the development of spin-offs or start-ups; joint funding applications with industry or public organizations; formal research and development collaborations such as contract research or joint research projects. The findings of the study by Karlsdóttir et al. (2022) indicate that "soft" activities—such as community engagement and external teaching or training—are more accurately predicted by individual-level factors, whereas "hard" activities—such as applied contract research and commercialization—are better predicted by organizational-level factors. Furthermore, Leko Šimić et al. (2022) examine students' perceptions and attitudes in India and Croatia regarding university social responsibility. Their research is based on the pyramid of corporate social responsibility, which includes economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions, as well as the ISO 26000 standards for assessing university social responsibility. Relatedly, in a study focused on students' perceptions of university social responsibility, Vázquez et al. (2015) found that students identified internal governance—such as working conditions for staff, promotion of work-life balance, respect for diversity and equal opportunities, efficient resource use, and democratic and transparent leadership elections—as the only dimension with a significant influence on their overall perception of university social responsibility. This perception was further linked to students' satisfaction with their studies and the quality of university services (Vázquez et al., 2015).

Among qualitative studies, Loi and Di Guardo (2015) conducted an in-depth exploration of the university's third mission and identified four distinct orientation patterns: first, a coherence-oriented model, aimed at aligning public service objectives with third mission initiatives; second, an exploitation-driven approach, centered around patenting practices; third, an openness-oriented model, characterized by institutional adaptability to external change and responsiveness to societal needs; and finally, the 'old school' pattern, which treats entrepreneurial activity primarily as a financial strategy. Their framework underscores the



institutional complexity of the third mission, challenging the oversimplified dichotomy between public and private roles (Loi & Di Guardo, 2015). Moreover, for a more comprehensive approach to the topic, Boffo and Cocorullo (2019) highlight the possibility of distinguishing different dimensions of the university's third mission, wherein some aspects could be conceptualized as constituting a fourth mission. Additionally, several authors (Leko Šimić et al., 2022; Vázquez et al., 2015) equate university social responsibility with the terminology of the third mission, although referring to different levels and domains.

### 3. Methodology

The research presented in this paper forms part of a broader study titled *Student Social Engagement and Volunteering in Curricular and Extracurricular Activities* (Bosanac et al., 2024). The overarching study consisted of four major thematic sections, which addressed: student social engagement; ethnic diversity and group-specific considerations in academic work; the third mission of the university; and participants' volunteering experiences. In the present study, particular focus is placed on the data related to students' perceptions of the university's third mission, including both its entrepreneurial and civic dimensions.

The study employed a qualitative research design, with semi-structured interviews selected as the method of data collection. This method was chosen for its flexibility in guiding the conversation and for providing participants with the opportunity to freely express their views, emotions, and understanding of the topic. At the same time, it allows researchers to pose questions that may function as prompts, encouraging participants to elaborate on their perspectives (Vilg, 2016). This approach was particularly appropriate given that many students were unfamiliar with the terminology related to the university's third mission. During the interviews, a brief explanation of the third mission terminology was provided to ensure adequate understanding. For example:

*Historically, when universities first emerged in the Middle Ages, their primary mission was educational—limited to the transmission of knowledge. This is commonly referred to as the first mission. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of the Humboldtian model of the university, research became an integral part of the university's function, marking the emergence of its second mission. The third mission of the university has gained increasing attention in recent years, and in some*

*parts of the world, in the past few decades. On the one hand, this third mission may involve the development of the entrepreneurial dimension, associated with the idea of the entrepreneurial university; on the other hand, it may represent the university's contribution to civil society. In essence, the third mission reflects the university's engagement with its broader environment through these two dimensions—entrepreneurial and civic. From your perspective, what is the role of such activities within academic study programs? Do you believe that universities should be engaged in these activities, or should they be the responsibility of other institutions?*

The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes, with the shortest lasting 20 minutes and the longest 55 minutes. This variation reflects, among other things, substantial differences among participants in terms of their familiarity with and interest in the topic. The study involved twelve students from the University of Novi Sad, half of whom belonged to the majority ethnic group (Serbs), while the remaining six participants came from minority ethnic communities (Hungarians and Roma). In the broader study previously conducted (Bosanac et al., 2024), attention was given not only to students' ethnic backgrounds but also to their prior volunteering experiences. However, given that the focus of the present study is on providing a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of the responses related specifically to the third mission of the university, the analytical lens was redirected toward other potentially influential factors, such as disciplinary field and level of study. Findings from the earlier study indicated that participants from the social sciences and humanities offered different responses compared to those from other scientific fields. Accordingly, this study specifies the faculties attended by participants, in order to potentially open up new lines of inquiry.

The sample in this study includes students from various educational-scientific and educational-artistic fields, faculties, and levels of study. A total of seven participants came from the field of social sciences and humanities, including students from the Faculty of Philosophy (3), the Faculty of Law and Business Studies "Dr Lazar Vrkatić" (1), the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education (2), and the Faculty of Economics (1). The field of technical and technological sciences was represented by two participants—from the Faculty of Technical Sciences (1) and the Faculty of Technology (1). Two participants were from the natural and mathematical sciences, specifically from the Faculty of Sciences (2). Within the field of the arts,



one student participated from the Academy of Arts (1). Regarding the level of study, the sample included students from undergraduate (4), master's (3), and doctoral programs (5).

#### 4. Interpretation of Findings

Although there are numerous and notable differences among the research participants, what they share is a common recognition of the importance of the university's third mission. In the broadest sense, two participants (from the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Technical Sciences) emphasized—almost identically—the importance of development in accordance with the times in which we live. Only one participant, a student of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, expressed a clear preference for the civic dimension of the university's mission, emphasizing that the university should not serve exclusively economic interests:

*I believe that through volunteering, everyone can find as much practical experience as suits them. I think what we're missing at universities is more education for democracy. In my view, the civic dimension is much more important, and I would encourage the connection with practice more in that direction (F<sup>1</sup>, Faculty of Philosophy, doctoral studies)<sup>1</sup>.*

This position is also supported by numerous authors (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2011), who emphasize the crucial role of universities in fostering democratic values, while criticizing contemporary tendencies toward the neoliberalization of higher education. For this reason, the focus of the present study was placed on the (im)possibility of the coexistence of these dimensions. Other studies (Aznar et al., 2013) have shown that students, regardless of their disciplinary background, recognize two key dimensions of the university: the entrepreneurial—which views the university as a space for preparing students for competitiveness in the labor market and for professional specialization; and the liberal—which highlights the university's role in personal development, including the promotion of social cohesion, the reduction of inequalities, and the advancement of knowledge, skills, and competences in society, with the aim of supporting a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. Although students regard employability as the most important function of

the university, a significant finding of the study is the high level of agreement with the view that higher education should also shape the whole person, including values and attitudes (Aznar et al., 2013). Similar findings have been reported in other studies (Brooks et al., 2021; Priddle et al., 2014), which showed that, in addition to preparation for the labor market, students also perceive the purpose of higher education as an opportunity for personal and social development. In line with this, nearly all participants in our study emphasized the importance of nurturing both dimensions, most frequently referring to employability and the development of soft skills.

For example, one participant—a master's student at the Faculty of Law and Business Studies “Dr Lazar Vrkatić”—emphasized in his response the importance of connecting theoretical knowledge with practical experience, with the aim of gaining work experience that would enhance future employability:

*When we look at a job advertisement, it usually requires some work experience. It is very important that, in addition to formal knowledge acquired at university, students have the opportunity to enrich that knowledge through practice, various extracurricular activities, and volunteering. This is an excellent opportunity for all students to take advantage of the programs available within their own institution. The civic dimension applies when it comes to volunteering and social issues, while the entrepreneurial dimension relates to finance, business, and management (M, Faculty of Law and Business Studies “Dr Lazar Vrkatić”, master's studies).*

The issue of employability is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Pribižev Beleslin et al., 2024; Bosanac et al., 2024), which show that students perceive social engagement and volunteering as forms of practical learning that can facilitate the development of professional competencies, preparation for future careers, smoother entry into the labor market, and the acquisition of practical experience.

In addition to employability, the participants also viewed third mission activities as an opportunity for the development of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and organization.

*It gives people the opportunity to gain new experiences—for example, to work on their communication, certain skills, and teamwork—which can certainly be beneficial in the context of entrepreneurship (F, Faculty of Technology, doctoral studies).*

<sup>1</sup> A numerical identifier was added in this case to distinguish between two female participants who share identical basic characteristics (gender, faculty, and level of study).



*For me, for example, it was about meeting a lot of people and learning how to organize things. I became more and more organized—to the point where I didn't even need to write things down anymore because I could keep everything in my head (laughs). So I believe that this contributes to my future work, especially if I decide to get involved in another volunteering initiative (F, Faculty of Sciences, undergraduate studies).*

Previous research (Maškarin Ribarić et al., 2013) confirms that students report social engagement and volunteering as contributing to the development of soft skills, including communication and organizational skills, as well as the ability to work in a team. Furthermore, within the broader framework of soft skills development, students also cite prosocial motivations for engaging in social activities. Specifically, they highlight the development of understanding, empathy, acceptance, kindness, solidarity, and democratic values—soft skills that they once again perceive in relation to their future professional roles (Bosanac et al., 2024).

The third mission of universities has sparked considerable debate, particularly in the context of its association with knowledge capitalization, entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology transfer (Nunes Gimenez & Machado Bonacelli, 2018). Souza and Palma (2010) emphasize the importance of the entrepreneurial mission of universities, which is interpreted in light of fostering economic development. However, as some authors point out (Vefago et al., 2020), the third mission possesses a multidimensional character, encompassing not only economic aspects but also the social responsibility of universities through active engagement in the cultural and social life of the community. Entrepreneurial universities, as key actors in socioeconomic development, fulfill their role through effective public policies, state support, and enhanced cooperation between academia, industry, and society (Vefago et al., 2020). In this sense, the concept of the entrepreneurial university entails not only the transfer of knowledge to industry but also the broader involvement of academics in the societal environment. Teaching, research, and social responsibility are interwoven through simultaneous collaboration, enabling the academic community to advance educational practices and contribute to societal development through their discoveries and methodological innovations (Amaral et al., 2011). As Lorentz and colleagues (2017) note, the entrepreneurial university has the capacity to recognize and respond to social needs, transforming

them into new research projects and intellectual paradigms, thereby reinforcing a positive cycle of intellectual and social development.

The division into civic and entrepreneurial dimensions represents an approach to the third mission within the framework of an integrative concept of cross-sector collaboration (Ćulum & Ledić, 2022). Some participants explicitly refer to social entrepreneurship, which may be seen as balancing the two aforementioned approaches. Both participants who directly mention social entrepreneurship in their responses are affiliated with the social sciences and humanities. One participant, a master's student in Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy, emphasizes that he founded his own association in order to assist the Roma community, apply his professional knowledge, and generate income:

*Of course, there are many associations, including youth organizations that focus on the problems faced by young people... I mention the lack of sports activities, cultural programs, extracurricular activities, and, at the same time, there are also other areas of social activism, such as engagement with the Roma community and the challenges they face. What I am doing, what I have established, is quite... not rare, but there are many Roma associations that address the economic problems facing the community, while there are relatively few that focus on culture, language, and education (M, Faculty of Philosophy, master's studies).*

The authors Mitrović et al. (2023) link social capital with social entrepreneurship. Similarly, a participant in our study indicated that he associates his engagement, among other things, with the development of social capital:

*I enjoy being in contact with people, helping them, because I have this desire — I wouldn't call it a passion, but rather an interest — to simply do something useful and positive. I will have access to sources of information, and that access will also help me find employment; I will build friendships and enrich my social capital, my personal network of contacts. And, of course, as I said, I will also become more familiar with my own community. These are some of the motivations that push me forward (M, Faculty of Philosophy, master's studies).*

The next participant, a doctoral student in Pedagogy, provides a detailed explanation of how she perceives the role of social entrepreneurship, as well as the ways in which it could potentially be integrated into the teaching process:

*I believe that entrepreneurship is indeed important, but specifically in the context of social entrepreneurship — contributing to society and the community. As for how it could be incorporated into teaching, I definitely think it should be integrated into curricula, regardless of the field of study or the type of faculty... it should be emphasized because it can contribute both to further empowering students for their future work within the community and to their personal experience of social engagement. Regarding how it could be integrated... it would be meaningful to include it within the framework of elective courses, but as mandatory electives — that is, we would not necessarily narrow students' choices, but we would offer elective courses that are similar in nature, each involving some form of social engagement. In that way, whichever course a student chooses, they would still be placed in a situation where they engage with the community. Thus, it would be necessary to organize professional practice in such a way that it includes this component of social engagement (F<sup>2</sup>, Faculty of Philosophy, doctoral studies).*

Some authors (Nunes & Zurlo, 2024) place social entrepreneurship programs within the third mission, which they describe as an integrated practice, emphasizing the importance of connecting social innovations and universities, while other authors (Lumpkin et al., 2013) highlight the importance of the pedagogy of social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the authors (Staniškis, 2016) distinguish between the third and fourth missions and speak of the transformative-sustainable university. Additionally, as authors (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007) point out, the literature on social entrepreneurship is still not well developed, but it is increasingly being brought to the forefront, and more and more frequently, the relationship between social and commercial entrepreneurship is being studied. Moreover, the same authors highlight the importance of studying social entrepreneurship on a continuum from purely philanthropic to purely commercial, as well as the equal opportunities for applying social entrepreneurship in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors.

Of particular importance is the study of different approaches to social entrepreneurship, as they can influence both teaching and research, as well as the third mission of the university. Within the different approaches, the authors (Shahid & Alarifi, 2021) highlight the importance of the following three: (a) within the *social entrepreneurship* approach, the emphasis is placed on creating a way of thinking or presenting a general understanding of the concept and practice of social

entrepreneurship, mostly focusing on content and being theoretical; (b) within the approach *through social entrepreneurship*, an experiential phase is presented with the goal of going through the actual process of social entrepreneurial learning in safe conditions; (c) within the approach to *social entrepreneurship*, the focus is on identifying opportunities for social business, creating, growing, and developing social enterprises, so this approach is aimed at practical and prosperous social entrepreneurs with a focus on providing the necessary knowledge and skills.

In this context, the same authors (Lackéus, 2015, as cited in Shahid & Alarifi, 2021) emphasize that some approaches may be more suitable for everyone, while others are more appropriate for certain students. For example, while the approach of education through social entrepreneurship is suitable for all students, education about social entrepreneurship and education for social entrepreneurship are more suitable for students who intend to become social entrepreneurs. Applied to the third mission of the university, the question arises as to whether this topic should be part of teaching and research or whether it should be separate from the university's core missions. Some authors (Gaete Sepúlveda, 2021) note that some pillars of development are connected to teaching and research, while others are independent. In this context, (Gaete Sepúlveda, 2021) links lifelong learning to teaching, technology transfer and innovation to research, while social responsibility is independent of teaching and research.

The mentioned understanding of the third mission of the university raises an important question – how should it be implemented in the practice of university education? In one study, Priddle et al. (2014) showed that students believe employability and sustainability are important issues that universities should focus on. However, in situations where these issues were present within the curriculum, students did not believe that the courses were effective in preparing them for the labor market or raising awareness about sustainability. On the contrary, the results show that students were almost four times more likely to agree with the statement that they “developed an understanding of how to act as a responsible citizen” outside the curriculum rather than within the course. Only those skills with a clear academic character, such as “the ability to assess and critique information sources,” were recognized as a result of formal education. The question arises as to what is the cause of such a situation? (Priddle et al., 2014).



As part of our research, some participants expressed the view that activities related to the third mission of the university should be formally integrated into the curriculum:

*As for how it can be integrated... it would be significant for it to be part of an elective course, but a mandatory elective course (F<sup>2</sup>, Faculty of Philosophy, doctoral studies).*

*I believe it would be good if this were part of a course, at least an elective course. Also, a good thing are the events organized by these organizations within the faculty... Additionally, debates could be held, and I just thought that the civil sector could be involved, as they debated certain issues that were not strictly technical, but also moral ones. Perhaps technical questions that are being raised in the world today. So, this could be a way to develop the civic spirit of students (M, Faculty of Technical Sciences, master's studies).*

One participant in their response also mentions the need to evaluate the activities of the third mission by awarding additional points, which raises a dilemma that is often present in the literature, relating to how (and whether at all) social engagement can be (and should be) institutionally recognized and valued.

*I believe that 100% should be part of the faculty... It would be best if it were a part of some course as additional points to be awarded as a reward. This is the best way to approach it (M, Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, undergraduate studies).*

Some authors, such as Butin (2006), argue that attempts to formally assess social engagement, particularly through quantification, are inconsistent with its essence and could undermine its transformative and critical potential. In contrast to participants who advocate for the integration of the third mission within teaching practices, some participants express disagreement with such an approach. Their responses point to various reasons for this stance—ranging from criticism of mandatory attendance, to the burden on students, and a preference for more flexible and informal models of participation. Some of them highlight:

*Definitely not as a mandatory line because I believe there's nothing positive about forcing it. It should be available, and those people are motivated, and then we achieve some goal, some success. It's hard to work with those who are not really interested in something they have to do (M, Academy of Arts, undergraduate studies).*

*I don't think that's maybe the most practical approach [through courses], because these would just be additional courses that would become another obligation for students who are already dealing with a lot of responsibilities, such as lectures and exams (F, Faculty of Science, doctoral studies).*

*Maybe as additional activities. After all, it's a kind of experience that might help with thinking or understanding the field itself. It can still be an experience of communication with people, not necessarily related to the field... something that isn't strictly tied only to attending classes, listening to lectures, and passing exams (F, Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, doctoral studies).*

Although in the past the third mission was often perceived as external to the core functions of universities – teaching and research – contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize the need for its integration. In this sense, there is a gradual but steady shift towards including third mission activities in teaching and research processes (Pinheiro et al., 2015). However, the process of institutionalizing the third mission is not without challenges. As Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) point out, the integration of the third mission into core academic flows often faces various constraints, including tensions among the missions, lack of clear evaluation mechanisms, and overload of academic staff. Additionally, Pinheiro and colleagues (2015) indicate that resistance to such integration often arises from the need to protect fundamental academic values, including autonomy and academic excellence, as well as to avoid subordinating the university to external interests.

Based on student responses, Table 1 identifies and summarizes four dimensions of the third mission of the university, with specific factors within each dimension highlighted by students. These factors are accompanied by statements that illustrate their views.

## 5. Limitations of the research

The total sample of the research included twelve students from faculties belonging to the social-humanities, technical-technological, natural-mathematical, and artistic educational-scientific or educational-artistic fields. Medical students were not included in the research. During the initial setup of the research, the primary goal was focused on various aspects of social engage-



Figure 1. Students' perceptions of different dimensions of the university's third mission

Dimensions of the University's Third Mission	Factors	Example Statement
Entrepreneurial Dimension	Employability and work experience	<i>It is very important that, in addition to formal knowledge gained at the university, students have the opportunity to enrich their knowledge through practical experience... (M, Dr Lazar Vrkatić University, master's studies).</i>
	Development of soft skills	<i>It gives people the opportunity to gain new experiences, for example, to improve their communication, teamwork skills, which can certainly contribute in entrepreneurship (F, Faculty of Technology, doctoral studies).</i>
Civic/Social Dimension	Social responsibility and promotion of democratic values	<i>I think our universities lack more education for democracy. I believe the civic dimension is much more important, and I would encourage more practical work in that direction (F<sup>1</sup>, Faculty of Philosophy, doctoral studies).</i>
Hybrid Dimension (Social Entrepreneurship)	Social entrepreneurship	<i>I think entrepreneurship is important, but in the context of social entrepreneurship, contributing to society and the community (F<sup>2</sup>, Faculty of Philosophy, doctoral studies).</i>
Academic Integration	Integration into the curriculum	<i>I think it would be good if this could be part of a course, if nothing else, at least elective courses... (M, Faculty of Technical Sciences, master's studies).</i>
	Flexibility and voluntariness	<i>Well, I wouldn't make it mandatory at all, because I believe nothing positive comes from obligation (M, Academy of Arts, undergraduate studies).</i>

ment connected to the multicultural environment. However, the results showed that social engagement largely depends on the field of education-science/art, which led to a shift in focus from the original intention of the study. Future research is suggested to

include a larger number of students from all educational fields, faculties, and departments to potentially gather additional data that could be significant for further research on this topic. Furthermore, the condition for participation in the study was previous volunteer experience, but not a requirement for involvement in entrepreneurial initiatives (though it is also more challenging to find such participants). This might explain the more frequent emphasis on the civil dimension over the entrepreneurial one. Eleven students were from public universities, while only one student was from a private university, which could also influence differences in responses. The next study should aim to include a balanced number of students from both private and public universities, which could potentially open up new questions of significance. Additionally, future research should rely on quantitative approaches, as they provide a basis for studying potential contextual and other variables that may be relevant to researching the third mission of universities.

## 6. Conclusion

In addition to teaching and research as the core functions of universities—commonly referred to in contemporary literature as the first mission (teaching) and second mission (research)—there has been increasing discussion regarding the so-called third mission of universities, which broadly refers to the university's relationship with its surrounding environment. Given that initiatives for the activation and institutionalization of the third mission often originate from the top-down, it is especially important to explore this topic from the perspective of those directly affected—the participants in the educational process. Numerous supranational organizations, including those whose primary focus is not education, increasingly emphasize the importance of developing and studying this topic, further affirming the need to consider the perceptions of students as key stakeholders in higher education, which was the goal of our research.

The results of this qualitative research suggest that students from different educational fields recognize multiple dimensions of the third mission of universities, which go beyond the traditional divisions into entrepreneurial and civic dimensions. The participants provide a wide



range of responses, with the majority focusing on the intertwining of the entrepreneurial and civic dimensions. Students recognize the importance of developing professional competencies while also emphasizing the significance of contributing to the community. Additionally, some participants identify social entrepreneurship as a distinct category, which could provide a strong starting point for studying the third mission of universities from the perspective of the coexistence of civic and entrepreneurial dimensions rather than their dualism.

The responses from participants also reveal certain differences in students' perceptions of the third mission depending on their educational fields, particularly among students from the social-humanities sciences, who place greater emphasis on the civic dimension. This finding, as well as the results of previous qualitative research (Bosanac et al., 2024), suggests that belonging to a specific educational/scientific or artistic field might be an important contextual variable for understanding students' perceptions of the third mission, which should be further explored in future quantitative research. Furthermore, students from the social-humanities sciences, particularly from the Faculty of Philosophy, recognize the role of social entrepreneurship, which can be viewed as a hybrid form of the third mission. In this context, social entrepreneurship can provide a good foundation for linking entrepreneurial initiatives with a

framework that includes social rather than solely economic perspectives. However, despite significant differences in the realization of the economic/entrepreneurial and civic dimensions of the third mission, there are important characteristics that link both dimensions (Bosanac, 2021): (a) a greater focus on the relationship between the university and its environment; (b) the implementation of both dimensions based on the modern paradigm of learning within the constructivist framework; (c) a focus on the learner rather than the content; and, finally, (d) both concepts emphasize the importance of experiential learning.

Interviews with participants also raised the issue of integrating third mission activities into the formal educational process, which elicited various responses. While some students advocate for incorporating these activities into the curriculum—either as mandatory or elective courses—others oppose such ideas, emphasizing the need for more flexible and voluntary forms of engagement. These differences are also present in academic discussions about the institutionalization of the third mission, highlighting its complexity. Overall, the research demonstrates that students recognize the importance of the third mission as an integral part of the university. The results have raised significant questions and pointed to the need for further analysis of these issues in order to gain a deeper understanding of the potential and challenges of institutionalizing the third mission from the students' perspective.

## References

- Amaral, M., Ferreira, A., & Teodoro, P. (2011). Building an Entrepreneurial University in Brazil: The Role and Potential of University–Industry Linkages in Promoting Regional Economic Development. *Industry and Higher Education*, 25(5), 383–395. doi: 10.5367/ihe.2011.0061
- Apple, M. W. (2012). *Ideology and curriculum* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Aznar, F. J., Córdoba, A. I., Fernández, M., Raduán, M. Á., Balbuena, J. A., Blanco, C., & Raga, J. A. (2013). How students perceive the university's mission in a Spanish university: Liberal versus entrepreneurial education? *Cultura y Educación*, 25(1), 17–33. doi: 10.1174/113564013806309055
- Betts, J. R., & Lee, C. W. (2005). Universities as drivers of regional and national innovation: An assessment of the linkages from universities to innovation and economic growth. In C.M. Beach, R.W. Boadway, & R.M. McInnis (Eds.), *Higher education in Canada* (pp. 113–152). Kingston, Ontario: John Deutsch Institute for the Study of Economic Policy.
- Boffo, S., & Cocorullo, A. (2019). University Fourth Mission, Spin-Offs and Academic Entrepreneurship: Connecting Public Policies with New Missions and Management Issues of Universities. In *Higher Education Forum*, 125–142. Japan: Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University.
- Bosanac, M. (2021). *Perspektive razvoja i institucionalizacije treće misije univerziteta* [Perspectives on the development and institutionalization of the university's third mission] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Novi Sad, Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Novom Sadu.
- Bosanac, M., Trivunović B., & Sinanović E. (2024). Društveni angažman i volonterske aktivnosti studenata u okviru nastavnih i vannastavnih aktivnosti [Student social engagement and volunteer activities within curricular and extracurricular programs]. U M. Bosanac i T. Pribižev Beleslin (Ur.), *Vrednosne orijentacije i društveni angažman studenata u multietničkom okruženju* [Value orientations and social engagement of students in a multiethnic environment] (str. 63–121). Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Novom Sadu i Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Banjoj Luci.
- Branković, J. (2021). Ekonomska relevantnost znanja: percepcije o ulozi univerziteta u ekonomskom razvoju Srbije [Economic relevance of knowledge: perceptions of the role of universities in the economic development of Serbia]. U G. Pudar Draško i A. Pavlović (Ur.), *Univerzitet u Srbiji i njegova društvena odgovornost* [The university in Serbia and its social responsibility] (str. 59–85). Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Institut za demokratski angažman jugoistočne Evrope.
- Brooks, R., Gupta, A., Jayadeva, S., & Abrahams, J. (2021). Students' views about the purpose of higher education: a comparative analysis of six European countries. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(7), 1375–1388.
- Butin, D. W. (2006). The limits of service-learning in higher education. *The review of higher education*, 29(4), 473–498.
- Compagnucci, L., & Spigarelli, F. (2020). The Third Mission of the university: A systematic literature review on potentials and constraints. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 161, 120284.
- Ćulum, B., & Ledić, J. (2011). *Sveučilišni nastavnici i civilna misija sveučilišta* [University teachers and the civic mission of the university]. Rijeka: Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci.
- Fedato, G.A.L., Pires, V.M. & Bresciani, S.A.T. (2025). Social impact and mission of Brazilian public universities: Is there alignment? *RAE – Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 65(3), 1–22.
- Gaete Sepúlveda, M. A. G. (2021). *Third Mission of Universities and Students: Contributing to the Reputation and Realization of the University's Third Mission*. Paper presented at the VIII Annual International Conference 'Education and Global Cities: Third Mission of Universities and Students'. Saint-Petersburg, Russia.
- Giroux, H. A (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Karlsdottir, V., Torfason, M. T., Edvardsson, I. R., & Heijstra, T. M. (2022). Assessing academics' third mission engagement by individual and organisational predictors. *Administrative Sciences*, 13(1), 9.
- Kitagawa, F., Sánchez Barrioluengo, M., & Uyarra, E. (2016). Third mission as institutional strategies: Between isomorphic forces and heterogeneous pathways. *Science and Public Policy*, 43(6), 736–750.
- Kouatli, I. (2018). The contemporary definition of university social responsibility with quantifiable sustainability. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 15(7), 888–909.
- Leko Šimić, M., Sharma, E., & Kadlec, Ž. (2022). Students' perceptions and attitudes toward university social responsibility: Comparison between India and Croatia. *Sustainability*, 14(21), 13763.
- Loi, M., & Di Guardo, M. C. (2015). The third mission of universities: An investigation of the espoused values. *Science and Public Policy*, 42(6), 855–870.
- Lorentz, M. H. N., Minello, I. F., & Bürger, R. E. (2017). The entrepreneurial behavior of directors of a public education institution and their perception about the entrepreneurial university. *Revista Espacios*, 38(5), 1–15.





- Lumpkin, G. T., Moss, T. W., Gras, D. M., Kato, S., & Amezcua, A. S. (2013). Entrepreneurial processes in social contexts: how are they different, if at all?. *Small Business Economics*, 40, 761-783.
- Lungulov, B., & Kisjuhas, A. (2021). The university as a community, or the university in a community? From the development of social sciences towards the university's third mission. *Sociologija*, 63(3), 534-553. doi: 10.2298/SOC2103534L
- Maškarin Ribarić, H., Radović Nimac, K., & Nađ, M. (2013). Volunteering and competitiveness on the labour market in times of crisis: Student's attitudes. In *Tourism in Southern and Eastern Europe* (pp. 217-229). University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management.
- Mitrović, V., Dević, Ž., & Mitrović, I. (2023). Socijalni kapital i socijalno preduzetništvo u kontekstu održivog razvoja [Social capital and social entrepreneurship in the context of sustainable development]. *Ecologica*, 30(112), 632-638. doi: 10.18485/ecologica.2023. 30.112.17
- Nunes Gimenez, A. M., & Machado Bonacelli, M. B. (2018). Enseñanza superior y sociedad: un estudio exploratorio sobre prácticas de la tercera misión en la Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). *Journal of Technology Management & Innovation*, 13(4), 94-104. doi: 10.4067/S0718-27242018000400094
- Nunes, V. D. G. A., & Zurlo, F. (2024). Dialogues between university and community: an interdisciplinary third mission program proposal guided by strategic design towards social transformation. *Estudos em Design*, 32(2), 60-75.
- Pinheiro, R., Langa, P. V., & Pausits, A. (2015). The institutionalization of universities' third mission: Introduction to the special issue. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 227-232.
- Pribišev Beleslin, T., Partalo, D., & Antonić, M. (2024). Društveni angažman u akademskoj i društvenoj zajednici iz ugla studenata: predstavljanje rezultata kvalitativne studije [Social engagement in academic and societal communities from students' perspectives: presenting the results of a qualitative study]. U M. Bosanac i T. Pribišev Beleslin (Ur.), *Vrednosne orijentacije i društveni angažman studenata u multietničkom okruženju* [Value orientations and social engagement of students in a multiethnic environment] (str. 121–155). Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Novom Sadu i Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Banjoj Luci.
- Priddle, J., Greig, A. J., & Wiles, E. (2014). Student attitudes to sustainability and employability skills: expectations from the university curriculum. *Integrative Approaches to Sustainable Development at University Level: Making the Links*, 143-154.
- Secundo, G., Perez, S. E., Martinaitis, Ž., & Leitner, K. H. (2017). An Intellectual Capital framework to measure universities' third mission activities. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 123, 229-239.
- Shahid, S. M., & Alarifi, G. (2021). Social entrepreneurship education: A conceptual framework and review. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(3), 100533.
- Souza, N. M. S. S. de, & Palma, M. A. M. (2010). Torre de Marfim ou Universidade Empreendedora: fatores críticos no processo de inovação no contexto universitário. *Revista Brasileira de Gestão e Desenvolvimento Regional*, 6(2), 130-156.
- Spânu, P., Ulmeanu, M. E., & Doicin, C. V. (2024). Academic Third Mission through Community Engagement: An Empirical Study in European Universities. *Education Sciences*, 14(2), 141.
- Staniškis, J. K. (2016). Sustainable university: Beyond the third mission. *Environmental Research, Engineering and Management*, 72(2), 8-20.
- Tracey, P., & Jarvis, O. (2007). Toward a theory of social venture franchising. *Entrepreneurship theory and practice*, 31(5), 667-685.
- Tripl, M., Smith, H. L., & Sinozic, T. (2012). *The 'third mission' of universities and the region: Comparing the UK, Sweden and Austria*. Paper presented at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Regions in Motion – Breaking the Path", Bratislava, Slovakia. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/120460>
- Vallaes, F. (2014). University social responsibility: A mature and responsible definition. In C. Escrigas, J. G. Sánchez, B. Hall, R. Tandon, & G. Puig (Eds.), *Higher education in the world 5: Knowledge, engagement and higher education: Contributing to social change* (pp. 88–96). Barcelona: Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI).
- Vázquez, J. L., L Aza, C., & Lanero, A. (2015). Students' experiences of university social responsibility and perceptions of satisfaction and quality of service. *Ekonomski vjesnik: Review of Contemporary Entrepreneurship, Business, and Economic Issues*, 28(S), 25-39.
- Vefago, Y. B., Trierweiller, A. C., & Barcellos De Paula, L. (2020). The Third Mission of Universities: The Entrepreneurial University. *Brazilian Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 17(4), 1-9. doi: 10.14488/BJOPM.2020.042
- Vilig, K. (2016). *Kvalitativna istraživanja u psihologiji* [Qualitative research in psychology]. Beograd: Clio.