


## The Third Mission of Universities on the African Continent: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation


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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of the study was to explore the conceptualization of the third mission in African higher education and the activities that universities are required to engage in and/or are engaging in to fulfil the third role.

**Method:** The interpretive lens underpinned the study. Data were collected from the documents of the African Union Commission (AUC), in which the third mission is both implicit and explicit. We used content analysis as a data analysis technique.

**Results:** The AUC conceptualizes the third mission as a role of universities, as a social role, as forging partnerships, and as being mutually beneficial to society and the university. Universities in Africa are implementing and/or required to implement 11 third mission activities aimed at bridging the gap between them and society. Almost all third mission activities are anchored to the classical missions of teaching and research associated with higher education institutions.

**Conclusions:** We concluded that: (a) the third mission is built on the classical missions of universities; (b) the distinction between the classical missions and the third mission is that the first mission (teaching) involves the dissemination of knowledge through academic education while the second mission (research) hinges on the generation of academic knowledge, but the third mission involves both in a non-academic context; and (c) the third mission is a multidimensional concept.

**Implication for Theory and Practice:** The study adds to the limited literature on the third mission of universities from a supranational perspective. Second, it extends the conceptual framework of Molas-Gallart

and colleagues for understanding the third mission that is based on the experience of advanced higher education systems by supplementing it with four themes from Africa. Finally, it provides information the AUC may use to revise the instrument for evaluating the performance of universities on the third mission.

**Keywords:** *universities, third mission, conceptualization, contestations, activities, Africa*

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## Introduction

There has been an enlargement of missions of universities—a trend termed “academic revolutions”—since the early 19th century because of the advent of the knowledge economy, globalisation, and changes in the financial landscape in which universities operate (Pinheiro et al., 2015; Rubens et al., 2017). A plethora of stakeholders in higher education subscribe to the notion that the contemporary university can be compared to a three-legged stool (Rubens et al., 2017), with each leg representing one of three missions—teaching, research, and a third mission. This third mission—“the engagement of university with societal needs” (Molas-Gallart, 2004, p. 74) or the contribution of the university to socio-economic development—has multiple names, such as third stream activities, the third leg, the third role, community engagement, public service, and civic engagement, that underscore the idea that universities should combine the classical missions of teaching and research (Knudesen et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2019) with a contribution to society (Compagnucci & Spirarelli, 2020). Proponents of the third mission, who subscribe to the idea that universities are the engines of socio-economic development, argue that teaching and research undertaken within academic environments are necessary but not sufficient to contribute to social and economic objectives (Karlsen, 2005); hence, the imperative for universities to engage in third mission activities in addition to teaching and research.

The third mission of universities, as the name suggests, is a latecomer among the roles of universities and can be traced to the United States in the 1860s following the rise of the land grant universities (Altbach, 2008). The 11th century (or the mediaeval) university had a single mission of conserving and transmitting knowledge through teaching. The dominant thinking at the time was that a university should not venture into knowledge advancement through research. Newman (1852), one of the apologists for a teaching-only university, advanced a thesis that “a university should be a place of education, religion, the training of the mind, and the development of the whole person” (Schuetze, 2010, p. 14) and reasoned that “[i]f its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, [then] I do not see why a university should have students” (as cited in Mugabi, 2014, p. 12). However, in the early 19th century, as a result of the Humboldtian higher education reforms in Germany, the “first academic revolution” (Etzkowitz et al., 2000, p. 315) took place, and research was introduced as another role of universities. The ideals of the first academic revolution mutated the university from a teaching-only institution into a teaching and research institution (Sin et al., 2019).

The late 1980s ushered in the second academic revolution, which institutionalized the third mission as a role of the university. With the recognition of the third mission as a legitimate role, the contemporary university is now regarded as an institution with triple mandates or as having province over teaching, research, and socio-economic development (Etzkowitz, 2003). The second academic revolution gave birth to the concept of an entrepreneurial university requiring entry of the university into a triple helix model (THM) of partnerships with government and industry (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). Thus, these partnerships contribute to an innovation-driven strategy to engender regional and national economic growth (Doh, 2012). Under the THM, universities promote social, economic, and cultural growth through transferring knowledge and technology to the industrial sector and society at large (Agasisti et al., 2019).

Since the 1990s, the third mission has been featured as a salient concept in higher education policy and discourse (Knudsen et al., 2019). However, the question regarding the novelty of the third mission still dominates scholarly literature on the subject. Pausits (2015, p. 256) asserted that “[t]he third mission has always existed, but it was not seen as an additional task, but rather some initiatives made by single members of the university out of intrinsic motivation.” Therefore, the novelty of the third mission pertains to a shift of the role from the periphery of universities towards the academic core (Pinheiro et al., 2015).

In Africa, the seeds of the third mission in higher education were sown in the 1960s (Ajayi et al., 1996; Mugabi, 2014). This is evidenced by the final commitment of the 1962 UNESCO conference on the development of higher education in Africa, where it was unreservedly declared that “[f]ar from being ivory towers detached from the society in which they are situated, higher education institutions in Africa must be in close and constant touch with society...” (UNESCO, 1963, p. 12). Similarly, post-independence African leaders, within the notion of a developmental university that had gained currency following the attainment of self-rule by several African countries, stressed the nexus between the university and Africa’s development and regarded the university as a key instrument for national development (Ajayi et al., 1996).

There has been renewed interest in the third mission of universities in Africa since 2000. The third mission has an associated standard in the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA). The standard underscores the third mission as a role of universities in its own right: “A higher education institution is not only responsible for teaching, learning and research, but also for serving society” (African Union Commission [AUC], 2018a, p. 24). In addition, “[t]he [higher education] institution shall encourage engagement in community outreach programs as part of its social responsibility” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24). The standard, in a bid not to breach the value of institutional autonomy and to recognise the diversity of universities on the continent and their approaches to the third mission, is non-prescriptive regarding the activities that universities should engage in to fulfil the third mission. The African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) survey questionnaire, a tool for assessing the extent to which higher education institutions have met the standards of ASG-QA (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2019; Nabaho & Aguti, 2021), pays attention to the third mission during quality assessment. Unlike the ASG-QA, it provides some, though not exhaustive, insights into the third mission activities of universities.

Generally, there is a dearth of studies in the African context on the third mission compared to the plethora of studies on the teaching and research missions of universities. The extant studies on the third mission are skewed towards the European and American higher education contexts (see Koryakina et al., 2015; Lebeau & Cochrane, 2015; Schnurbus & Edvardsson, 2020). Studies on the third mission, particularly in the African context, are scarce (Mugabi, 2014). While studies from other contexts and higher education systems provide valuable insights into the third mission activities of universities, there has been an awakening to the fact that third mission activities vary considerably from one university system to the next (Göransson et al., 2009), that there is lack of agreement on the activities to be included in the third mission (Neary & Osborne, 2018; Pinheiro et al., 2015), and that universities are continuing to shape the third mission, as it is an evolving concept (Giuri et al., 2019). Therefore, little is known about how the third mission is decoded within the African higher education landscape and the activities that universities in Africa engage in to fulfil their role in this regard. This knowledge gap is compounded by the strategic silence of the ASG-QA on the meaning of the third mission and the non-prescriptive nature of the 10th standard of the ASG-QA on the precise third mission activities that universities should engage in.

It is against this backdrop that we answer this question: How is the third mission conceptualized in African higher education, and what activities are universities required to engage in and/or are engaging in to fulfil the third role?

## Review of Literature

The third mission has become a buzzword in higher education literature. Despite its popular usage and its gaining currency, it has proven to be a rather fluid concept. The distinction between it and the classical missions of the university is blurred. Consequently, the third mission, as a concept, has been described in the extant literature as an ambiguous (Pinheiro et al., 2015), multi-interpretable (Vorley & Nelles, 2008), and multidimensional (Knudsen et al., 2019) concept. The fluid nature of the concept has elicited competing voices and contestations regarding university activities that can be nested in the third role.

The earlier conceptualization of the third mission was associated with the contribution of higher education institutions to (regional) economic development (Berghaeuser & Hoelscher, 2020). Within this economic lens of the third mission, universities are expected to leverage their highly skilled human resource in the various academic disciplines to engender economic growth and competitiveness (see Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2007) in the current knowledge economy. The activities that are aligned to the economic viewpoint of the third mission include, inter alia, technology commercialization, cooperation with (local) industry partners, knowledge transfer, licensing, and generation of companies resulting from university-developed technology (Göransson et al., 2009; Molas-Gallart, 2004). The extant literature on the subject points to the idea that the third role of universities has a strong social focus. Therefore, proponents of the social dimension of the third mission argue that, in addition to contributing to economic growth, universities should pay equal attention to improving quality of life and contributing to society's development (Krčmářová, 2011) as well as improving the quality of public services (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). The social third mission hinges on the promotion of entrepreneurial skills, social innovation, social welfare, and human capital development (Campagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Martin & Pyles, 2013.). The distinction between the two versions of the third mission is that the social dimension, unlike the economic variant, generates partial or non-economic revenue (Volpe & Esposito, 2020).

There are many definitions of the third mission. Molas-Gallart (2004) regarded it as “engagement of university with societal needs” (p. 75) or “engagement of universities in non-academic activities” (p. 78). Molas-Gallart et al. (2002, p. 2) associated the third mission with the “generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside the academic environments.” Finally, Ray (1999 as cited in Mugabi, 2014, p. 15) defined the third mission as:

A meaningful and mutually beneficial collaboration [of HEIs] with partners in education, business, public and social service. It represents that aspect of teaching that enables learning beyond the campus walls; that aspect of research that makes what we discover useful beyond the academic community; and that aspect of service that directly benefits the public.

Thus, we identify common threads in the definitions. The third mission activities take place outside academic environments, and they aim to address social and economic needs of society with the aim of promoting sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Consensus has not emerged, and may not emerge, regarding the activities of universities that may be encapsulated in the third mission. Molas-Gallart et al. (2002), in a report to the Russell Group of Universities in the United Kingdom, developed a conceptual framework that can nuance understanding of the third mission as well guide the effort to assign specific activities to the different indisputable roles of universities. The framework affirms that third mission activities are based on capabilities (what universities have), such as knowledge and facilities, and activities (what universities do). The activities of universities comprise research, teaching, and communication of research results outside of academia for application in non-academic contexts. Based on the capabilities and activities of universities, Molas-Gallart et al. (2002, p. vii) identified third mission activities of universities as technology commercialization, entrepreneurial activities, advisory

work and contracts, commercialization of facilities, contract research, and collaboration in academic research. Others include staff flow, student placements, learning activities, curricula alignment, social networking, and non-academic dissemination. The extant studies point to a convergence of third mission activities. Studies particularly identified intellectual property, academic entrepreneurship (spin-offs), contracts with industry, contracts with public bodies, participation in policy making, lifelong learning, and involvement in social and cultural life as third mission activities (Laredo, 2007; Campagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

The literature, albeit from the Global North (i.e., North America, Europe, and Australia), points to the multidimensional nature of the third mission, lack of consensus regarding the third mission activities, and whether the boundary between the third and the classical missions is permeable. The African perspective is generally not part of the discourse. Therefore, little is known about whether there is a convergence (or lack of it) between Africa and the Global North as far as the meaning of the third mission and its activities are concerned. The perspectives from Africa, especially at the supranational level, have the potential to extend scholarship on the sensitive topic.

## Methods

### Conceptual Framework

The study is underpinned by the interpretive paradigm. We collected the data needed to answer the research question from the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) (AUC, 2018a), the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) Survey Questionnaire (AUC, 2014a), and the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b).

### Data Sources

The ASG-QA document and the AQRM questionnaire are key instruments of the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy, which is the African equivalent of the Bologna (Declaration) Process of 1999 in the context of European higher education. The harmonization strategy was adopted by the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union (COMDAF) in 2007. The strategy anticipates the creation of an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS) to replace the diverse national higher education systems of the member countries of the African Union (Nabaho, 2017; Nabaho et al., 2020). The diverse higher education systems in Africa act as a bottleneck to the mutual recognition of degrees and diplomas due to lack of trust in each other's qualifications; constrain intra-Africa mobility of students and academics; and limit the competitiveness of qualifications obtained from African universities in the global labour market. Therefore, harmonization of higher education is viewed as a strategy to overcome the constraints to Africa's integration, including academic integration, which was a dream of post-independence African political leaders.

The ASG-QA and the AQRM are not the only instruments of the harmonization strategy, but they are the only instruments that have been finalized and endorsed for implementation in national higher education spaces. Other instruments of the strategy that are either being developed or are yet to be developed and will, together with the ASG-QA and the AQRM, constitute the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework, are the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency, the African Continental Qualifications Framework, and the African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (Nabaho & Aguti, 2021).

The AQRM questionnaire was developed by the AUC after extensive consultation with the higher education community in Africa and launched in 2010. It is a voluntary instrument for assessing quality in higher education institutions in Africa and aims at supporting a culture of continuous quality improvement. The questionnaire contains three distinct sections. The first section elicits background information about the



institution, including general information on the institution; the institution's profile; the students' profile; the facilities available at the institution; the faculty/staff profile; governance and management; teaching and learning; linkage with the industry sector; research and community outreach; and internationalization (AUC, 2014a). The next section comprises key reference points and 49 institutional-level standards for rating. These reference points are governance and management; infrastructure; finance; teaching and learning; research, publication, and innovation; and community/societal engagement (AUC, 2014a). Assessment of the quality of education follows the approach of quality audits in higher education, whose hallmarks are self-assessment followed by peer review commissioned by external quality assurance agencies of national higher education systems (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2019). The point of departure as far as the AQRM is concerned is that validation of the self-assessment report (or peer review) is a responsibility of the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation [HAQAA] Initiative on behalf of the AUC. The assessment reports nest the institutions and their academic programs into five categories: poor, insufficient, satisfactory, good, and excellent quality. Therefore, the AQRM does not rank higher education institutions, and this is what sets it apart from ranking schemes in higher education (AUC, 2018b).

The ASG-QA document was developed in 2018. It comprises three parts. Part A contains the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, Part B outlines the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance, and Part C deals with internal quality assurance for external quality assurance agencies (AUC, 2018a). The internal quality assurance component, which is of primary interest for this article, contains 13 institutional level standards (AUC, 2018a). The tenth standard, Community Engagement, resonates with the third mission. However, some third mission activities are either implicit or explicit in the standards relating to the first and second missions. The two instruments of the harmonization strategy are complementary to each other. The ASG-QA stipulates the criteria (or standards) for quality assessment, while the AQRM questionnaire is used to assess the extent to which higher education institutions have complied with the standards that provide a common language of quality in the African higher education landscape. Though the AQRM questionnaire was developed earlier than the ASG-QA, something which is akin to putting the cart before the horse, recent mapping studies attest to apparent convergence between both instruments (HAQAA Initiative, 2019).

The AQRM Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b) contains the results of the assessment of quality by the AUC in 15 higher education institutions in the different geographical regions of Africa using the AQRM survey questionnaire. The 15 institutions were selected by the HAQAA Initiative, a project of the African Union and the European Union, following an open but competitive call to institutions in 2016 to express interest in participating in the assessment. The call, made via the AAU, stipulated that those 15 institutions would be selected from the different African regions to participate in a quality audit sponsored by the HAQAA Initiative (AAU, 2016). The selection of the universities to participate was based on the motivation of the university leadership towards quality enhancement, geographic diversity, diversity of resources and missions, and linguistic diversity (AAU, 2016).

We now turn attention to the issue of the suitability of the three documents for answering the research question. The ASG-QA document and the AQRM questionnaire provided the continent-specific conceptual lens regarding the scope of the third mission and a framework for identifying the third mission activities that are assessed during quality audit (or peer review), respectively. Specifically, the tenth standard for internal quality assurance provides an African-specific description of the third mission and delineates the boundary, though contestable, between the third mission and the classical missions of the academy. In this respect, the meanings attributed to the third mission were gleaned from this standard for internal quality assurance. Conversely, the AQRM questionnaire, unlike the ASG-QA document, contains baseline third mission activities for both self-assessment and for external quality audit. Arguably, the two instruments of the harmonization strategy reflect the collective voice of the highest political body on the continent (the AUC) and the African academic community represented by the AAU. The AAU played a pivotal role in the development of the two

instruments and is among the implementing partners of the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM). The AQRM Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b) sheds light on whether higher education institutions were implementing third mission activities that are stipulated in the AQRM survey questionnaire and further provides an opportunity to identify other third mission activities in view of the fact that institutions are not constrained from implementing activities that respond to their unique contexts and that may be part of national higher education frameworks. The fact that the institutions assessed were selected from all the geographical regions of Africa provided a continental perspective into the subject and some level of confidence for generalizing the findings.

## **Analysis Strategy**

We used content analysis as a data analysis strategy since the information was already in text form. Skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009) were sequentially followed during data analysis. We employed open coding while reading the aspects related to the third mission in the ASG-QA document, the AQRM survey questionnaire, and the AQRM consolidated evaluation report of 2018. In reading the text, we paid attention to both the language used as well as the context in which it was produced to obtain insights relevant to the research question. We examined the language of the text, and it informed the classification of the data into categories that represented similar meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Four data-driven themes emerged from the codes relating to conceptualizations of the third mission, while 11 themes emerged on third mission activities. The relationships among the themes and the possible explanations of the themes were arrived at during the process of data analysis.

## **Results**

This section presents the ways that the third mission in African higher education and the third mission activities are either implicit or explicit in the two instruments of the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework (the ASG-QA and the AQRM) and the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b).

### **Conceptualization of the Third Mission**

Four conceptualisations of the third mission in the ASG-QA and the AQRM are (a) the third mission as a role of universities, (b) the third mission as a social role, (c) the third mission as forging partnerships with the community, and (d) the third mission as an undertaking that benefits the university and society as a whole. These conceptions, as will be seen in the next section, have a bearing on how universities give effect to the third mission.

#### **The Third Mission as a Role of Universities**

The architects of the ASG-QA depict the third mission as a role of the university and, therefore, part of the academic core. The 10th standard of the ASG-QA unequivocally states that “[a] higher education institution is not only responsible for teaching, learning, and research, but also for serving society” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24). Using the interpretive lens, we can delineate two inferences about the *raison d’être* of a university in Africa from the quality standard. The first conclusion is that the third mission, especially at the institutional level, is still viewed as a peripheral activity as opposed to being regarded as part of the academic core. The standard can be interpreted as a wake-up call to those universities that have not elevated the third mission as part of the academic core to do so as well as to prioritise the provision of solutions to pressing social issues. The other inference is that the third mission is distinct from the first and second missions. However, we need to add a caveat to the foregoing inference: The operationalisation of the third mission in the AQRM survey questionnaire attests to the notion that third stream activities cannot be divorced from teaching and research as the ASG-QA document would make one believe.

A review of some rating standards in respect to the third mission in the AQRM survey questionnaire repudiates the view that the boundary between the third mission and the classical missions is waterproof. Arguably, the AQRM survey questionnaire exposes the porous nature of the borderline between the third mission and other missions by mentioning teaching and research under the third mission. The AQRM survey questionnaire implicitly advances the idea that activities related to teaching and research can be condensed in the third mission if such activities target the external constituencies of the university or are conducted in non-academic environments. It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to argue, based on the foregoing premises and the insights from the AQRM survey questionnaire, that most third mission activities are anchored on the classical missions of universities and are intended for non-academic stakeholders.

### **The Third Mission as a Social Role**

It is undeniable that the third mission is a role of universities on the continent though it may not, within the internal university community, enjoy parity of esteem with the classical missions. The recognition of the third mission as a role necessitates extending the discourse from the third mission as a core functional area of universities to unravelling the exact nature of the role. The 10th standard for quality assurance in the African higher education context paints the third mission as a social role and the social dimension is unambiguous in the standard. The standard views the third mission as part and parcel of the “social responsibility” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24) of universities. Within the social perspective, the AUC strategically positions universities as social agents with a cardinal responsibility of causing social impact in society. Therefore, economic considerations that are at odds with the public interest and the public good view of higher education ought not to drive universities to engage in the third mission. It is therefore not surprising that commercialization activities such as securing patents, which may have an economic dimension, are handled under research and innovation rather than the standard relating to the third mission.

As social agents, universities are expected to leverage their capabilities and classical roles to provide innovative answers to social problems. Within Africa, these societal issues include, inter alia, lack of sustainable socio-economic growth and development, high poverty levels, high unemployment rates, food insecurity, the prevalence of communicable and non-communicable diseases, rapid environmental degradation, terrorism, and high crime rate. In this respect, the transformative agenda of universities in relation to the community should focus on promoting sustainable social, economic, environmental, and ecological development; making a difference in the social and economic well-being of communities; and contributing to positive social change.

Data from the AQRM consolidated evaluation report attests to the fact that the third mission as a role has received less attention in universities. The social role received low ratings compared to teaching and research. It is equally under-resourced and lacks policy frameworks in some of the universities that were assessed.

### **The Third Mission as Forging Partnership With the Community**

The 10th standard of the ASG-QA suggests that the university is not the sole actor in the development arena. It further promotes the idea that organizations cannot accomplish their goals alone and should therefore engage in win-win partnerships. The AUC expects universities at a general level to institute mechanisms for “partnering with other stakeholders in the community for sustainable development” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24). The AUC places considerable faith in the contribution of universities to improve the quality of education at the lower levels. This is underscored in the standard for quality rating in the AQRM survey questionnaire that interrogates whether “[t]he institution has forged partnerships with other education sub-sectors to enhance the quality of education in the country and region” (AUC, 2014a, p. 21). The inclusion of this standard for quality rating in the AQRM survey questionnaire is by design and not by accident. There is a perception that higher education is best placed to contribute to ensuring that the quality of education in the lower sub-sectors is fit for purpose. The partnerships in this direction can address the perennial complaints that the graduates of the lower sub-sectors of the education system are ill-prepared for both higher education and the world of work. The standard is non-committal on the specific quality enhancement initiatives. Therefore, the specific



initiative ought to depend on the conceptualisation of quality in education, which is arguably a slippery and context-specific concept.

### **The Third Mission as an Undertaking That Benefits the University and Society**

The third mission is considered a role that provides benefits to the academic community and to society. The mutual benefits from engaging in the third mission buttress the notion that universities should not regard the third mission as a burden but rather as an undertaking from which they stand to reap unquantifiable benefits. The third mission also strengthens student engagement with the community as well as democratic values and civic responsibilities in students. The benefits of the third mission to universities are (a) “[e]nriching scholarship, research, and creative activities; and (b) [e]nhancing teaching and learning” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24). Finally, through the third mission, the university addresses “critical societal issues and contribute[s] to public good” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24). The benefits attest to the complementary nature of the triple missions of the university. The complementarity of the missions can breed contestations regarding nesting activities in the specific missions because of the porous nature of the boundary between the triple missions of universities.

The idea of reciprocal benefits from the third mission, as far as universities and the community are concerned, is explicit in the standard. The third mission is intended to facilitate “mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (AUC, 2018a, p. 24).

### **Third Mission Activities in African Universities**

The findings reveal that the AUC expects universities in Africa to undertake third mission activities to propel sustainable socio-economic development and that this is consistent with the notion of the developmental university. In line with this call, some universities, amidst challenges, have embraced the third role of universities. Eleven third mission activities have been distilled from the AQRM survey questionnaire and from the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) Consolidated Evaluation Report.

#### **Research on Behalf of the Community**

The purpose of research and the initiators of research conducted by academics provide a yardstick for nesting research-related activities in either research or the third mission. Research-related activities can be nested in the third mission if they are conducted either upon request by the non-academic community or if the findings will be utilised outside the academic community. Both the form and substance of the AQRM support the proposition above. In terms of form, this type of research is assessed under community/societal engagement. Apart from the form of the AQRM, one of the standards for quality rating points to research: “The community often requests the institution for specific... research assistance” (AUC, 2014a). We ought to point out that the standard for quality rating ought to have leaned towards higher education institutions providing research assistance that the institution has reasonable control over rather than the community requesting research assistance that is outside the control of the institution. Therefore, the appropriate phrasing should have been that the “institution responds to the requests of the community for specific research assistance.” Despite this shortcoming of the questionnaire, the rating standard provides guidance regarding research that is distinct from academic research.

The defining characteristic of research on behalf of the community is that the aim is to address a specific community problem. It should be noted that this kind of research is different from collaborative research conducted for industry that has an economic motive.

#### **Collaboration With Industry**

This third mission activity entails collaboration between the higher education institution and industry. This collaboration can take place on many fronts. However, the AQRM survey questionnaire is explicit about collaboration in research. Within the “linkage with the industrial sector” thematic area of the AQRM survey questionnaire, the quality assessors rate universities on “[c]ollaborative research undertakings to solve

industrial problems” (AUC, 2014a, p. 12). It is evident, from the standard for quality rating above, that collaborative research between industrial-sector universities is applied research since it is intended to solve problems in the industry through providing evidence-based information for policy and practice and thus can contribute innovations for solving industrial problems. This reflects the faith in universities as expert organizations to help the industrial sector leapfrog the challenges confronting it. The research under this theme is different from academic research in the sense that it is not funded by a research grant, and the research is not a candidate for publication in academic journals. Arguably, this research can enhance the competitiveness of industries as well as generate income for higher education institutions. Finally, the AQRM consolidated evaluation report interrogated whether “[t]he institution has a mechanism for partnership with industry, including attracting resources from industry” (AUC, 2018b). This stresses the idea that collaborations of higher education institutions with industry focus on the economic perspective of the third mission. The economic perspective aside, collaboration with industry can guarantee adequate provision of places for student placement (internship and industrial attachment), another third mission activity with social connotations.

### **Capacity-Building**

The standard for quality rating in the AQRM questionnaire relating to capacity-building states that “[t]he institution offers relevant short courses to the community/broader society based on identified needs and supporting identified economic opportunities” (AUC, 2014a, p. 21). The short courses under this thematic area are intended for non-traditional students, are custom-made, do not necessitate accreditation by the higher education regulatory bodies, are not credit-earning, are of a short duration, and do not lead to an academic award.

Equally important is the tendency of the quality rating standard to allude to “supporting identified economic opportunities” (AUC, 2014a, p. 21) that resonates with promoting socio-economic development upon which definitions of the third mission hinge. In Africa, youth unemployment and poverty levels are high. Hence, there is a need to place the short training courses in this category as third mission activities if the aim is to empower society to exploit the economic opportunities. The dynamic environment we operate in places a high premium on interventions such as training geared towards retooling members of communities.

### **Access to Facilities**

Facilities such as buildings, science, language and computer laboratories, libraries, sports grounds, hostels, classrooms, and equipment, as well as incubation centres, are regarded as being among the capabilities of universities. The third mission activity in relation to the use of university-owned facilities is explicit in the following standard for quality rating in the AQRM survey questionnaire: “The institution makes its facilities available (where possible) to the local community in support of community and socio-economic development activities” (AUC, 2014a, p. 21). The industrial sector stands to benefit from the state-of-the-art laboratories and testing facilities in universities. Partnerships that were highlighted earlier can also enable universities to access similar facilities in the industrial sector. This further emphasises the reciprocal nature of community engagement. It should be noted that the rating standard does not address the issue of whether the facilities should be accessed by the local community free of charge, at the commercial rate, or at a nominal fee to the higher education institution.

### **Community Outreach Programs**

Community outreach is a way of ensuring that the university is socially engaged. The AUC, according to the design of the AQRM questionnaire, expects community outreach to be part and parcel of the third mission of universities in Africa. Under the thematic area of research and community outreach, the AQRM survey questionnaire interrogates the number of community outreach programs that the university conducted in the previous three years (AUC, 2014a). However, the AUC is guarded on the community outreach activities that universities should engage in. This strategic silence is by design and could have been intended to respect the autonomy of universities as far as community outreach is concerned. Arguably, third mission activities

should be shaped by the academic disciplines and by the needs of the community. For example, a university with a medical school could engage staff and students in health education and health promotion. Community outreach opportunities provide faculty and students with an opportunity to apply knowledge, and this is consistent with the conceptualisation of the third mission as entailing knowledge application.

### **Student Placements**

This activity presupposes that the workplace provides immense learning opportunities to students and stresses the point that learning does not take place only in the ivory tower. Under the thematic area of “linkage with the industry sector,” the assessors of higher education institutions are required to rate the “industrial placements and practical training for students” (AUC, 2014a, pp. 11–12). Student placement is intended to, among others, address the various stakeholders’ concerns that the training of traditional students in higher education institutions is sometimes theoretical and detached from the world of work. Internship and practical training are seen as avenues for blending theory with practice, preparing work-ready graduates, and obtaining feedback on academic programs. Industry-based training and internship, in particular, can carry credit units. However, the AQRM evaluation report of 2018 identified some mismatches between internship placements and subject discipline in some universities (AUC, 2018b).

### **Community-Focused Student Projects**

The AQRM Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b) identified strengths and weaknesses of the universities that participated in the assessment regarding the third mission. One strength singled out for some universities in the report was that “[f]inal year projects are geared towards the needs of the community” (AUC, 2018b, p. 43). The alignment of the projects with the needs of the community makes this a third mission activity. The universities could have responded to the quality rating standard in the AQRM survey questionnaire, which interrogates whether “[s]tudents are required to engage with communities through their academic work” (AUC, 2014a, p. 20). This third mission activity is intended, in addition to solving community problems, to achieve the benefits that accrue to the students from the third mission. These benefits, though highlighted under the conceptions of the third mission in the African higher education landscape, strengthen students’ civic engagement and democratic values besides inculcating civic responsibilities in them.

### **Special Semester Modules**

One of the strengths relating to the third mission identified in the 15 universities was “[t]he University offers special semester modules on community engagement for students” (AUC, 2018b, p. 43). Special semester modules on community engagement, which may be organized around areas such as environmental protection, have the potential to create and/or increase awareness among students about societal engagement.

### **Consultancy**

The AQRM survey questionnaire does not feature consultancy under the standard relating to the third mission or the institutional-level assessment thematic area. This may therefore lead to an erroneous conclusion that consultancy as a third mission activity is not apparent in the AQRM survey questionnaire. However, the activity appears under program-level assessment and specifically under program outcomes, where it is stated that “consultancy is undertaken in the subject area to solve industrial problems and support the social and economic development” (AUC, 2014a, p. 26). The placement of this activity under the academic level could have been intended to demonstrate that it is a concern of the academic unit rather than the institutions. Consultancy aligns with the economic view of the third mission owing to its potential to diversify the funding sources of the higher education institution. In Africa, it is seen as a third stream of revenue for public universities that overly rely on state funding and tuition.

### **Intellectual Property**

The assessors of the quality of universities using the AQRM survey questionnaire are required, under the thematic area of research and community outreach, to indicate the number of patents obtained by staff/the

institution in the past three years. This third mission activity emphasises the imperative to shift from research to innovation and commercialization of knowledge through patents. Implied in the activity is the commercialization of institution and staff intellectual property. Commercialization of innovation through technology transfer is one of the ways in which universities can add value to the national economy.

### **Curricula Alignment**

There is now a dominant thinking in higher education in Africa that the curriculum of higher education institutions should be responsive to the needs of the labour market. Indeed, quality in higher education is now defined, among others, as fitness for purpose, which denotes the responsiveness of the curriculum to the needs of the labour market. The AQRM survey questionnaire is aligned with this prevalent thinking. For example, two statements for quality assessment in the AQRM consolidated evaluation report and on which all the 15 institutions scored high are “curriculum development has been informed by thorough research and consultation with relevant stakeholders including public sector planners, industry and other employers” and “The curriculum reflects... the needs of society” (AUC, 2018b, p. 50). Within Africa, the responsiveness of the curricula to the needs of the labour market and participation of employers in curriculum design or review are incontestable indicators of the commitment of a higher education institution to the third mission.

The architecture of the AQRM survey questionnaire is intended to ensure that the world of education is not detached from the world of work. Synchronization between the two worlds has the potential to enable higher education institutions to produce graduates who are work-ready to stem the persistent complaints from employers that the graduates of higher education institutions are ill-prepared for the world of work. Finally, the alignment is further intended to curb high graduate unemployment in Africa, which is attributed to, inter alia, a mismatch between the skills of the graduates and the skills required by the labour market.

From this sub-section, it can be inferred that 11 third mission activities are featured in the AQRM survey questionnaire (AUC, 2014a) and in the AQRM Consolidated Evaluation Report (AUC, 2018b). Seven out of the 11 third mission activities could be associated with the majority of the institutions that participated in quality assessment using the AQRM survey questionnaire in 2017. These common activities are research on behalf of the community, collaboration with industry, capacity building, access to facilities, community-focused projects, consultancy, and curricula alignment. The findings show that 100% of the institutions had research on behalf of the community, capacity building, and curricula alignment on the menu of their third mission activities. Conversely, 93% of the higher education institutions collaborated with industry, offered their facilities to the community, engaged in community-focused activities, and provided consultancy services to society. The proportion of institutions that implemented the dominant third mission activities points to some degree of homogenization of third mission activities in universities in Africa. In view of the above, we can infer that the quality assurance regime at the AUC level appears to have shaped the third mission architecture in higher education institutions in Africa.

## **Discussion**

The AUC anticipates that Africa will soon transform into a knowledge-based economy (AUC, 2015, 2014b), a type of economy where the production, distribution, and utilisation of knowledge are regarded as the engine of economic growth, wealth creation, and competitiveness in all sectors of the economy (Hadad, 2017). The university, by exercising its third mission, is regarded as a tool to accelerate the region’s transition into a knowledge-based economy. The third mission is now entrenched in the ASG-QA as part of the academic core of universities. In line with the common dictum that what gets measured gets done, higher education institutions are assessed, using the AQRM survey questionnaire, on the extent to which they have implemented third mission activities. It is apparent that the AQRM survey questionnaire, unlike the ASG-QA, contains a range of third mission activities upon which higher education institutions are assessed and that

universities in Africa have embraced the third mission in a bid to demonstrate their relevance, shed off the ivory tower syndrome, and generate additional income. Eleven third mission activities have been gleaned from the AQRM survey questionnaire and from the AQRM consolidated evaluation report, but this has been possible after defying the rigid demarcation between teaching, research, and the third mission in the AQRM survey questionnaire and in the AQRM evaluation report. Therefore, the number of third mission activities would have been fewer if our efforts had been restricted to the quality assurance standard on community engagement. For example, technology commercialization and collaboration with industry in research are domiciled in the second mission, while curricula alignment with the needs of society, which Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) classify as a third mission activity, is featured under teaching in the AQRM survey questionnaire and AQRM evaluation report. This classification dilemma resurrects the assertions by Pinheiro et al. (2015) and Neary and Osborne (2018) that there are contestations regarding the activities of universities that belong to the third mission.

The 11 third mission activities identified in this article resonate, at least in form, with most of the third mission activities in the extant literature from the Global North (see Danatiello & Gherardini, 2018; Molas-Gallart et al., 2002; Schnurbus & Edvardsson, 2020; Trippel et al., 2015) and at Makerere University in Uganda (Mugabi, 2014). This attests to some level of consensus, regardless of the higher education context, around the third mission, and points to the internationalization of some third mission activities in higher education institutions and geographical regions. This convergence has been influenced by, among others, isomorphic forces or policy borrowing from countries and higher education systems that have a long history of implementing structured third mission activities.

Despite the convergence among some of the 11 activities and the activities that were identified from studies on the Global North, the range of third mission activities in the AQRM survey questionnaire is small. For example, activities such as shaping and/or implementation of policies at different levels, participation of faculty as board members, public lectures, and ad hoc advice (Danatiello & Gherardini, 2018; Pinheiro, 2015; Schnurbus & Edvardsson, 2020) do not have traces among the activities in the AQRM survey questionnaire and the AQRM consolidated evaluation report. The limited number of third mission activities can be explained by several factors. The first is the imperative to limit the assessable third mission activities to those activities that have a high likelihood of having a significant impact on the surroundings, as opposed to being preoccupied with many activities with little impact. The second explanatory factor could have been the desire to focus on activities that cut across universities—or bottom-line activities—regardless of the age of universities and the diversity of academic disciplines. Thirdly, the missing third mission activities could have been deemed to be appropriate for individual-level third mission activities or academic unit-level activities. Finally, some of the third mission activities present a hurdle when it comes to collecting and documenting data.

The Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) conceptual framework provides useful insights into the third mission activities from the Global North, most of which have been echoed by the extant studies from the European Higher Education Area (Danatiello & Gherardini, 2018; Schnurbus & Edvardsson, 2020). Their framework offers a reference point from which to compare our 11 third mission activities with those from the Global North. This reference provides insight into whether the themes from Africa resonate—both in form and substance—with the themes from the Global North. At a macro-level, eight third stream activities from Africa are closely related with third mission activities in the conceptual framework both in form and substance. On the other hand, only four third mission activities (research on behalf of the community, community outreach programs, community-focused student projects, and special semester modules) are not integral to the conceptual framework. With regard to research, the conceptual framework focuses on contract research for industry rather than research for the community. Therefore, the Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) framework can be supplemented by these four categories of the third mission from Africa. Similarly, Africa can benefit from the third mission activities in the conceptual framework outside of the 11 third mission activities found in this study, specifically staff flow, social networking, entrepreneurial activities, and non-academic dissemination.



The difference in the substance of the common (or the seven) third mission activities lies in whether the activities can be comfortably classified as either economic, social, or both. The framework by Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) is explicit concerning which of the 12 third mission activities are economic and social in nature. For example, technology commercialization, entrepreneurial activities (such as spin-offs), advisory work and contracts, commercialization of facilities, and collaborative research with industry have an economic outlook while staff flows, student placements, learning activities, curricula alignment, social networking, and non-academic dissemination have a social leaning. Except for intellectual property, which correlates with technology commercialization, and collaboration with industry, which points to the economic dimension of the third mission, the AUC is non-committal on whether third mission activities such as access to facilities should be provided free of charge as opposed to explicit commercialization of facilities in the Global North. The social third mission activities from the Global North, which are common in the framework by Molas-Gallart et al. and our findings (student placements and curricula alignment), denote the same meaning.

What literature classifies as third mission activities, the contestations notwithstanding, rotates around the traditional missions. With the exception of making facilities accessible to the local community, the third mission activities that we have identified constellate around the classical missions of universities. This supports the view by Vorley and Nelles (2008) that third mission activities are embedded in the first and second missions and that the third mission is most effectively built around a university's teaching and research activities. However, the African context has demonstrated that a range of third mission activities entails knowledge dissemination (teaching) and knowledge generation (research).

In quality assessment, it can be argued that we get what we measure. Therefore, we end up with wrong results if we measure a wrong thing or use a wrong performance indicator. We have made this observation in relation to some design flaws of the AQRM survey questionnaire. Ideally, measurement of the performance of a university on the third mission should focus on the third mission activities implemented by the institution. However, two standards for quality rating—"the institution encourages departments and staff to develop and implement strategies for community engagement" and "the institution disseminates information on its community engagement activities to the local community" (AUC, 2014b)—are not third mission activities. Our argument is that the standards for quality rating should focus on the third mission activities, as has been the case with other standards for quality rating, rather than endeavours that can trigger third mission activities or provide accountability about the third mission activities.

## Conclusions and Contributions

In view of the findings and discussion, we can make the following conclusions. First, nearly all the third mission activities for African higher education are based on the classical missions of universities and there is a symbiotic relationship among the triple missions. In this respect, the distinction between the classical missions and the third mission is that the first mission (teaching) involves the dissemination of knowledge through academic education while the second mission (research) hinges on the generation of academic knowledge, but the third mission involves both knowledge generation and dissemination in a non-academic context. Secondly, the architecture of the third mission, in line with the perception of the third mission as a social role, tends to downplay the economic impact of third mission activities on the part of universities. Therefore, from the African context, third mission activities should be viewed from the perspective of contributing to the public good rather than generating profit. For example, innovations by universities and faculty should target addressing societal problems rather than generating revenue. Nevertheless, scientists and universities can generate revenue from the subsequent commercialization of their innovations. Thirdly, how the third mission is understood in a particular higher education space shapes the resultant third mission activities and the performance indicators for the third mission. Finally, the third mission is a multi-

dimensional concept and the motivations for engaging in the third mission inform the dimension that becomes either apparent or more pronounced in an education system.

This article makes four contributions to the discourse on the third mission in higher education. First, it adds to the limited literature on the third mission of universities from a supranational perspective and therefore complements the scanty literature that uses higher education institutions as a unit of analysis. Secondly, it provides information that could be used by the AUC and the Association of African Universities to restructure the AQRM survey questionnaire, nesting the third mission activities that now appear under the classical missions of universities under the third mission, specifically, the standard on community engagement, and to remove from the AQRM survey questionnaire the standards for quality rating that do not focus on third mission activities. Thirdly, the article has extended the conceptual framework for the third mission by Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) by supplementing it with the four themes from Africa. Finally, the study adds value to the understanding of the third mission by those outside Africa by demonstrating that the third mission activities that stem from research transcend contract research and non-academic collaboration in academic research that have an economic outlook. Community-driven non-academic research constitutes a variant of third mission activities aligned to the research mission. Another lesson for those outside Africa is some first mission activities that take place in the ivory tower and that constitute course units for traditional students can reasonably be classified as third mission activities if their objective is to address pressing societal problems. For example, activities such as special semester modules (e.g., on environmental protection) that may be non-credit earning but raise students' consciousness about pressing societal problems (such as environmental degradation) can be classified as third mission activities, which are offshoots of the teaching mission.

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