



AVEPRO

# DEVELOPING THIRD MISSION ACTIVITIES IN ECCLESIASTICAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

A POSITION STATEMENT FOR THE GUIDANCE OF ECCLESIASTICAL HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THEIR GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP AND EXTERNAL  
REVIEW PANELS

## PREAMBLE

This paper is one of a series being developed by AVEPRO to give advice on specific aspects of the profile of the institutions within the orbit of AVEPRO. It is not intended to be a rigid set of criteria against which HEI will be assessed, but a statement of internationally recognised good practices in the conduct of the activities in question, which will inform how the HEI goes about its business, and how it frames its self-evaluation processes.

It is thus intended to be a practical document to be used by HEIs, and by external evaluation teams to provide constructive advice, and will also be of use to institution Boards of Governance, Bishops and Grand Chancellors. The prime focus is on ecclesiastical HEI's, having expertise in the fields of theology, philosophy and canon law, but it is equally relevant to free standing institutes and those who are part of a larger institution (secular or faith based).

The position statement is thus structured as a series of questions which institutes would tend to ask as they think about their Third Mission Strategy (TMS) in their specific context and the paper attempts to provide some systematic answers from international best practice, which, it is hoped, will be helpful to those HEI just starting in this domain, and those who are quite well advanced.

## STRUCTURE OF THE POSITION STATEMENT: THE SIX QUESTIONS ON WHICH THE PAPER IS BASED

What is University/ Institutional Third Mission ?

Why should institutions undertake Third Mission activities ?

What might be the scope and range of activities potentially available to satisfy the Third Mission Agenda in respect of different user groups and sponsors ?

What are the factors to be considered in the compilation and design of a Third Mission Strategy (TMS)?

What sort of operational support is likely to be needed in an institution to sustain TM activities and provide support for staff?

How might an institution get started on its Third Mission ?

## WHAT IS UNIVERSITY/INSTITUTIONAL THIRD MISSION?

The Third Mission is internationally fully recognised as a fundamental mission of higher education Institutions, alongside the more traditional ones of learning (first mission) and research (second mission). The third mission implies that Institutions must have the basic aim of a dialogue with society in order to foster a higher level of general wellbeing within their cultural, social and educational context, as well as the development of civil awareness. HEIs should therefore establish networks with external partners with the purpose of sharing and exchanging their expertise. Third Mission comprises a variety of activities aimed at reaching out to society at large and the (local, national or world) church which are suggested. In general, Third Mission activities should be a spin-off of the HEI's core activities and, as such, they are particular expressions of core study programmes and research and other institutional facilities.

Third Mission Strategy refers to the long-term policy of an HEI to organise its Third Mission activities and implement them for the benefit of the Church and society at large. A TMS includes a profile of the sort and focus of these activities, thereby taking into account the expertise of the HEI, the time it wants to invest in these activities, the required infrastructure, the financial input and return, funding possibilities, etc. It goes without saying that a TMS will acknowledge the particular needs and expectations of the broad society, its context and setting in which it is located, and also its existing capability, expertise and traditions.

There is an ongoing debate in higher education as to whether Third Mission activities should be conceived , funded and organised as a function within mainstream faculties and departments, as an element of the main missions of Education and Research , or whether it should be separately organised as a distinct Third Mission in specialist outreach offices . Both are entirely possible , and indeed can operate side by side, with an office providing support for departments and individuals. HEI should be clear as to what they would find most convenient and effective. It should thus not be forgotten that one of the aspects of Third Mission might well be an opening up , and recasting of existing education and research provision to a range of new users of these services in more accessible ways.

## WHY SHOULD INSTITUTIONS UNDERTAKE THIRD MISSION ACTIVITIES?

There are two dimensions to this question. For Ecclesiastical Institutions:

In its social vision and teaching , the Catholic Church always puts stress on the dignity of the human being (every person), and the need for the integral development of the human being. This refers to every sphere of life, including academia. Thus, ecclesiastical HEIs are called to form

a friendly environment, and assist- above all , but not exclusively- students to mature integrally and not just intellectually. Human dignity , transcending this life , is thus the foundation of the Catholic vision of human life in this world.

Thus , through Third Mission activities, ecclesiastical HEIs, being part of the Church, should consciously and responsibly engage in the basic mission of the Church expressed by Christ. “Go into the whole world, and proclaim the Good News to all every creature” (Mark 16, v 15).

Particularly since Pope Paul VI, the fundamental position of the Church’s mission in the world is that of evangelisation and dialogue. Ecclesiastical HEI’s participate in that basic mission of the Church and as such should include in their mission both the proclamation of the Gospel (cf *Veritatis Gaudium*, no. 1) and a sound integral dialogue with the world and its culture. Its core message is about God and the human being created in the image of God. Thus, it is a basic assumption of Christian faith that it is only in Jesus Christ, God-made-man, that both man and the world can come to know their identity and calling (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Consequently, the task of the third mission of ecclesiastical HEIs is of particular significance in the modern world. For ecclesiastical HEIs the third mission takes on an even more important role, as it is closely connected to the “missionary transformation of a Church that “goes forth”, entering into dialogue with a society characterised by increasingly complex dynamics, as highlighted in the Foreword to *Veritatis Gaudium* : “we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change”, marked by a general social and environmental and human crises , in which each day we can see more signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises. There is, without doubt, a need to change models of global development and redefin[e] our notion of progress. The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths. From the point of view of academic education and scientific investigation, this mammoth and urgent task demands a significant and common commitment to a radical change of paradigm or - it could be said - a bold cultural revolution”

Pope Francis has been very explicit in his proclamation that ecclesiastical faculties should engage with, and be agents of transformation of their societies, as proclaimed in *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*. This is emphatically work of an evangelising and missionary nature, and most certainly implies the adoption of the activities discussed in this PS, and encompasses both a commitment to social responsibility and social responsiveness.

The consequence is clearly the expectation that HEIs cannot be subject to an inward looking culture, but should embrace the opportunities afforded by a powerful external orientation drawing on inner strength, faith and conviction. This means engaging not only with their traditional external collaborators, but with a considerable variety of new groups and a multitude of difficult forms of interaction. The cultivation of a creative, mutually enhancing and evolving dynamic in these new relationships is thus critical to effective Third Mission Strategy.

For Higher Institutions in General:

Ecclesiastical faculties are part of the global academic community, and thus might reasonably be expected to be aware of the conventions in the HE sector generally. Third Mission activities in the secular domains may be stimulated by several factors, some of which are in common with ecclesiastical institutions. These may include the following:

- a sector wide movement to balancing academic freedom and autonomy with social responsibility espoused internally as a restatement of institutional values
- pressure from Governments to serve the needs of non-traditional students and consumers and users of sciences in return for public funding
- the evolution of academic knowledge production into the co-creation of knowledge with societal partners , and thus knowledge exchange
- the desire to break down unhealthy inward looking cultures which inhibit necessary institutional change and evolution
- the imperative of diversifying income sources away from an unhealthy reliance on one source, namely government , or indeed , student fees
- the Magna Charta Universitatum has members from both state and Catholic universities, and in 2020 published a revised version of its Charter, in which it states “Universities acknowledge they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world, and to the communities they serve; to benefit humanity, and to contribute to sustainability”.

It thus follows that the sense of worth and institutional credibility are likely to be strengthened if concrete affirmation is given to the principle of social responsiveness ie it is not just a question of “what are we good at”; but also “ what are we good for ?”

Some of the above factors are becoming clearly apparent in the ecclesiastical HE domains, also. In general, we may conclude that, in its social vision and teaching, the Church always puts stress on the dignity of every human, and the need for the integral development of the person, in every sphere of life, including and beyond academia. All RC HEIs thus inherit this obligation in both their educational and research and scholarship activities as expressed by the earlier quotation from Christ in Mark 16:15. This would seem to be a profound justification for HEIs to espouse Third Mission , broadly defined, in innovative and relevant ways.

On a macro level, the challenge-and opportunity may be phrased thus: in the effort to enhance and reinforce public and private morality in an increasingly troubled and divided world, if the Church and its institutions do not become proactive agents of ethical and moral change, what agencies could fill the gap and with what negative consequences ?

Taken together the driving forces for Catholic institutions espousing Third Mission activities seem thus irresistible and highly desirable.

## WHAT MIGHT BE THE SCOPE AND THE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES POTENTIALLY AVAILABLE TO SATISFY THE THIRD MISSION AGENDA IN RESPECT OF DIFFERENT USER GROUPS AND SPONSORS ?

It is widely accepted that Education, Research and Scholarship and Outreach are the core traditional missions of institutions. It should therefore be recognised that the wealth of intellectual expertise in Theology, Philosophy and possibly other disciplines would lend itself to being provided in non-traditional settings and locations with users who are not the traditional campus based full or part time student, nor the traditional audiences of academic research.

Any TM strategy clearly needs to be inspired by a Vision, which is shared both by internal members of the HEI and its external partners and users. This would be a robust philosophical statement, which acts as a beacon and a rallying point and a guide to action. There is much to be said for unequivocal statements which would embody the theological justifications as above; the values of any charism involved; the evangelical justification; as well as the contextual setting. Such inspiration should provide particular activities with a soul.

Various possibilities for Third Mission activities, in the light of the Vision, may thus include:

- ✓ the re-constitution/reorganisation of existing first, second and third level programmes and curriculum to suit the needs of non-traditional students, including alternative forms of non-campus based delivery, formation student assessment and pastoral care. This includes access arrangements
- ✓ programmes of lifelong adult learning/continuing professional development for: those who may have dropped out of HE; those who are seeking a career change; those who are advancing their studies to higher levels (masters, doctorates) whilst in employment; those undertaking further study for personal/leisure reasons. All of the above groups may wish to access the institute's expertise through flexible learning means, and they may not be initially theology or philosophy trained
- ✓ depending on the ecclesiastical and societal context, an HEI can develop non-traditional education (e.g. online courses, podcasts, interviews, study-days) for non-traditional groups based in particular organisations (e.g. secondary schools, hospitals, prisons, police academies, staff of homes for the elderly), perhaps focusing on questions of ethics, morality etc pertinent to the controversies of the day.
- ✓ HEIs often embody considerable cultural expertise, more or less closely linked to Christian theology, studies of religions, philosophy and canon law, and perhaps music. HEIs can offer this expertise to museums, theatres, concert organisers, heritage institutions, tourism etc., in the form of research, courses and seminars, publications and media opportunities
- ✓ many societal questions have a religious, ethical or spiritual dimension. HEIs have the expertise to contribute to the debates about these matters and/or can offer their services as consultants, or commentators in the media. The role of the HEI in providing public symposia, lectures etc to influence policy makers, opinion leaders, public opinion

generally, and interest groups, is potentially very significant in topics such as those mentioned in the next paragraph.

- ✓ HEIs may set up joint research and development projects with partners in the Church or the society. Typically, such projects will be interdisciplinary since they are rather focused on ecclesiastical/societal questions which need to access a number of disciplines to make any sense, e.g. poverty, immigration, climate change and the planet. Such projects usually necessitate cooperation of ecclesiastical institutions with Catholic or state universities who may possess the disciplines an ecclesiastical institute may lack, thus moving towards the interdisciplinary advocated by Pope Francis. The advent of *Laudato Si* related research centres are an outstanding example here. Engaging with societal partners is a critical factor in the design and conduct of such research, and the using of research to achieve maximum practical impact.
- ✓ HEI's may well set up community field projects with NGO's and civic authorities, using students as participants to expose students to societal realities, and using them as problem solvers in particular environments e.g. people migration; homelessness; education in underprivileged townships, community development.

Not all the institutes will wish, or be able to pursue all the above, consistent though they are with the teachings of the Church, in its Magisterium. A Third Mission Strategy thus necessitates a selection from the above and other possibilities, appropriate to the needs of the various users and interested parties, It is worth reiterating who these might be.

In the RC institutional sector, we have the following:

- the prime sponsors and commissioners of HEI services are naturally the church authorities in various forms, including the national bishop's conferences; individual bishops and dioceses; the Orders or consortia of local businesses or societal groups which may have established the HEI in the first place.
- beyond these, there are specific users such as national, regional and local governments; NGOs; public services; business and industry; and a variety of community and social groups.

It is evident that different of these groups have different actual and potential needs, which the RC HEI might well be able to satisfy itself, or in partnership with other bodies, academic or other. The point is that Third Mission cannot be done as an unilateral offering, but must relate to a defined need in the user community. Furthermore, if one of the justifications for espousing Third Mission is evangelisation, it becomes important to ensure that any activities in particular settings are both effective and valid expressions of the evangelical imperative, in terms of potential and alignment. Each HEI will have its own criteria to assess this, but they are likely to include impact in relation to the search and application of Truth, and the capacity to do good in terms of matters like societal peace and harmony, the alleviation of poverty, and spiritual individual and societal behaviour. The Culture of Encounter is relevant here.

Experience across both higher education in general , and successful Catholic universities in particular, indicate that there are series of critical success factors which need to be addressed by institutions, and to these we now turn.

## WHAT ARE THE FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE COMPILATION / DESIGN OF A THIRD MISSION STRATEGY ?

As has been indicated, each institution has a particular profile and setting, which differs from others, and thus, no two institutions would have the same TMS. Furthermore the range of possible TM activities from which a choice can be made is considerable, and thus careful consideration of influencing factors is needed by the institution. These will include the following:

- the TMS of an HEI should align with the latter's general mission. This means that the TMS should be part of the general mission of the HEI and exemplify it as regards the tradition and the character of the HEI, the existing relations to specific sectors in the society and the church, and the existing academic expertise of the HEI. Attempts to undertake activities that seem to be rather adjacent and unrelated are likely to be rejected or marginalized by faculty members, though working with new challenges and new partners may well take faculty out of their comfort zones, and stretch their creativity. This is positive, and is important to stimulate dynamism, and may well contribute significantly to the long term sustainability of the institution.
- the particular charism of a founding Order will have a profound influence on both what is done , and the manner in which it is provided.
- where the TMS is typically a spin-off from the core activities, reflecting and drawing on existing academic expertise, there is likely to be less resistance, though a repackaging of existing work (curriculum or research) may well be needed to make it relevant and useful enough to be applied. This may encompass, teaching through the focus on issues, rather than starting with theory.
- the last point could well be that a multi discipline approach may be needed, a point very well articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* in respect of academic responses to the despoilation of the planet , as God's Creation.
- The existing culture of the institution is important. An essentially inward looking/quasi monastic culture would be problematic. Thus, initial success on an initiative by committed and capable staff will hopefully create a positive attitude, especially where success and the benefits to individuals and the institution can be demonstrated.
- Of crucial importance is the ability of staff to create a good cooperative relationship with target user groups and collaboration at the start. This will evolve over time in depth and maturity, as the parties become familiar with each other. It should help to create a realistic assessment of the usefulness of the institution externally.



- As is indicated below, there are a number of elements necessary for the sustainability of the TMS and its agendas, and the institute should endeavour to grow this infrastructure systematically and gradually, rather than over-reach itself.
- The explicit support of the institution's governance and leadership for TM Strategy is vital, to ensure continuity, enthusiasm and recognition for effort.
- It is recognised that smaller more restricted institutes will only be able to progress so far with a modest range of activities and supports given their restricted capacity and expertise. In this respect, partnerships with other HEI may well be desirable to progress matters, both in academic and non academic support matters. Their potential is also related to the specific nature of the region in which they are situated, with its distinctive social, economic, cultural and political profile. This clearly needs careful analysis and understanding.

Realism and flexibility linked to vision and ambition would seem to be the prime desiderata.

#### WHAT ARE LIKELY TO BE THE OPERATIONAL SUPPORT ELEMENTS IN AN INSTITUTION NEEDED TO SUSTAIN THIRD MISSION ACTIVITIES AND TO SUPPORT STAFF ?

The terms strategy implies the desire to establish a long-lasting contribution and provision which is sustainable over time. Third Mission provision is thus not *ad hoc* in response to opportunities as they arise, but a systematic provision well embedded in institutional mission, culture and process. To achieve such sustainability, several elements are conventionally needed, including the following

- the alignment of TMS with the institution's underlying values,( including those of the founding organisation), its expressed mission and its traditions and character, will facilitate acceptance
- that TM activity builds on the existing academic expertise of the institution, contained in study programmes, research and publications and other elements, i.e. a spin-off. It should emanate from sources of strength, not mediocrity, in the institution's profile
- the design of TM activities should follow from an identification of the needs of potential users and stakeholders in Church and society, which implies a close dialogue and engagement, market intelligence, trend analysis and collaborative provision The creation of a high level Advisory Board of likely external societal partners meeting regularly is normally of huge value to the HEI in establishing what opportunities exist, priorities for development of initiatives raising resources for such activities, and providing valuable assistance in making the HEI more visible externally
- there needs to be an articulated policy and related processes for establishing the accurate costs of undertaking TM activity, together with pricing of activities which is likely to be variable between different users, according to ability to pay. There is a discussion to

be had as to whether the services are provided free; or whether to cover costs; or whether to generate an income. These are three perfectly legitimate positions to hold , but it needs to be clear.

- since TM is very dependent on individual academics, personnel policy and practice should be consciously geared to facilitating effective academic participation rather than inhibiting it, e.g. in terms of its inclusion as a legitimate element in staff contracts; including TM activities in staff workload calculations and as a promotion criterion; possible financial or other incentives; and appropriate staff training for innovative TM activity (e.g. the conduct of applied R and D)
- encouragement and support of leaders at different levels
- ethical guidelines to assist in determining whether particular opportunities should be pursued, including the choice of partners externally, as part of a light approvals process.
- a QA process specifically designed for these activities , with a heavy focus on consumer satisfaction and impact.
- the creation of an Outreach Office in the HEI , or in collaboration with others , which can undertake the necessary identification of opportunities , negotiate with partners; deal with costing and pricing questions; identify, induct and support staff to work on projects; help them liaise with external collaborators ; solve operational issues which arise from time to time; and conduct collaborative reviews of project impact and user satisfaction, using a fitness for purpose approach.
- measurable indicators of progress and performance. Setting some reasonable and realistic targets of activities to be attempted during a given period is sensible. Equally, progress towards these needs to be monitored, using quantitative indicators (eg students educated; consultancy income generated) and qualitative judgements. In this way, honest review should generate areas to be improved, successes to build on, or indeed, activities not to repeat again.

The point of the above is not to create complications and bureaucracy, but to ensure that the institution is fully supportive of TM endeavours , and that the focus of academics is on delivering the initiatives concerned, not being diverted to frustrating matters. That is, institutions should support and facilitate, not control.

## HOW SHOULD AN INSTITUTION GET STARTED ON ITS THIRD MISSION ?

As has been indicated , HEIs are in different starting positions in respect of TM, depending on traditions, maturity, profile and location. However, it is probably the case that most are not well developed. In this event, the following are offered for consideration, using this PS as a framework.

Discussion within the HEI and with its governance , on key questions such as ...

- Why should this particular HEI adopt TM?
- What are the hoped for benefits ?
- What are we doing at the moment which falls into this category, and how well are we doing it ?
- Are existing programmes and research sufficiently flexible to be provided for non traditional students and research users ?
- Who is doing it in the HEI ? How did it start ? How are they doing ?
- What help do they need ?
- How have we publicised successes , and how can we publicise successes internally and externally?

And then a discussion on how to proceed eg...

- Should we set up a consultative Board of university providers and leaders and external interested parties to compare perceptions of the above, and formulate an overarching set of realistic initiatives ?
- What seem to be the evident , relatively easy to start opportunities for TM activities , and how might we respond and over what period ? Be realistic and very selective , and phase the initiatives sensibly , avoiding an overload on staff.
- With whom should we collaborate externally to realise these opportunities ?
- How should we set up such a dialogue ?
- What problems can be foreseen ?
- Who might conduct these activities and what help will they need ?
- What are the resource needs , and what financial assumptions should we make in terms of costing and pricing ? Secure financial backing from the sponsors of the institution for start up investment .
- What would the above contribute to the advancement of the Magisterium and the Catholic Identity ?
- Don't waste time on MOUs which have no clear practical consequences?
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It is appreciated that HEI may wish to start at different points , but whatever that is, it should be a systematic approach, rather than a series of ad hoc decisions.

There, of course, implications for what the rector may do to facilitate the above, including setting up dialogues across the HEI to sensitise the internal community to the Vision and its manifestations, securing a stable mission to this effect, getting the Governing authorities on board with the reality of start up funding, setting up an Advisory Board of external partners and users, facilitating the design of a simple strategy.

## CONCLUSION

This Position Statement, it is hoped, will provide institutions with helpful guidance on how they might progress a Third Mission agenda and strategy, in the light of the pronouncement of the Holy Father and by the Church, as a means of contributing towards the evangelisation and missionary agendas. It is emphasised that the contents are not in any way prescriptive, but recognise the uniqueness of each institution when it comes to devising a TMS<sup>1</sup>, in terms of its size, profile, setting and traditions, and the external environment in which it has its being .

It is hoped it will be useful for institutions, their governing authorities and AVEPRO panels in respect of the advice offered, and will contribute significantly to the Quality agenda in Catholic institutions. Should HEI feel the need of external advice from specialists in this field, AVEPRO would be pleased to assist in identifying appropriate colleagues with relevant expertise and experience .

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<sup>1</sup> To get an idea of the different aspects of a TMS, see the website : <https://www.grih.nl/en>. This website focuses specifically on academic research and third mission in the humanities.