

HOW TO SUPPORT UNIVERSITIES IN STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT OF ULLL AND UCE ACTIVITIES. THE ROLE OF THE ITALIAN NETWORK OF UCE (RUIAP)

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ABSTRACT

Italian universities recently underwent evaluation by the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR), with a specific focus on assessing their impact during the 2015-2019 period. This evaluation brought to light significant concerns related to the universities' utilisation of the assessment of the impact of the Third Mission activities made by ANVUR. Notably, there was a lack of attention to the impact of their activities on regional development and social cohesion.

In response to these findings, the Network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP), a coalition of universities dedicated to supporting Lifelong Learning (LLL) and University-Community Engagement policies and strategies, established a dedicated working group. The primary goal of this working group was to develop comprehensive guidelines aimed at helping universities reframe their approach to evaluation. These guidelines provide a framework for universities to transform the evaluation process into a pivotal moment for qualitative growth, development, and ongoing improvement.

This contribution aims to shed light on the process involved in crafting these guidelines and underscores their significance in strengthening the awareness of Italian universities. These guidelines serve as a catalyst for fostering collaborative relationships between universities and their respective regions, ultimately facilitating more impactful engagement and development initiatives.

THE EVALUATION OF THE THIRD MISSION IN ITALY: AN INTRODUCTION

In Italy, the evaluation of the Third Mission is carried out by ANVUR. The ANVUR perspective draws back to work that started several years ago on the different forms of social responsibility in which Italian universities and research institutes are engaged and on the criteria for measuring and enhancing their impact. ANVUR recently produced the third round

of the research evaluation exercise, the Evaluation of Research Quality (VQR) 2015-2019. In the previous VQR exercises, the Third Mission was evaluated in an experimental way through a sample of activities carried out by universities and research institutes. Using a different approach, the impact of the third round of Third Mission activities was evaluated through “case studies”. In fact, the 2015-2019 VQR exercise, which ended in June 2022 with the publication of results and the list of assessed case studies, refers to an “open” definition of impact. It aims to give individual institutions the opportunity to show their own Third Mission initiatives with greater social impact with a bottom-up approach (see Blasi, 2023).

Italian universities and research centres have submitted nearly 700 case studies for 130 institutions in total whose impact has ranged across all the ten fields of action:

1. Valorisation of intellectual or industrial property
2. Academic entrepreneurship
3. Technology transfer structures
4. Production and management of artistic and cultural assets
5. Clinical trials and health initiatives
6. Lifelong learning
7. Public Engagement
8. Production of social, educational, and political public goods for inclusion
9. Innovative tools to support Open Science
10. Activities related to the Agenda ONU 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The impact described has been substantiated through a set of relevant and meaningful indicators and evidence chosen by each institution to demonstrate the differences compared to the initial situation. The quality of the submitted case studies has been assessed and expressed into a 5-point rating scale, thus circumventing a vision of ranking between universities.

The Third mission Group of Evaluation (GEV TM) nominated by the ANVUR has evaluated each case study according to the following criteria:

1. Social, economic, and cultural dimension of the impact
2. Relevance to the context of reference
3. Added value for the beneficiaries
4. Contribution of the proposing institution, emphasising the scientific aspect where relevant. Each case study was classified by the GEV TM into one of the following categories: excellent and highly relevant, excellent, standard, sufficient relevance and low relevance or not acceptable.

The VQR results are used to allocate the premium share of the Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO) of the Ministry of Universities (5% of the total).

Indeed, in Italy, over the course of several years, the allocation of state funds to universities has been subject to an ongoing "correction" that considers the evaluation conducted by the National Agency of both the quality of research and, starting in 2022, the Third Mission (TM), in addition to the number of current students.

Since lifelong learning is one of the fields of TM, the RUIAP (Network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning) has started a working group (<https://www.ruiap.it/le-iniziativa/gruppi-di-lavoro-e-servizi/>) to support universities in their process of recognising the impact generated by LLL and UCE initiatives. The RUIAP, established in Genoa on 16 November 2011, associates 32 Italian universities and several affiliates (organisations, experts, teachers).

The member universities intend to promote the development of lifelong learning in their universities, as an active contribution to the knowledge society, for the enhancement of the individual and the growth of the economic, social, and cultural system of the country. They refer to the principles of the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, which identify the development and implementation of strategies for LLL as an institutional mission of the universities, necessary to face the transformations of society in synergy with the actors present in the different social and economic contexts.

The RUIAP, whose mission is to strengthen LLL within universities and in dialogue with institutional and social actors, aimed to support its member universities in the complex work of reporting on TM activities. To carry out proper social reporting of their TM initiatives, and to initiate a dialogue with ANVUR to ensure the use of shared methods and tools for the evaluation of the Third Mission, a working group took place. The working group initiated a reflection on the way criteria for assessing the impact of the case studies selected by the universities were interpreted and then applied by ANVUR. This, turn, helped create a systemic learning perspective to respond to the increasingly palpable and widespread need for social reporting of the universities' activities.

THE WORK OF THE RUIAP WORKING GROUP ON THIRD MISSION TO IMPROVE IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Lifelong learning and open education are one of the ten fields of action that allow for presenting case studies in this regard. It allows for the presentation of 'case studies' that can refer to “any activity undertaken by people in a formal, non-formal and informal way, at various stages of life, to improve knowledge, skills and competences, in a personal, civic, social and employment-related perspective” (ANVUR, 2021, p. 73).

Field F (Lifelong Learning) includes continuing education courses, continuing medical education, MOOCs, but not master's degree courses, professional-based courses, training initiatives regulated through third-party agreements and a dual system of vocational training activities (ANVUR, 2021, p. 75). Some initiatives such as (short) master (postmaster degree level university courses), for example, are not considered LLL activities, since they are potentially targeted at so-called 'non-traditional students,' to adults coming out of formal EQF level 6 or 7 courses, or to professionals.

The GEV's endeavour to establish evaluation criteria based on impact added value for the beneficiaries, and relevance to the context was highly regarded by the universities. Consequently, the RUIAP TM Working Group deemed it fitting to commence a constructive and collaborative discourse with ANVUR to promote evaluations that are increasingly mutually beneficial and effective. The group sought to establish guidelines for the evaluation of universities' lifelong learning (LLL) activities, with the aim of engaging in a direct dialogue with ANVUR and the scientific community of evaluators affiliated with the Italian Evaluation Association (AIV). By means of a participatory process, which included universities and local stakeholders, the working group developed guidelines to assist universities in transforming the evaluation process into an opportunity for qualitative growth, development, and enhancement. Convened in the form of seminars and sharing sessions, a series of discussion meetings centred on the guidelines were conducted at three prominent Italian university locations, namely University Cattolica in Milan on 10th March 2023, Genoa on 5th May 2023, and LUMSA in Rome on 29th May 2023. A further opportunity to work with stakeholders will take place on 20 September as part of the XXV AIV (Associazione Nazionale Valutazione) Congress in Rome.

The initial stage of the preparatory process for the guidelines involved delimiting the boundaries of LLL within the academic Third Mission. This undertaking was not a foregone conclusion, given the numerous educational initiatives that universities have traditionally undertaken and, accordingly, are tasked with evaluating. Lifelong learning represents a transversal "field" that intersects with the university's three missions. The group aimed to offer thought-provoking insights and valuable tools for the evaluation process (Piazza and Rizzari, 2021; Piazza and Calvano, 2022). The guidelines' creation aimed to promote the adoption of detection models, procedures, and tools that enable an assessment of LLL's impact consistent with universities' social reporting requirements.

The working group observed that evaluating LLL activities in the broader context of Third Mission initiatives presents an opportunity for growth and improvement not only for the university's quality processes, but also for the personnel involved in executing them. The challenge, in this regard, is to identify how evaluation processes can stimulate learning processes that improve the quality of human capital, foster professional development and growth of university personnel, and enhance the quality of the goods, services, and programmes that universities provide as part of their Third Mission. Pursuing and implementing quality processes provides us with an opportunity to learn and better understand our mission, revealing the formative and transformative function of evaluation.

To promote the self-evaluation process of universities and enhance their ability to design LLL activities, the working group decided to refrain from providing ready-made solutions and operational guidelines, which may fail to account for the unique territorial contexts in which Italian universities operate. Instead, an inquiry-based approach was adopted, employing thought-provoking questions to encourage those involved in the planning and evaluation of LLL activities to contemplate the entire process, from its inception to the social outcomes that such activities may yield. The questions that were developed - constructed in a participatory manner by the working group and seminar participants - considered a number of fundamental dimensions: mission of the universities and coherence between the university mission and LLL activities; stakeholder involvement in the process of needs analysis, design, and evaluation of outcomes and impact; design of specific LLL activities; evaluation and transferability of outcomes; and external (social spill overs) and internal impact (improvement of teaching, exploitation of research results). The informal and public discussions facilitated by the working group have played a crucial role in assisting participants during the sessions to establish the parameters of LLL and enhance its evaluation in relation to the resulting impacts. Through the proposal of evaluation queries based on the criteria that define impact for universities, it has been feasible to identify indicators that are commonly acknowledged and widely accepted.

The working group proposed the utilisation of the Kirkpatrick model (1959, 1976), which is considered valuable in contemporary contexts as well (as evidenced by Aljawharah and Callinan, 2022). This model identifies four successive steps necessary to ascertain the impact of a continuing education intervention. These steps include reaction, learning, achievement of behavioural change and organisational changes, leading to defined results.

In this manner, the working group proposed to measure not only the initial reaction (often limited to student satisfaction) and learning (typically assessed at the conclusion of the intervention) but also changes in individual behaviour and their respective organisations. These changes are measured at 6 to 12 months following the intervention. The working group has put forward a comprehensive set of indicators for each step, encompassing factors such as job satisfaction, career advancement, salary improvement, increased responsibilities, autonomy, creativity within the job and, for organisations, growth in turnover or added value, penetration into new markets or product development, increased export rates, and more.

It is important to note that these indicators are not without costs; they require a dedicated effort for data collection after the completion of the training. However, they are indispensable for calculating not only the impact of the intervention but also for assessing the social responsibility of universities.

The participatory approach was implemented through a collaborative process of developing evaluation questions and defining indicators by participants in the "workshop of shared ideas" on Third Mission evaluation, with a focus on LLL initiatives and the broader mission of evaluation as a reflective exercise for institutions. By engaging in a dialogue with the RUIAP working group, the AIV, and the ANVUR staff responsible for analysing TM results at the national level, it was possible to 1) identify evaluation questions that serve the universities; 2) propose potential common and shared indicators; and 3) construct "theories of change" based on critical cases, which can serve as a guide for the next evaluation exercise, as well as in the logic of academic TM that generates "public value" for communities. The formalised guidelines have been presented at the RUIAP Spring Conference in May 2023 in Rome, held in collaboration with AIV and ANVUR at LUMSA University. As a result of RUIAP's efforts in this area, a memorandum of understanding between ANVUR, RUIAP, and the Italian Association of Evaluators was signed on 29 May 2023 in Rome. The final version of the guidelines will be prepared after the definition of the guidelines of the evaluation committee that ANVUR will nominate in the future. The aim of the guidelines is not only to better describe the "case studies" that universities will propose to the evaluation, but also to provide the associated universities with a tool to better define the social impact of their action towards society. In this vein, we hope that universities will adopt the indicators that they consider more useful to describe the ways in which they meet the needs of local societies and of the main stakeholders of their territory.

CONCLUSIONS

The endeavour undertaken by the working group has reinforced several significant insights. Firstly, the act of purposefully designing with the intention to generate impact provides an avenue for creating value and meeting the educational requirements of the wider public. Impact evaluation is undoubtedly an intricate and time-consuming undertaking, the outcomes of which can only be attained by embracing the principles of impact-driven design and recognising the evaluation process as more than a mere bureaucratic obligation. Instead, it should be regarded as a valuable opportunity for both personal and organisational growth and development.

The RUIAP initiative has revealed that numerous activities fall under the umbrella of LLL. It has fostered a collaborative reflection among various universities, leading to shared definitions. These definitions have also gained acceptance through the recent call for the new VQR 2020-2024. Furthermore, by considering how they evaluate the effects of their AP (Advanced Placement) actions, universities have recognised the necessity of measuring them more rigorously, employing standardised criteria and indicators wherever possible. This approach allows for continuous improvement and facilitates result comparability with other universities.

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