

# The “Third Mission” of Tertiary Education Challenges and Recommendations

## Position Paper of the Austrian Research Association

The Austrian Research Association (ÖFG) presents the following Position Paper as the result of an ÖFG workshop held by Christiane Spiel and Martin Gerzabek in Vienna in April 2022, and prepared in coordination with the participants and speakers of the workshop.

### Status quo

Austria, the European Union and the world are confronted with tremendous social, economic and societal challenges. COVID-19 clearly revealed how poorly we are prepared to deal with the unexpected challenges of a pandemic. Starting in February 2022, the war in Ukraine made the world an even more complicated place. In such times of crisis, institutions of tertiary education assume a special responsibility, as they generate and share knowledge from a position of utmost autonomy. Nevertheless, the public perception of science and research in Austria is significantly more negative than the average in the European Union. The statement that young people’s interest in science is essential for our future prosperity met with strong agreement by 48 per cent on EU average – yet only 27 per cent in Austria (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2237>). In other words, researchers and the results of their work suffer from the lack of prestige in Austria, which unfortunately opens the doors to fake news and conspiracy theories. All the more reason for institutions of tertiary education to exchange their scientific knowledge not exclusively in academic circles. They rather need to network with the economy, politics and society in order to assume an active, evidence-based role in developments, and communicate this role to their graduates. This is what we call their “Third Mission”. It includes the transfer of research results to society and economy as well as a societal and regional commitment, and should adopt future-oriented topics, such as digitalisation and sustainability. The Third Mission should be systematically interlinked with and based on the two primary missions of institutions of tertiary education – teaching and research. It is particularly important for our tertiary education to invest more effort into implementing the Third Mission, even if institutions have already taken important steps in that direction.

The purpose of this Position Paper is to define recommendations for the individual level (researchers, students), the institutional level (tertiary education), and the political level in order to actively adopt and implement the Third Mission. These recommendations for action take into account relevant research results as well as best practices from the past both in Austria and internationally.

### Recommendations for action

#### Individual level

- Researchers need to show both awareness and knowledge of problems in society, and they need to be ready to actively implement Third Mission activities.
- They consequently need to be willing to leave their university “ivory tower” behind in order to approach and network with stakeholders of civil society, the economy and politics.
- These steps can only be successful, if researchers know how to reach, communicate with and ultimately get through to various target groups (e.g., from lower levels of education) in society.
- Researchers need to communicate not only their research results but also their research process; transparency is always a key prerequisite to gaining trust in society and the general public.
- The philosophy and attitude of the Third Mission should also be adopted in teaching (e.g., within the framework of “service learning” or theses with external cooperation). For this reason, also students need to be willing to commit to these principles.
- It is finally imperative for institutions of tertiary education to explore how to successfully implement Third Mission activities, and to establish lasting international networks with regard to these activities.

### Institutional level

An established Third Mission plays a fundamental role in the public perception of research as well as institutions of tertiary education. Moreover, it counteracts the metaphor of the university “ivory tower”, which sees such institutions as places of intellectual isolation, separate from the needs of society. Instead an established Third Mission enables institutions of tertiary education to visualise the full range of their accomplishments and impact, which in turn makes their value to society assessable.

- Institutions of tertiary education should develop a Third Mission strategy, which takes into account their dedication, range of studies, and their regional environment. This should also include the development of study programmes and further training opportunities adjusted to the needs of society.
- The implementation of this strategy requires adequate structures to promote networking, publication, reflection as well as discussion and further development, and to consult and support individual researchers in their Third Mission activities.
- Third Mission activities should be recognised and valued at institutions of tertiary education; they should, for example, be considered in qualification processes and job appointments, and lay the foundation for the development of related career models.

### Political level

- Science and education policies should clearly communicate that the Third Mission is an integral element in the operation of institutions of tertiary education aside from research and teaching. As such it should be included in the mandate to any institution of tertiary education.
- The development of a Third Mission profile and the implementation of Third Mission activities should be taken into account in performance agreements (including relevant funding).
- In order to be able to classify and assess activities related to the Third Mission, science and education policies should establish a framework for the participatory development of adequate (also qualitative) indicators.
- Third Mission activities require funding pools to be set up, which is of particular importance to the promotion of social innovation. The visibility and appreciation for Third Mission activities should be strengthened by establishing further incentives, such as special awards (including prize money for a defined purpose).

Policy-makers in the field of science and education should ultimately bear in mind that the Third Mission plays a vital role not only in the future viability of our research and tertiary education system but also in the performance of the entire country.

Moreover, it is also essential for the three levels mentioned above to systematically exchange opinions and have a debate on the Third Mission, especially with regard to topics relevant to all three levels, such as the consideration of Third Mission activities in career models, the development of indicators, or communication with the general public in order to combat society’s hostility towards science.

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