

Beyond the “Third Mission”: a grounded theory approach to universities’  
involvement with the society

The objective of this project is to move beyond the uncritical import of the politicized concepts of the social role of higher education (and knowledge in general), variously described as the “social outcomes of learning” (e.g. OECD 2007), the contribution of higher education to a “democratic culture” (e.g. Council of Europe 2008), or, most generally, as the “third” mission of universities (in relation to the “first” and “second”, respectively teaching and research). It plans to offer a critical “bottom-up” account of the ways in which academics (and other people involved in higher education) engage with “their” societies. “Engagement” is, in this context, seen as a practice in which academics mediate and negotiate their own identities and positions in the context of the changing conditions of knowledge production, while, at the same time, reflecting and altering the specific political and social contexts of this process (cf. Bourdieu 2000).

The project relies on theories on social construction of agency (e.g. Archer 2003) and intellectual positioning (e.g. Baert 2012, Eyal and Buchholz 2010) to show how the academics’ involvement with “the society” reproduces and/or creates new structures and meanings related to the role of knowledge, institutions and agents who produce it, and ultimately, of “society” itself.