

BEYOND THE THIRD MISSION: PLURALISING SOCIETAL RELEVANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Debates on societal relevance in higher education often assume that relevance is a singular and expandable good. Building on a discourse-analytical approach, this article challenges that assumption and conceptualises relevance as plural, contested, and relational. It shows how different relevance expectations generate structural tensions rather than cumulative gains and how relevance claims are negotiated across discourses of usefulness, risk, politicisation, and the third mission. By introducing a typology of modes of contestation, the article reframes societal relevance as a matter of balance rather than maximisation.

1 Introduction

What does it mean for higher education institutions to be “societally relevant”? Why is it, in the minds of various stakeholders, important to “build bridges” between academia and fields of practice such as industry, politics, or civil society? What exactly is implied when policy makers and evaluators urge researchers to demonstrate “impact”? Why do universities increasingly stress their contributions to solving the “grand challenges” of our time? Each of these questions invokes relevance in a different way. Yet the very frequency with which the notion is mobilised obscures its conceptual ambiguity. The matter gets even more confusing at the meta-level: For whom are higher education institutions presumed to be relevant, by what criteria, and according to which evaluative logics? All of these questions point towards the need for a more systematic understanding of the term.

The argument of this article – a revised version[†] of a keynote address for the annual conference of the Society for Higher Education Research (GfHf) in Heilbronn, Germany – grows out of a longer trajectory of engagement with relevance discourses in academia. Let me begin with a biographical anecdote that illustrates the ambivalence of practice-oriented research. Two decades ago, as a student assistant in a research project on socio-ecological transformation and organic agriculture, I

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† The present paper is based on the German keynote lecture manuscript. AI-based language tools were used to support the translation of the original text into English and to assist in the reformulation, condensation, and stylistic refinement of selected passages on the basis of the original manuscript. In this process, AI-generated drafts served as intermediate working versions that were subsequently reviewed, revised, and substantively reworked by the author.

spent an entire day calling organic farmers to recruit them as partners for transdisciplinary workshops. Not surprisingly, reaching them by phone was difficult. More surprising, however, were the responses I received from those who did answer, as several mentioned that they were already overburdened by obligations resulting from participation in such projects. The paradox is evident here: The urge to build bridges between theory and practice came primarily from university-based researchers, not from the practitioners. My early “aha moment” – the realisation that for the practitioners, “practice” is simply what they do, while for academics, “practice” is a desirable goal, a kind of promised land, something beyond their reach – has never left me. This observation resonated with earlier sociological analyses. Jürgen Friedrichs, writing in the late 1980s, described a “social scientific longing for practice” that served less the needs of practitioners than the normative and identity-building aspirations of sociological researchers themselves (Friedrichs, 1988, p. 10, my translation; cf. Kaldewey, 2016). The desire for relevance, in other words, is not necessarily an external demand placed upon academia. It can also be understood as internally produced, embedded in professional self-descriptions, and linked to broader cultural narratives about the role of science in society.

This early experience ultimately informed my academic trajectory. In my dissertation, I examined how “practice” was discursively constructed throughout the history of science and the history of universities – resulting in a semantic field whose evolution can be traced back over centuries, even millennia (Kaldewey, 2013, 2014). Since then, whenever policy makers or other stakeholders draw a distinction between “basic research” and “applied research” (Kaldewey & Schauz, 2018), demand to leave the “ivory tower” (Kaldewey, 2023), urge for “responsible research and innovation” (Flink & Kaldewey, 2018) or point to the “grand challenges” that have to be tackled by scientists (Kaldewey, 2018), I instinctively see semantic fields, historical trajectories, and the discursive labour through which academics continually affirm their external orientation. This *déformation professionnelle* of a sociologist of science forms the backdrop to the present essay.

Over the past decades, such narratives of relevance have multiplied and diversified, not least in the field of science studies and higher education research. By the end of the 20th century, the old distinctions – theory and practice, basic research and applied research – had become worn out. The 1990s in particular saw the emergence of new concepts aimed at reimagining scientific research and the role of universities in terms of their practical relevance. Scholars envisioned a “mode 2” of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001) and a “postacademic science” that is commissioned for solving practical problems (Ziman, 2000). They diagnosed an “academic capitalism,” in which universities were turned into entrepreneurial actors (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), conceptualised a “triple helix” that connects universities, industry, and governments (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997, 2000), and proposed a “Pasteur’s Quadrant” as a sphere in which basic science and technological innovation become reconciled (Stokes, 1997).^{*} These frameworks, however, while influential, often seem to suggest that there exists a single, self-explanatory standard of relevance against which universities and research can be evaluated. They tend to depict higher education institutions as either successfully adapting to societal expectations or falling behind in an increasingly competitive and accountability-driven environment.

In the following, I propose a different approach. Rather than presuming a unitary meaning and definition of relevance, I argue that relevance is inherently *plural*. Universities are internally differentiated organisations in which research, teaching, and third mission activities follow distinct logics and interact with external environments in different ways. Moreover, society – aka “practice” – is not a monolithic entity but a constellation of multiple functional systems, professional fields, publics, and stakeholder groups – each with its own expectations of what counts as valuable or relevant knowledge. Relevance must therefore be understood as a relationship between specific internal aspects of the science system and specific external aspects of the social environment. This relational understanding of relevance also resonates with the concept of dual higher education, which is central to the focus of this journal: Rather than locating the “relevance” of education either within academic institutions or within vocational practice, dual higher education institutionalises their interrelation.

^{*} While each of these frameworks inspired extensive research, none of them could establish itself as new master narrative. In the early 21st century, therefore, scholars and policy makers alike are in search of new semantics (Hessels & van Lente, 2008; Hessels et al., 2009; Maasen & Dickel, 2016; Rohe, 2017; Flink & Kaldewey, 2018).

2 Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach to the study of societal relevance in higher education. Rather than reporting original empirical data, it develops a theoretically informed synthesis of existing debates in science studies, higher education research, and organisational sociology. The analysis builds on long-term engagement with relevance discourses in academia and draws on historical and comparative perspectives to examine how relevance is constructed, evaluated, and contested (Kaldewey, 2013, 2014, 2016; Kaldewey & Schauz, 2017, 2018; Flink & Kaldewey, 2018; Kaldewey, 2018; Hamann et al., 2019).

Methodologically, the article combines elements of conceptual history with discourse-analytical tools (Schauz, 2014; Schauz & Kaldewey, 2023). It reconstructs recurring patterns across influential discourses through which relevance is articulated, justified, and problematised. The selection and synthesis of the debates discussed in this article follow a qualitative and theory-guided logic rather than a systematic review procedure. The analysis focuses on discourses that have been particularly influential in shaping how societal relevance is articulated in higher education and science policy, including long-standing debates on usefulness, risk, and the political role of science, as well as more recent institutionalised frameworks such as the third mission. More specifically, these discourses were selected because of their pervasiveness across higher education systems and across time, whereas more marginal or context-specific debates were not considered. The four modes of contestation introduced later in the article should be understood as heuristic analytical constructs. They are not derived from a systematic empirical classification, nor do they constitute ideal types in a strict Weberian sense.

The subsequent sections develop this perspective in three steps. Section 3 introduces a conceptual framework that accounts for the plurality of relevance by differentiating between internal, external, and meta-level perspectives. Building on this framework, Section 4 identifies recurring modes through which relevance becomes contested. Finally, Section 5 reflects on the organisational implications of these dynamics and introduces the notion of a relevance balance.

3 The pluralisation of relevance

Debates about the societal role of higher education typically employ a singularised vocabulary: the usefulness of universities, *the* relevance of research, *the* impact of science. Policy documents and public debates often assume that relevance is a stable, universal criterion, measurable through generalisable indicators or assessment tools. Yet such singularisation obscures the heterogeneity of expectations directed at universities and masks the internal differentiation of academic institutions themselves.

It is noticeable that key concepts in both higher education policy frameworks and academic discourses mirror this tendency towards singularisation: Terms such as “third mission”, “technology transfer”, “transdisciplinarity”, “science communication”, “citizen science”, or “impact” are often depicted as coherent and unified categories. Similarly, the influential diagnoses from the 1990s use singularised concepts as well: “mode 2”, “triple helix”, “academic capitalism”, “postacademic science”, “responsible research and innovation” all suggest that a single model captures the changing relationship between science and society. There are interesting exceptions, however. The traditional basic/applied distinction, for instance, made it possible to speak of “applied sciences” in the plural in the 19th and 20th centuries – although the singular form “applied science” has remained more common (cf. Bud, 2024). More recently, the category of “grand challenges” explicitly points to a plurality of problems that need to be addressed (Kaldewey, 2018). Likewise, notions such as “future skills” emphasise the multiplicity of competencies required in higher education (Ehlers, 2020). These examples illustrate that it would be unsatisfying to assume that there is only one “grand challenge” or only one “future skill” that has to be trained in higher education institutions.

Against this backdrop, this section argues that relevance must be approached in the plural. It introduces a threefold analytical distinction – internal perspectives, external perspectives, and meta-level evaluative perspectives – and shows how each highlights different dimensions of how universities engage with society. This differentiation makes visible that relevance is not a property

but a relation. It emerges when specific dimensions of academic work intersect with specific environments, audiences, and evaluative contexts.

3.1 Internal perspectives: Differentiation within universities

Universities are not monolithic organisations; they comprise a plurality of missions, functions, and organisational substructures. As such, different parts of the university relate to society in distinct ways. Internal relevance discourses are therefore heterogeneous, reflecting the differentiated nature of academic labour.

(a) The domain most frequently associated with societal relevance is research (see, for example, Hessels et al., 2009). Policy discourses invoke expectations of innovation, technology transfer, and problem-solving capacity, particularly in STEM fields. Yet even within the sphere of research, relevance is far from homogeneous (Hamann et al., 2019). Different types of research and different disciplines operate within different temporalities, audiences, and epistemic cultures. Basic research, on the one hand, emphasises curiosity-driven inquiry and epistemic autonomy, defending its societal value through indirect or long-term arguments. Applied research, on the other hand, demonstrates more immediate utility but often embeds itself in specific stakeholder relationships or economic frameworks. These differences complicate generalised statements about “the relevance of research.” What counts as valuable knowledge in one discipline may be irrelevant in another; what one societal environment demands (e.g., rapid innovation cycles in the private sector) may contradict what another values (e.g., normative legitimacy in policymaking or interpretive depth in the humanities).

(b) What about the second mission of the university? Paradoxically, teaching is both the most immediate interface between universities and their social environments and the one whose importance is least recognised in relevance debates. In the era of mass and universal higher education (Trow, 2010), universities educate large portions of national populations, prepare professionals for all major societal fields, and cultivate the competencies necessary for democratic citizenship. Yet public and policy discourses rarely frame teaching as a primary vector of relevance. This neglect is partly due to the structure of policy incentives, which often prioritise research outputs. Teaching is frequently perceived as an internal affair of the university rather than as their contribution to the world outside. Consequently, the societal relevance of teaching – its long-term influence on social systems, professions, and public culture – is systematically undervalued. This imbalance has significant implications for how universities allocate resources and how academics distribute their efforts across missions.

(c) Since the late 1990s, the “third mission” of academic activity has gained prominence (Laredo, 2007; Pinheiro et al., 2015). Initially focused on technology transfer and economic innovation, the third mission concept has expanded to include policy advice and expert consultation, continuing education and lifelong learning programmes, public engagement and science communication, social and cultural outreach, and, more recently, sustainability initiatives and diversity strategies. The career of third mission discourses exemplifies the institutionalisation of relevance expectations. Its expansion signals the perceived need to supplement traditional missions of research and teaching with more specific and visible forms of engagement. Yet this institutionalisation also produces complex internal effects: it redistributes organisational attention, generates new administrative units, and creates symbolic performances of relevance that may or may not correlate with substantive societal outcomes.

In view of the three missions, it becomes evident that internal relevance discourses are shaped by intrinsic trade-offs. Each mission – research, teaching, and the varieties of outreach – demands time, resources, and institutional support. Because universities operate under conditions of organisational scarcity, increased activity in one area typically requires reductions elsewhere. The proliferation of third mission activities often follows a “more is better” rationale: more engagement, more transfer, more communication. Yet each initiative introduces opportunity costs. Administrative staff devote time to designing, coordinating, and reporting on outreach activities; academic staff allocate time to public engagement or cross-sector collaborations; leadership teams dedicate attention to strategic positioning. These shifts may produce beneficial external visibility but reduce the university’s internal capacity to support teaching and research. Against this background, the

question arises how to conceptualise relevance not as an additive good but as part of a *relevance balance*, i. e. an equilibrium that can be improved or diminished depending on how the university distributes its resources across missions.

3.2 External perspectives: Multiple societal environments

Just as internal differentiation of universities produces multiple internal relevance discourses and practices, the external environment is itself plural. Society does not constitute a single unitary addressee. Instead, universities are embedded in a landscape of differentiated functional systems, local publics and stakeholders, as well as national and global actors- each with its own rationality and expectations.

(a) First, building on sociological systems theory, we may conceptualise the political system, the economic system, the legal system, the health system, etc. as distinct societal environments (Luhmann, 1997). Universities interact with each of these systems in specific ways (Weingart, 2001). The economy values skilled labour, innovation, and technology transfer, while politics seeks expertise, legitimacy, and solutions to collective problems. In addition, the legal system demands jurisprudential knowledge and highly trained professionals. The health system relies heavily on medical education, translational research, clinical studies, and clinical training. Each system evaluates relevance differently. A single form of academic output may therefore be highly relevant to one system but irrelevant – or even disruptive – to another.

(b) Beyond such societal macro systems, universities also interact with a wide array of local publics, professional associations, interest groups, and civil society organisations. They shape expectations, disseminate findings, react to controversies, and influence policy. Publics are inherently heterogeneous. They range from local communities affected by campus development to global audiences following scientific debates on climate change, artificial intelligence, or biomedical innovations. Stakeholder groups may include industry partners, NGOs, cultural institutions, or activist networks. Each public constitutes a distinct evaluative environment that interprets academic outputs according to its own concerns, values, and priorities. Therefore, if these publics are organised, they can act as intermediaries between the academic world and various social contexts (cf. Caves & Oswald-Egg, 2024).

(c) Furthermore, external relevance expectations are strongly shaped by national higher education systems, cultural norms, geopolitical dynamics and various actors operating at these levels. Universities are thus embedded in “sociotechnical imaginaries” that have often co-evolved with nation states (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Kaldewey et al., 2020). Countries vary widely in what they expect from their universities – some prioritise economic competitiveness; others emphasise civic education or national identity; still others focus on innovation ecosystems or state-building. Global power configurations influence which forms of research are prioritised or contested, particularly in areas such as biotechnology, military technology, or climate science. Understanding relevance therefore requires contextualisation: what counts as societal contribution in one national setting may be interpreted differently in another.

Across these external environments, relevance emerges as a structural coupling – a concept borrowed from systems theory to describe stable but selective connections between social systems (Luhmann, 1997; Stichweh, 2014). For example, dual higher education programmes couple universities with labour markets by institutionalising interactions between academic learning and professional practice. Thus, dual higher education can be understood as an organisational form in which relevance is continuously co-produced across different contexts within and beyond the university. Such structural couplings shape which academic activities are likely to resonate externally and which remain confined to the academic sphere. At the same time, they may create tensions when expectations from different systems conflict – for instance, when political demands for rapid solutions clash with academic temporalities or methodological standards.

3.3 Meta-level perspective: Plural modes of valuation

At a meta-level, societal relevance increasingly appears not only as something universities are expected to produce, but as something that must be measured, evaluated, and made governable.* Contemporary higher education systems are permeated by evaluation regimes that assess not only the quality of academic knowledge, but also its usefulness. In this context, relevance no longer functions merely as a semantic claim about the relationship between science and society, but as an object of formalised evaluation. What counts as relevant is increasingly shaped by the instruments designed to measure and compare relevance.

These evaluative infrastructures often suggest that relevance could, in principle, be captured through unified or at least harmonised frameworks. Formal assessment exercises as well as narrative modes of demonstrating relevance tend to operate with implicit assumptions of commensurability, even when they acknowledge disciplinary or contextual variation. Yet such assumptions obscure a more fundamental characteristic of relevance: its evaluation is itself irreducibly plural. There is no single procedure through which the societal value of academic work can be assessed without remainder. Rather, different “modes of evaluation” mobilise different normative expectations, temporal horizons, and sources of legitimacy (Hamann et al., 2019): Historical and narrative accounts of useful scientific contributions, standardised assessment procedures, and participatory or stakeholder-oriented evaluations do not merely apply different tools to the same object; they enact different conceptions of relevance. Each mode foregrounds certain dimensions of academic work while backgrounding others, producing distinct forms of visibility and invisibility that are not mutually reducible.

This plurality of modes of evaluation should not be misunderstood as a transitional problem to be solved through better indicators or more comprehensive frameworks. On the contrary, it reflects the structural heterogeneity of scientific knowledge and its multiple societal entanglements. Attempts to impose singular or hierarchical regimes of relevance evaluation risk narrowing the spectrum of legitimate academic contributions and privileging those forms of knowledge production that align most easily with dominant assessment logics. In doing so, they may undermine precisely those forms of epistemic diversity and long-term orientation that sustain the problem-solving capacity of science. Therefore, evaluative pluralism is not an obstacle to scientific autonomy but one of its preconditions. The capacity of universities to relate to different societal environments in self-determined ways depends on the availability of multiple, partially incompatible modes of evaluation.

Seen together, the internal, external, and meta-level perspectives suggest that relevance emerges as a dynamic equilibrium shaped by organisational choices, societal expectations, and evaluative pressures. An institution may increase its relevance in one domain while diminishing it in others. For instance, extensive outreach may improve public visibility but reduce the time individual academics spend on research. Vice versa, increased research productivity may enhance disciplinary prestige but weaken local engagement. These trade-offs illustrate that relevance is neither additive nor unlimited. A university's overall societal contribution depends on how it balances competing demands and allocates resources across missions.

4 Contested relevances

If societal relevance takes shape through such precarious equilibria, it is hardly surprising that it becomes contested. Balancing heterogeneous expectations does not eliminate tensions but renders them visible. Contestation does not simply stem from misunderstandings or disagreements about evidence. Rather, it reflects deeper structural frictions in how academic practices intersect with societal interests and values. Different actors attribute relevance according to different criteria, operate in different temporal horizons, and draw on different sources of legitimacy. As a result, what appears as a meaningful societal contribution from one perspective may be perceived as insufficient, problematic, or even harmful from another. Building on the conceptual framework developed in the

* The following considerations build on an argument that Julian Hamann, Julia Schubert and the author developed to answer the Prize Question of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) in 2018: “Can the social relevance of relevance be evaluated and, if so, how?” Our essay was awarded the first prize, for the published original version see Hamann et al. (2019), for an updated version see Hamann & Schubert (2023).

previous section, the following analysis introduces a heuristic typology of modes of contestation. These modes are not intended as exhaustive categories, but as analytical lenses that reveal how relevance is negotiated and disputed.

4.1 The usefulness discourse: When relevance is imperative

One of the most familiar forms in which societal relevance becomes contested concerns the question of usefulness. Academic knowledge is repeatedly expected to demonstrate tangible benefits, practical solutions, or immediate applicability. Within this horizon, relevance is often implicitly equated with utility: research is considered relevant insofar as it can be used, applied or transferred.

Historically, this equation has always been fragile. Long before contemporary impact discourses, modern science developed a self-description that explicitly distanced itself from immediate usefulness. The ideal of "pure science" – and later the notion of „basic research“ – articulated a claim to relevance grounded not in direct application, but in the production of reliable knowledge and theoretical insight. Its societal significance was assumed to unfold indirectly, unpredictably, and often only over extended periods of time.

From this perspective, the usefulness discourse appears less as a dispute about where to draw the line between relevant and irrelevant knowledge than as a conflict between different expectations and temporal horizons of relevance. For example, few scientific achievements have had consequences as far-reaching as the atomic bomb, yet it resists any unambiguous characterisation as "useful". Conversely, activities such as the interpretation of poetry or the study of ancient languages are frequently dismissed as useless, despite their role in sustaining cultural orientation and critical reflection.

Disputes over usefulness therefore do not concern the presence or absence of societal effects. They revolve around which effects count as relevant and why, who defines usefulness, and on what time scales such judgements are made (Hamann et al., 2019; Hamann & Schubert, 2023). Research that promises immediate applicability is often privileged by policy makers and other stakeholders, while forms of knowledge whose relevance unfolds slowly or indirectly tend to be marginalised. In this sense, the usefulness discourse does not resolve the problem of relevance; it exemplifies why relevance itself remains contested.

4.2 The risk discourse: When relevance becomes problematic

A second mode in which societal relevance becomes contested emerges where research is perceived not as insufficiently relevant, but as excessively so – and not in the intended ways. In these cases, scientific knowledge is not criticised for lacking impact, but for producing consequences that are considered dangerous, uncontrollable, or socially unacceptable. Relevance here takes the form of risk.

Again, few examples illustrate this more clearly than the development of the atomic bomb. Scientific research in this field proved to be profoundly relevant in societal terms, yet precisely this relevance turned into a source of moral, political, and existential conflict.* Similar dynamics can be observed in contemporary debates surrounding biotechnology, artificial intelligence, or medical research. In these contexts, scientific knowledge is no longer primarily assessed in terms of its usefulness, but in terms of its potential for harm.

The risk discourse thus reverses the logic of the usefulness discourse. While the latter demands more relevance, applicability, and societal impact, the former questions whether certain forms of research should be pursued at all. Research becomes contested not because it fails to address societal problems, but because it intervenes too deeply, too rapidly, or too irreversibly into social and natural processes. These dynamics echo classic diagnoses of modern risk societies (Beck, 1992). Importantly, such contestations are not external to science. They often arise from within scientific communities themselves, where researchers reflect on the unintended

* This is reflected, for example, by the group of physicists who participated in the Manhattan Project and who, following the first use of the atomic bomb in 1945, founded the Atomic Scientists' Association, which continues until today publishes the "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists" (Mecklin, 2025).

consequences of their work and call for restraint, regulation, or ethical oversight (Forge, 2008). The risk discourse therefore highlights a second structural tension of relevance: scientific knowledge may be societally relevant in ways that undermine its legitimacy. Relevance, in this sense, does not simply generate acceptance; it can also provoke resistance and demands for limitation.

4.3 The ideology discourse: When relevance becomes politicised

A third mode in which societal relevance becomes contested emerges where academic knowledge is drawn into broader political and cultural conflicts. In these cases, research is not primarily criticised for lacking usefulness or for producing unacceptable risks, but for its perceived normative orientation. Relevance here becomes a matter of ideology and political alignment.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the contemporary Culture Wars in the United States, where universities have become central arenas of cultural polarisation (Binder, 2025). Research on topics such as climate change, public health, or diversity is frequently attacked not as irrelevant or erroneous, but as ideologically driven. Academic institutions are accused of promoting “woke agendas,” indoctrinating students, or undermining traditional values. Conversely, the same research is often defended precisely because it takes a clear stance on contested societal issues. These conflicts are not about whether academic knowledge matters. On the contrary, the societal impact is presupposed – and precisely is marked as the problem. The dispute thus concerns *what kind* of academic knowledge should matter, and *what kind* of knowledge should be dismissed as ideological.

At first sight, this politicisation appears to be imposed on universities from the outside. A closer look at the academic world, however, reveals internal disagreements about the appropriate relationship between expertise, activism, and public responsibility. Calls for value neutrality coexist with expectations that universities should actively contribute to social justice, democratic resilience, or cultural change. In this context, relevance becomes a contested attribute, shaped less by epistemic criteria than by conflicting values and political identities.

4.4 The third mission discourse: Relevance rituals and organisational balancing

A fourth mode in which societal relevance becomes contested in higher education is articulated through the third mission discourse. In this context, relevance is no longer primarily negotiated in terms of usefulness, risk, or political alignment, but through organised efforts to demonstrate engagement, responsibility, and contributions beyond research and teaching. Relevance becomes institutionalised. Following the neo-institutionalist perspective (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), one might speak of *relevance rituals* to describe organisational practices that publicly signal societal responsiveness without necessarily transforming core academic activities. Sustainability offices, diversity strategies, outreach programmes and science communication events exemplify such rituals. They render relevance visible, communicable, and auditable, thereby stabilising legitimacy vis-à-vis external audiences. At the same time, their effects often remain indirect, symbolic, and difficult to assess.

Relevance rituals are not merely superficial or cynical gestures. They fulfil important organisational functions by translating diffuse societal expectations into manageable formats. Yet precisely because they operate at the level of representation and coordination, they risk decoupling demonstrated relevance from substantive societal impact. What counts as relevant increasingly aligns with what can be organised, documented, and communicated within existing institutional structures. The third mission discourse thus foregrounds organisational trade-offs in a particularly explicit way. Resources devoted to relevance rituals – coordination units, reporting procedures, strategic initiatives – are resources not available for research or teaching. While such practices may enhance visibility and legitimacy, they can also generate additional burdens and shift attention towards ritualised forms of relevance. In this sense, the third mission discourse makes explicit a central insight of this article: societal relevance is not an unlimited good. It is produced, distributed, and constrained through organisational decisions that inevitably involve prioritisation of some goals and exclusion of others.

5 Conclusion: Relevance as balance

Debates about the societal relevance of higher education and academic research are often driven by an implicit assumption that more engagement, more visibility, and more impact are always desirable. This assumption obscures a fundamental characteristic of universities as organisations: they operate under conditions of scarcity, internal differentiation, and competing expectations across research, teaching, and third mission activities. Societal relevance, as this article has argued, is therefore not something that can simply be maximised. It must be balanced.

Recognising this practical constraint leads to a conceptual shift: abstract postulates of relevance in the singular give way to empirically grounded notions of *multiple* and *contested relevances*. Relevance, as the analysis has shown, is plural at several levels. It is shaped by heterogeneous structures internal to the university, by diverse and often conflicting external expectations, and by plural modes of evaluation. Furthermore, relevance claims are contestable in several dimensions. The usefulness discourse highlights tensions between immediate applicability and long-term knowledge production. The risk discourse demonstrates that relevance may take forms that undermine legitimacy rather than enhance it. The ideology discourse reveals how relevance can become politically charged, contested not for its absence but for its normative implications. Finally, the third mission discourse illustrates how relevance is increasingly institutionalised through organisational practices and rituals that stabilise legitimacy while simultaneously generating new trade-offs. Taken together, these modes of contestation make clear that societal relevance is not additive. Increasing relevance in one dimension may reduce it in another. Extensive engagement activities may strengthen public visibility while constraining the time and attention available for research and teaching. Conversely, intensified research productivity may enhance the disciplinary prestige of individual academics or departments while weakening their local or societal connectedness. Such dynamics are not pathologies or failures of governance. They reflect the structural conditions under which universities operate.

Understanding relevance as a *matter of balance* shifts the perspective from optimisation to judgement. The question is no longer how relevance can be measured more comprehensively or demonstrated more convincingly, but how institutions navigate competing relevance claims under conditions of limited resources and organisational complexity. From a governance perspective, this implies that universities should not simply expand engagement activities, but rather prioritise and coordinate competing relevance claims across their core missions. This affects the allocation of resources between research, teaching, and third mission activities, the design of incentive structures for academic staff, and the evaluation of institutional performance. This becomes particularly visible in the case of dual higher education, where balancing academic and practical orientations is structurally embedded in curricula and cooperation agreements. Policies that promote societal relevance without accounting for these trade-offs risk overburdening organisations and generating symbolic rather than substantive forms of engagement. At the same time, regimes of evaluation that seek to standardise or hierarchise relevance tend to privilege those forms of engagement that are most visible, most easily communicable, or most compatible with prevailing assessment logics, thereby marginalising alternative forms of societal impact.

To summarise, a balanced understanding of relevance requires tolerance for plurality, acceptance of trade-offs, and institutional spaces for reflexive judgement rather than permanent expansion. Seen in this light, societal relevance is neither an external demand to be satisfied nor an internal virtue to be maximised. It is a relational and contested achievement that depends on how universities align their multiple missions over time.

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