

Higher Education Institutions and Multistakeholders' Engagement: A Longitudinal Study of an Anchor Institution's Legitimacy and Dynamism

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Abstract—Higher education institutions (HEIs) often serve as the social glue of a community. They are place-bound institutions with strong regional ties that typically play a crucial role in shaping the socioeconomic development of local ecosystems. Although their role as anchor institutions—large institutions that impact community life and economies over generations—is clear, there are few studies on how these universities actually evolve. How do their structures change over time? And what, if any, are their strategies for maintaining their status as an anchor institution? This research presents a longitudinal case study spanning a seven-year period in the life of the University of Turin (UniTo), a large generalist university in Northern Italy. During this period, UniTo successfully transitioned from an ivory tower into an entrepreneurial university and a civically engaged institution embedded in its local region. Our analysis identifies the main challenges in evolving from one model to the other, along with the strategies used by UniTo to both face these challenges and maintain its status as an anchor institution. Our findings show that, in the HEI sector, an institution's organizational structures need to be dynamic. Structured, top-down relationships, such as those between the institution and the municipality, need to work in tandem with spontaneous, bottom-up one-to-one relationships. Overall, what emerges from this research is a new concept of legitimacy, called *anchored legitimacy*, that is built on both spontaneity and structuralism and persists over decades and centuries.

Index Terms—Anchor institutions, higher education institutions, multistakeholder engagement, socioeconomic impact, universities.

I. INTRODUCTION

HIGHER education institutions (HEIs), such as universities and polytechnics, are place-bound institutions with strong ties to their communities [6], [11], [13], [33], [37]. Defined as the “social glue” of a community [59], universities and HEIs

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play an active and strategic role in shaping the socioeconomic development of entire regions [10], [46]. They contribute to solving inequalities and social problems and can even remediate socioeconomic marginalization [11], [50], [81]. Indeed, universities can be thought of as public leaders, galvanizing the interests of salient stakeholders and developing strategies aimed at precise societal objectives [57], [58]. Universities are also knowledge generators, and, for this reason, there have long been calls for universities to guide their programs and activities according to societal values [14]. Recently, the two traditional functions of HEIs, teaching and research, have been expanded to include a so-called *third mission* [16], [48]. Third mission activities involve a mix of knowledge transfers to industry, business, and the general public; policy development and economic initiatives [5], [70]; and stakeholder engagement and urban outreach activities [74]. Generally, these third mission activities are periodically disclosed in reports to meet the information needs of stakeholders [21].

The literature confirms the importance of disclosing valuable information and its corresponding impacts both in financial and reputational terms [23], [40]. We define disclosure using Dumay's ([21, p. 178]) more narrow definition as: “the revelation of information that was previously secret or unknown.” Disclosures can be financial or nonfinancial and can be made through “reporting activity,” “detailed periodic account(s) of a company's activities,” and knowledge transfer activities, such as patents, spin-offs, and research projects ([21, p. 178]). Hence, a generalist public university may use disclosure to raise external funds, build relationships of trust within a local ecosystem of stakeholders, or coordinate efforts to address a pertinent social issue, such as improving healthcare or nutrition, eradicating poverty, increasing the quality of education [48], [66], [69], finding answers for climate change, reducing waste, preventing biodiversity loss [49], and so on.

In the past, the role and the position of universities within society was essentially different. Public universities were often small, elite institutions, typically known as ivory towers [30]. Only recently has the debate on the role of universities gained momentum within the academic community, with aspects such as the engagement of external stakeholders being emphasized [36]. Within stakeholder theory, a stakeholder is defined as “any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives” ([32, p. 48]). Since the purpose of this study is to analyze the role of HEIs as anchor

institutions within a local context, the term *external stakeholder* is intended in its broadest meaning to include all stakeholders across a region's citizenship (both primary and secondary) [1], [2], [53] and not just those stakeholders with a direct financial interest in the institution, such as investors or partners. Most notably, what sits at the center of the academic effort toward remodulating the role of HEIs is questioning how trust might confirm a university's social contract with its stakeholders and how HEIs are working to enhance their commitment to disclosing information on knowledge sharing with the public [39].

On this premise, universities may need to serve as anchor institutions with very strong ties to their surrounding local community. Goddard et al. [37, p. 307] and Cantor et al. [13] define anchor institutions as "large, locally embedded institutions...that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of cities in which they are based" and that "persist in communities over generations." Indeed, they are stable and enduring organizations with a mission to support the social and economic growth of the territory in which they are based [25], [26], [27], [28], [37]. However, to carry out this social contract, HEIs must, in one sense, be statically bonded to their neighborhood, and, in another sense, evolve dynamically and with the flexibility to anticipate and meet the needs and challenges of people and communities all over the world [11], [28]. For instance, the recent COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic and sudden change in course delivery strategies for many HEIs. Universities had to quickly implement digital alternatives to face-to-face teaching and research just to continue fulfilling their missions. Moreover, many HEIs were called upon to perform public services, such as preparing and administering tests, vaccinating the population, and inventing and manufacturing respirators and sanitizing agents, etc. [17].

While there are undoubtedly differences between mega universities and small HEIs in terms of their size and research performance [31], the importance given to third mission activities has grown in recent times for HEIs, both large and small. Part of this shift in thinking is due to reforms in national education systems under the pressure of the ministries of different countries [16]. An example of this is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the U.K., which asks researchers to measure the economic and social impacts of their research projects [47]. Another example, this time from Italy, is the increased attention given to activities involving community health protection, life-long learning, knowledge transfers, and public engagement by the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research [8]. Moreover, over the past few decades, universities have also been encouraged to increase the social and economic relevance of their research and to become more accountable for their social and economic impacts. People want universities to start solving grand challenges and wicked problems [9], [64].

Despite universities as anchor institutions having received increased attention in the literature, to the best of our knowledge, there is still limited evidence as to whether HEIs need a certain level of dynamism to continually generate social, economic, and environmental impacts, and, if they do, how does that dynamism evolve and change over the years such that the HEI remains embedded as an anchor institution in the local context? The

purpose of this article is to investigate whether and how an anchor institution's features can confer a social license to operate [55], and how it might disentangle the complex expectations of its multistakeholder relationships within a local and evolving ecosystem. The longitudinal case study on the University of Turin (UniTo) presented in this article is based on seven years of observations. It highlights the stages of evolution this university has gone through from its former status as an ivory tower through its transition to becoming a civically engaged institution embedded in its local region. The data analyzed were gathered from interviews and focus groups with relevant stakeholders and supplemented by sustainability reports and UniTo's website. The corpus was coded against key aspects of the literature on anchor institutions. As most of the research on anchor institutions derives from geography and urban planning, this study is among the first to apply anchor institution theory to a managerial context. More specifically, this study demanded a research architecture solid enough to guarantee the reliability of the data and even one that considered the involvement of the researcher in the data collection.

Our findings reveal the strategies and activities used to maintain UniTo's status as an anchor institution during its ongoing transition. Thus, some of the novelty of this study lies in the fact that it offers a clear exposé of how an HEI can transform from an ivory tower or an entrepreneurial university into one that is civically engaged in third mission activities.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section II provides a brief exploratory literature review on prior studies on anchor institutions. Section III contextualizes UniTo and its missions, underlining its materiality as a relevant and information-rich case study. This section also outlines our methodological choices. Section IV presents our main findings, discussing the different stages in the evolution of UniTo. Finally, Sections V and VI discuss our conclusions, the limitations of this study, and prospects for future research.

II. CAN UNIVERSITIES BE DYNAMIC ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS?

In the literature, universities have been observed and analyzed from different points of view. Some research studies [67] have focused on universities as instruments of economic growth within a triple helix model (university–government–industry). Coined *entrepreneurial universities*, this label reflects the priority given to commercialization, patenting, technology transfers, incubators, and spin-offs as the main outputs and "*raison d'être*" of these types of universities [3], [4]. Others describe universities as knowledge factories because they produce scientific knowledge and high-impact research, which they then share with firms [84]. By contrast, *mode 2 universities* are oriented toward social challenges. They cultivate relationships with different stakeholders—often nonscientific ones [78].

As mentioned in the introduction, over the past decade or so, many universities have transitioned from being ivory tower institutions to becoming highly engaged, community-based institutions that play an active role in shaping social, political, and economic development [11]. These *engaged* or *civic universities* promote third mission activities and create opportunities in

their local regions through inclusive approaches to community engagement [37]. However, no matter the orientation of the university, in terms of a broader sociocultural definition, universities tend to be large, place-based institutions with strong ties to their community [11], [13], [33], [37]. However, just because a territory has a university does not automatically mean that university will be committed to improving its community. The relationship between HEIs and their local ecosystems is a necessary partnership, a mutual interdependence that provides opportunities and shares bidirectional knowledge with different local community stakeholders [45]. Only in such cases is it possible to consider a university to be truly engaged and, therefore, anchored within a territory.

As mentioned, anchor institutions are large, locally embedded institutions with a strong identity and reputation [28], [37] that foster economic growth as well as social and cultural development [41]. Hospitals, museums, and, of course, universities are good examples. The term anchor institution has its roots in the US, emerging from urban policy discussions on the significant physical assets in a region and may be defined as “place-based organizations that persist in communities over generations, serving as social glue, economic engines, or both” ([13, p. 20]). However, the relationships that develop between universities and their communities, as well as the features of the anchor institution, do evolve over time [25], [26]. The land a university sits upon is just one example of this changing relationship. In the past, universities were granted lands to build their campuses upon, often through land designation programs. However, by the early 20th century, most long-standing universities had become embedded in their urban communities. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, urban renewal schemes had begun in many inner-city areas, where universities are located, and so the focus shifted to the need to tackle physical, social, and economic deterioration. Today, we now see persistent university–community partnerships and neighborhood revitalization schemes. Hence, the role of an anchor institution is not static, even if it is the *custodian of place* [85]. Rather, it is fluid and dynamic [11], and, in this way, it captures the community’s needs and acts to foster the development of a locality [62], [63].

Goddard et al. [37, p. 307] defined anchor institutions as “large, locally embedded institutions, typically nongovernmental public sector, cultural or other civic organizations that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of cities in which they are based.” In addition, the notion of an “anchored institution of democracy” stresses, even more, a reciprocal relationship with local communities based on a participatory and inclusive decision-making process that connects the HEI’s mission with “democratic public purposes” ([45, p. 169]).

In summary, universities, as anchor institutions, are characterized by a strong identity, a solid reputation, knowledge production, and significant investments in the local area in which they are based. They are large institutions with significant intellectual, human, and financial resources; they are stable and enduring. However, at the same time, they must be dynamic and flexible if they are to evolve together with the local community. Only in this way can they act as change agents to foster social and

economic growth, contribute to building a stronger community, or help to reduce inequality [64]. Table I summarizes the main features of an anchor institution according to the most recent academic literature.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

We relied on a case study methodology [83] with a longitudinal perspective to explore how UniTo, as an anchor institution, has evolved over time. Conducting case studies is a qualitative methodological approach that allows for deep insights into the cause-and-effect relationships of an organization’s operations and projects. Further, it is a methodology that goes beyond what can be achieved from quantitative analyses [19]. Descriptions of meanings and relations are presented to understand how reality is put together and how events unfold [35]. This methodology follows an accepted approach in its design and execution [83] that involves the following: a criterion-sampling strategy, data collection from multiple sources, and a strategy of analysis intended to obtain the most complete record of the targeted information as is possible [65]. UniTo was selected as our subject because it represents a revelatory case study [24] of a generalist Italian public university that evolved over time while remaining anchored to its territory and its local community.

The study is placed in the management literature while the research methodology pivots on a focus group methodology [75]. Focus groups are particularly useful when little is known about a specific phenomenon, and researchers want to dig deeper into how it is perceived and depicted by individuals and groups. Because focus groups are interactive, they tend to provide deeper levels of meaning, and they reveal synergistic effects that highlight not only data and ideas but also different views and contradictions. As the purpose of this study is to focus on how anchor institutions might evolve over time, using focus groups is an ideal way to involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders with whom the university bridges and bonds its relational capital [80].

B. Profiling UniTo as an Anchor Institution

UniTo is one of the largest and oldest universities in Italy. Founded in 1440, it is located in the city of Turin within the region of Piedmont. With 120 buildings and 22 libraries spread across the city, the university also includes a botanical garden, five museums, and a hospital that is responsible for approximately half of the medical services of the entire region. In 2020, UniTo boasted almost 81 700 undergraduate, 14 800 graduate, and 1100 Ph.D. students, with 2056 professors and researchers and 1849 administrative staff members. All 27 of its departments are teaching departments, and the university also conducts research in all academic fields except for engineering and architecture, which are handled by the local polytechnic university. Therefore, UniTo follows the Humboldtian tradition of addressing knowledge creation [71].

In 2020, UniTo ranked third place among all Italian universities, with ten departments financed within the ministerial label “Departments of Excellence,” and, in 2018, it was awarded first

TABLE I
MAIN FEATURES OF AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

Anchor institutions' main features	Main authors
Is stable (place-based) and enduring	[11]; [28]; [37]; [45]; [50]; [59]
Is flexible	[11]; [28]; [25], [27]
Plays a key role in local development, both economically and socially	[85]; [10]; [11]; [25]; [26]; [34]; [37]; [45]; [50]; [59]; [81]
Has significant physical assets	[27]; [34]; [37]; [56]
Is a large employer	[37]; [25]; [50]; [56]; [81]
Is engaged (civic, local community, political engagement)	[85]; [9]; [10]; [11]; [26], [27]; [38]; [50]; [59]
Has an established partnership with neighborhood	[85]; [25]; [27]; [28]; [34]; [45]; [50]; [81]
Is a knowledge creator and disseminator	[15]; [25]; [28]; [45]

place in the public engagement ranking of the Italian Ministry for Research. UniTo also has excellent world rankings. In 2020, it placed 22nd in the world and 2nd in Italy for its sustainability performance according to Greenmetric, and it was ranked 217th in the world university rankings according to US News.

In terms of its relationships within its local community, UniTo collaborates with many elements of society. For example, it conducts research and pilot projects both with the city of Turin and other public administrations, and with local enterprises, NGOs, and large multiutility companies. Research activities include developing, testing, and piloting novel technologies, such as fuel cells and electric vehicles, as well as research projects and initiatives dealing with poverty, social exclusion, housing policies, and migration issues. Through public engagement activities such as Researchers' Night or the recently established Butterfly Area—a new project to support collaboration among citizens, researchers, businesses, and public administrations—UniTo is tightly embedded within a local ecosystem that is transitioning toward sustainable development. Notably, UniTo has created the Green Office of the University of Turin (UniToGO), which actively promotes sustainability in both the academic community and across the whole city. In past years, several public initiatives have been organized such as the Waste Mob, a plogging¹

activity open to all citizens. Hence, UniTo's external stakeholders include all elements of its local ecosystem.

Additionally, UniTo has adopted several channels for institutional and individual communications. At the governance level, a sustainability report is released annually, while each department's website dedicates pages to knowledge transfer, research outputs, and public engagement activities. UniTo, its 27 departments, and many projects have a presence on all the major social networking platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.).

C. Data Collection and Analysis

We gathered data from different sources to capture the complex composition of UniTo and its stakeholders [43]. Drawing on field observations, interviews, focus groups, printed material, and websites, we hoped to develop a deep understanding and paint a complete picture of the phenomenon and the university's relationships with the surrounding environment. These primary data were mostly qualitative and required field participation by the researchers while the activities were being carried out by the organization. Many of these activities also involved external stakeholders. Table II shows the focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted. These were undertaken to guarantee a comprehensive longitudinal analysis. Other studies have successfully used focus groups when engaging relevant

¹A portmanteau of the Swedish "plocka" meaning picking up rubbish and "jogga" meaning jog—picking up rubbish while jogging.

TABLE II
DETAIL OF THE HERMENEUTIC UNITS

Date	Sample participants	No. of participants	Research purpose
Apr 2015	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Internal and external representatives of teaching and research staff, administrative staff <i>External stakeholders:</i> Local companies, large corporations, UNESCO chair, NGOs, and communication agencies	16	Collecting data to design policies and internal strategies to foster sustainable development, understanding the impact of UniTo on the local area, and the relationships with the local community
June 2015	<i>External stakeholders:</i> Representatives of various associations, industrialists, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists	16	Understanding the economic impact generated through research and knowledge transfer
Sep 2015 In-depth interview: February 2017	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Medical and hard science departments delegates	15	Understanding the contribution of the departments in determining organizational, social, and environmental impacts at various levels with and for the university's partners
Sep 2015 In-depth interview: Mar 2017	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Social sciences departments delegates	20	Understanding the contribution of the departments in determining organizational, social, and environmental impacts at various levels with and for the university's partners
Nov 2016	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Vice-rectors for research, vice-rector for communication, president of the university, university incubator, university incubator for creative entrepreneurship, sustainability report unit, interdepartmental	14	Discussing UniTo's cultural and societal outreach on local development to jointly collaborate for the elaboration of a strategic plan for the city and stakeholders' exploration
	center for public engagement, and interdepartmental research center <i>External stakeholders:</i> Three municipality representatives		
December 2016	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Rector, three vice-rectors	5	Follow-up interview
April 2021	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Director of research and third mission department, vice-rector for sustainability and welfare, director of sustainability department	12	Discussing UniTo's strategy in supporting the university citizenry and the local citizens during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
March 2022	<i>Internal stakeholders:</i> Vice-rector for research, vice-rector for knowledge transfer, director of the third mission department, and other representatives <i>External stakeholders:</i> Banking foundation representative, representative of the local prison	6	Discussing UniTo's strategy to create societal value through teaching, research, and third mission activities

stakeholders, and these were fundamental to understand the phenomenon under study [73]. In parallel, we also gathered and analyzed secondary data, such as internal and publicly available documents—sustainability reports, websites, and other reports provided by the stakeholders. These secondary data were used to triangulate the information gleaned from the interviews and focus groups [83]. Data collection took place over a period of several years, most specifically from April 2015 to March 2022, allowing for a truly longitudinal analysis.

In total, 104 internal and external stakeholders participated in the focus groups and in-depth interviews. The internal participants included privileged interlocutors, such as the rector and several vice-rectors, along with departmental directors and the directors of some of the university's more specific functional areas. External stakeholders were selected from the institutions with consolidated and long-lasting relationships with the university. Each focus group session lasted between two and four hours. Table II summarizes the sources of data and the specific aims of each focus group.

To increase procedural reliability [68], we recorded and transcribed the content and the dynamics of the focus group. Discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through content analysis. We intentionally asked similar questions to different respondents in order to detect possible inconsistencies and respondent bias. We adopted retrospective interview methods with the aim of interpreting the past [82]. The recordings were transcribed and coded by two different researchers, where there were inconsistencies, the researchers revised the transcripts using meeting notes before reaching a consensus. Data analysis followed open and axial coding techniques for identifying and linking the data collected to the research questions [76]. Objective descriptive data and interpretative data based on perceptions were coded separately. Data were analyzed with different tools, both manual and software-aided ones, such as QCAmap [72]. Using primary data collected in a field where the participants had not been previously briefed on our study allowed them to depict reality as it is, not as how we as researchers might influence them to portray it. Additionally, we had an adjunct researcher in the team to ensure that the process of data analysis was free of bias.

As the data collected through the focus groups were triangulated with other data sources, our research can be considered as a mixed-methods, qualitative dominant study of the QUAL-QUAL type, according to the qualitative–quantitative continuum model of Johnson et al. [43]. Because this case study spans seven years, we adopted a sequential triangulation [60], where we analyzed and validated information obtained from the primary data (interviews and focus groups) with secondary sources (such as the sustainability reports and departmental webpages). This helped us to recognize the actions adopted over a seven-year period and monitor their evolution. This approach also allowed us to reduce inconsistency and contradictions and to identify convergences among different sources [20]. As a last step, we analyzed our findings through the theoretical framework presented in the previous section. The researchers constantly compared and discussed their interpretations of the collected evidence.

IV. FINDINGS

We discovered three progressive stages in the evolution of this anchor institution: metacognitive awareness, instantiation of anchor institution procedures, and the development of an anchor institution strategy. Metacognitive awareness pertains to UniTo's relationships with its local ecosystem, which revealed that three main elements are crucial for an anchor institution to maintain its anchored role: 1) transparency and reputation; 2) internal structure (centralized versus decentralized); and 3) third mission activities and knowledge transfers. Instantiating the procedures of an anchor institution occurred in response to the ongoing challenges faced by UniTo. Finally, the university implemented a strategy for its successfully transition, revealing the need for anchor institutions to move between two criteria: spontaneity and structuralism.

A. Metacognitive Awareness

1) *Transparency and Reputation*: UniTo is considered bureaucratic. Departments have complete administrative autonomy, but the university's financial resources are managed centrally. Ministerial reforms enacted in 2010 have resulted in a performance management system that sees UniTo publish many budgets and statements: a consolidated budget, financial statements, a consolidated financial statement, a reclassification of the financial statements, performance plans, etc. Notably, the performance plan quantifies teaching, research, and third mission achievements.

All top administrators have access to a 24/7 online dashboard monitoring key performance indicators. From university dropout rates to the number of spin-offs created, from the number of foreign students attracted to visiting professors hosted, this dashboard is home to many, many indicators. Transparency is also an important issue, and there are several imperatives to publicly release both financial and nonfinancial information. In fact, the rector once began a speech with the following statement:

Italian public universities are one of the most controlled and transparent organizations in the Italian market. They consistently make a great amount of data publicly available, even though institutional stakeholders always ask to describe UniTo again and again. (Rector, Convocation Address)

In his address, he expressed the frustrations associated with being an anchored institution, and how the legitimacy of the institution always seems to be in question. In one of the focus groups organized in April 2015, the participants agreed upon the need to communicate information to external stakeholders in a more discursive and less bureaucratic manner. This was one of the reasons for creating a sustainability report. The idea came about due to an increased perception among administrators that the university's relationship with local stakeholders was deteriorating. Hence, they wanted to begin a new discourse on sustainable development and the role UniTo could play in that. Unfortunately, the report ultimately did not cover the main outcomes of the university's missions and, during a focus group in September 2015, one professor judged the report to be “a

nice stylistic effort that will not guarantee any extra funds to my research” (Professor of Philosophy).

2) *Organizational Structure: Centralized Versus Decentralized*: During the November 2016 focus group with multiple institutional stakeholders, UniTo was described as “nebulous” by a municipal representative, as an “ensemble” of talented professors by the Association of Public Communicators, and as a “training center” for the “enormous number of students that need to be employed” by a representative of an industrial association. These vague and nonspecific characterizations were, in reality, veiled criticisms over the institution’s legitimacy—not for its values or its rigor, but simply due to a lack of communication. One manager said:

Compared to the Polytechnic of Turin (the second largest university in Turin), it is difficult to define UniTo, to engage it in a dialogue, to co-create policies. We have difficulty in finding the right interlocutor, in knowing your exact firepower. (Municipal Manager)

This statement reflects exactly how difficult it was for the institution to dialog with its stakeholders. After all, there is a difference between the representatives of the university, whose behavior can be questioned, and the university itself, which is anchored. People were worried ...

...about doing business with UniTo, as we have no clear perception of it. We perceive the name of a professor or an expert in a niche research field with more clarity, reading about his research output in the newspaper. The bonds we have with UniTo are personal, one-to-one. (Company Representative)

These stakeholders suggested that organizations like UniTo should not only be at the top of the rankings for research but must also be recognized as leaders and pioneers by the general public, and that this must be communicated through the coherent and coordinated messaging of its affairs (Environmental Communicator).

3) *Third Mission Activities and Knowledge Transfers*: In December 2016, the vice-rector of public relations created a taskforce on the theme of how UniTo was managing its third mission. He asked the departmental directors to begin disclosing the initiatives that the departments were putting in place with external stakeholders in terms of joint research projects, collaborations, commissioned researchers, etc. During February and March 2017, we came to realize that there was a great disparity between some departments, which had detailed records of all of their third mission activities, and others, which only had a blank page or some vague rhetoric on their institutional website. Hence, we undertook a round of in-depth interviews.

At the organizational level, we found infrastructural disparities between the departments, where certain department managers were keen to account for their third mission activities while others completely ignored such practices. For example, scientific departments tended to show more institutionalized and structured information, mainly related to knowledge transfer initiatives such as communicating scientific results and innovations or filing patents. However, the humanities departments, with their fuzzier content, typically required deeper support to help identify and disclose their initiatives and actions, such as

hiring experts in public engagement, intellectual property rights, or innovation.

Further, only the scientific departments asked their research partners to sign any kind of formal documentation, whereas most of the social science departments took an uncodified approach. The locus of this problem turned out to lie in the researchers themselves “as primary sources of data” (Director of the Research Department). More specifically, in medicine and the hard sciences, knowledge transfers and innovation generally coincide with a formal research agreement. This is because there are often tricky legal and ethical implications of such work. For this reason, these agreements have been always considered more closely related to research than to third mission activities. Additionally, the sciences tend to raise a greater amount of funding, and they disclose less about what they are doing. Conversely, third mission activities in the social sciences and humanities mostly revolve around public engagement initiatives, such as workshops, exhibitions, conferences. Their stakeholders are local SMEs, associations, and third sector partners, and, in general, they raise less money from these endeavors.

One hard science professor stated during an interview:

We are trying to overcome the prejudice that we are not involved in the world. We work every day with people. We engage local communities, here and in developing countries. We engage with schools, but we must know if such arguments are of importance for people beyond the university. (Professor)

While a social science professor affirmed that:

The social sciences are often treated as second level disciplines, and asking us to produce data on knowledge transfer implies the prejudice that our research is not important compared to hard science. (Professor)

These statements opened an internal self-reflection process within the governance body of UniTo about the importance of clarifying a basic ontology for defining third mission activities.

B. Instantiation of Anchor Institution Procedures

To overcome these differences between the hard sciences and the humanities as well as to homogenize and standardize the university’s communication practices, a new institutional website and an organizational subunit, called Frida, was launched in 2017. Frida’s main mandate is to present UniTo’s research activities to the general public using popular language and storytelling. Its activities involve informal communication through most of the popular social networks, creating ad hoc catalogs and public podcasts, and conducting interviews with the staff. Additionally, any professor or researcher can voluntarily share the results of their research with the general public simply by uploading a summary of their projects.

Frida was the first web portal developed by an Italian public university for supporting the dissemination of research results. Through Frida, the data visualizations of different mapped activities began to display new patterns, and it revealed that the social sciences and humanities, the hard sciences and life sciences, and the health sciences had, in fact, an equal distribution in terms of the number and types of third mission activities. Additionally,

some common categories of stakeholders began to be revealed. These included public administrations, municipalities, and governments; third-sector organizations; other research institutions and universities; public schools; and hospitals and public health centers. What emerged from the focus group in November 2016 was an incredible richness of projects over a wide range of topics, from water sanitation to innovative agricultural techniques in Saharan rural villages, from projects supporting vulnerable people (migrants, disabled, newly poor, addicts, and inmates) to financial literacy, from prenatal care to the early diagnosis of rare diseases, such as dysphagia, endometriosis, and oncology related to DNA risk.

The legitimacy obtained from educating people in these topics is priceless, overwhelming any business strategy that a public organization could put in place. This was confirmed by an administrator, who said:

For us, it is relevant to have updated information on partners and the work that has been done, along with its territory. (Representative of a hard science department)

The problem of stolen legitimacy can be perceived in the words of a research director:

Among the hard sciences, there is the risk of seeing UniTo as a normal supplier. [Companies] start from the assumption that when they pay for something, it is then their property. We feel that our role is an unbalanced role. They presume that the output of a public university could be privatized, but we must defend our role and territory. (Director of Research)

The problem of legitimization is closely linked to the production and transfer of knowledge. However, at the organizational level, all the tools we examined in this project were institutionalized. Further, the emphasis was on creating engagement events with the surrounding territory—to affirm what was actually the status quo for UniTo—not simply to ensure the role of the university as a research center or knowledge generator. This is risky, but being anchored means that:

Innovation may come through the work of companies and the university's efforts: a desirable future for the economy and society relies on a dialectic role more than on mechanical adjustment, as explained by supply and demand numbers. (Vice-rector for research transfer)

C. Development of an Anchor Institution Strategy

From the focus group of 2022, it emerged that the link between individual lecturers and researchers and the university must be more flexible; it must be able to move between two poles: spontaneity and structuralism. Both vice-rectors for research expressed their desire for there to be much more coordination between the spontaneous spirit of the researchers and the hierarchy of the university in the future—the goal being healthier, more collaborative relationships. The need for institutional figures to help the lecturers, researchers, and professors better understand the potential social impact of their research was also identified. These experts would help the academics through a “strategic coupling phase.” For the participants, coupling the university’s missions meant establishing a series of connections between the following dyads: research and third mission activities, teaching and third mission activities, and research and teaching. It was therefore made clear that maintaining legitimacy would no

longer only be linked to the communication of an activity, but to the direct engagement of stakeholders within the university’s missions in a proactive manner.

As clarified by one of the focus group participants, it would become increasingly essential for academics to acquire the skills to plan an impact strategy for their research project starting from the design phase. In other words, wherever possible, the academics would need to prepare an impact strategy, similar to what happens in social impact assessments. Hence, the scholar would need to consider, from the design phase, the impacts to be achieved from a particular project in terms of teaching, research, and the third mission. Moreover, several other requirements needed to be set for every project. These included elements of qualitative assessment (success/failure), elements related to risk, measurable parameters of generated value, and an analysis of affected stakeholders.

V. NEED FOR A DEFINITION OF ANCHORED LEGITIMACY

Our case study revealed two key findings: the required features, characteristics, and strategies needed by an HEI to maintain and further its position as an anchor institution; and the need for a new construct—*anchored legitimacy*—to shift the focus of the debate on anchor institutions from the institution itself to the procedures and relationships that exist between the institution and society.

Recalling the definition given in the introduction, anchor institutions are “large, locally embedded institutions, typically nongovernment public sector, cultural or other civic organizations that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of the cities in which they are based” ([37], p. 356). Hence, in terms of the characteristics needed to be considered an anchor institution, the first is a good reputation within one’s local ecosystem. This is necessary to guarantee the institution becomes a respected authority in the minds of its stakeholders. Accomplishing this will invariably require transparency policies covering both financial and non-financial disclosures. However, these should be just a first step, not the ultimate goal. As declared by one of the internally interviewed stakeholders (who was not engaged in corporate social responsibility or sustainability reporting), reporting and communication activities could prove to be a “nice stylistic effort” and nothing else. Therefore, HEIs may find it necessary to strengthen the relationship between a transparent accounting and the internal activities (such as teaching, research/administrative and project writing/fundraising tasks) of professors and researchers.

Second, an anchor institution cannot be static. Rather, to be part of an ecosystem, it needs to support dynamic and flexible relationships with stakeholders that endure over time. According to Cantor et al. [13, p. 20], anchor institutions “persist in communities over generations.” Their role is not just to statically and steadfastly safeguard and advance knowledge (in the case of HEIs), it is also to strengthen society and the democratic process ([45, p. 169]). In this sense, anchor institutions need to have a dual nature. On one side, they need to be stable and enduring [11], [87], [28]. They need a hierarchical, vertical structure to be able to work with the governance bodies of cities and

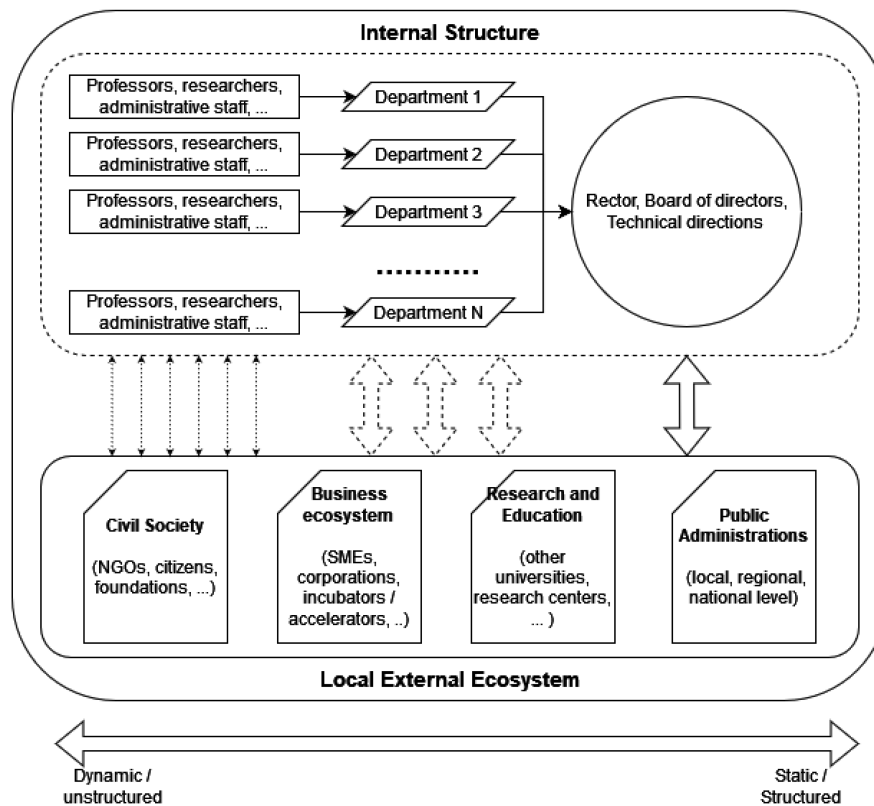


Fig. 1. Simplified representation of the dual static and dynamic nature of an anchor institution's relationships with its ecosystem.

regions. However, at the same time, they also need a dynamic and flexible structure [11], [25], [27], [28]. This enables rapid and unstructured reciprocal interchanges with the society through one-to-one relationships, as shown in Fig. 1.

Third, anchor institutions need to be engaged [85], [9]. They need established partnerships within their neighborhoods [85], [25], [27]. Additionally, HEIs, as knowledge creators and disseminators [15], [25], [28], [45], should also play a key role in local development [85], [10]. As pointed out by some of the participants in focus groups and interviews, unstructured relationships with external stakeholders may lead to institutional weaknesses. But if the one-to-one relationships between the academic staff, administrative staff, and external stakeholders can result in a deeper and more timely impact on civil society, this type of unstructured communication action may generate stable and official partnerships. Thus, as depicted in Fig. 1, including both types of actions (structured and unstructured) requires a certain degree of standardization (at least at the level of departments) to clarify the boundaries of internal stakeholders' actions, roles, and responsibilities to external stakeholders.

However, although there are rather expansive discussions of the features and characteristics associated with anchor institutions in the literature (see Table I), there are no known studies on the processes that an anchor institution needs to follow in order to evolve and shape itself into an organization that can “persist in communities over generations.” This is why we feel it necessary to both introduce and define the concept of anchored legitimacy. The dynamic relationships between an anchored institution and society must go beyond static snapshots taken at a specific time and place. They need to embody more than one particular

structure, set of organizations, or set of values that never changes. Therefore, anchored legitimacy is defined as the increasing legitimacy that a pivotal institution in a territory maintains over time, even down the centuries. Developing anchored legitimacy occurs through mechanisms of dialog and openness with local stakeholders, which help to make it solid but also continuously modern, dynamic, and evolving. It is important to remember that anchored institutions are still organizations with particular values, cultures, and behaviors, and they are composed of people and procedures. Therefore, anchored legitimacy requires both spontaneity and structuralism. Spontaneity refers to the one-to-one relationships which are necessary to form strong stakeholder ties—both internal and external, while structuralism refers to the rigid hierarchies and procedures necessary at the top management levels. In between, there needs to be a fluid and dynamic layer of middle management that operates with a certain degree of standardization. In our anchored legitimacy framework, this fluid and dynamic structure is termed *structural spontaneity*, and the required standardization is termed *spontaneous structuralism*.

A. Challenges for an Anchored Legitimacy and Managerial Implications

Table III summarizes the main themes emerging from the interviews and focus groups. The main internal/external challenges identified are highlighted along with UniTo's potential strategic solutions.

These identified challenges led us as researchers to consider what anchored institutions might do to maintain their structural

TABLE III
MAIN FEATURES OF AN (HEI) ANCHOR INSTITUTION: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES TO BE IMPLEMENTED

Aspects	Contrasting features	Internal/external challenge	Strategy
Transparency and reputation	Financial versus non-financial reporting	“External stakeholders always ask to describe UniTo again and again”	Report information in a more discursive and less bureaucratic manner
	Funding	“A nice stylistic effort that will not guarantee any extra funds to my research.”	Connect accounting and reporting initiatives to internal fundraising needs
Internal Structure	Centralized vs non-centralized	“The bonds we have with UniTo are personal, one-to-one.”	Develop communication strategies to better communicate the dualistic structure to external stakeholders (static vs dynamic, centralized vs non-centralized)
Third Mission and Knowledge Transfer	Scientific vs humanities departments	“The social sciences are often treated as second-level disciplines.”	Standardizing disclosures for single units/departments
	Research vs third mission	“among the hard sciences, there is the challenge of marketing strategy and negotiation with private corporations.”	Non-formal and divulged communications of research activities (marketing strategies)
	Public vs private	“They presume that the output of a public university could be privatized, but we must defend our role and territory.” “Companies, in general, consider us to be a supplier and not a partner.”	Strengthen the role of the university and increase its reputation (e.g., patents funded by public-private collaborations should not be considered as owned by private companies)

spontaneity and their pivotal role in a community. As a result, we developed four recommendations.

First, from our analysis, we determined that disclosures over more or less sophisticated forms of knowledge transfer may vary depending on the source field of the knowledge. If the aim is to educate and inform the public, the relationship between the nature of knowledge and the generalist approach must take precedence [52]. Therefore, the first proposition we make is to consider the nature of knowledge when ministries are called on to develop policies and incentives having to do with research and the transfer of knowledge. For example, ministries, such as ANVUR in Italy, could establish training courses for managers to teach them social impact assessment literacy before requiring them to enact third mission performance evaluation measures. After all, it is only fair to ensure that the universities have the skills to meet the requirements before rewarding or punishing them on the basis of the activities achieved. The lack of soft skills on the part of administrative and academic staff is an organizational problem that precedes the very impossibility of carrying out measures and numerical surveys on activities that make logical sense. Without a cultural transformation regarding the ultimate purpose of measuring impact and, consequently, on the accompanying knowledge and skills to do so, there is a risk that such measurement may reward or punish universities in the wrong way. The very logic of measurement and reward

cannot fail to take into account the differences that exist between different fields of knowledge—something that exists in the U.K.’s REF assessments. However, it is not enough to replicate a model without adapting it to the specific characteristics of the university system in each locality. The vocation and development of scientific knowledge is also a matter of cultural legacy, and different universities have different vocations, many of them dating back centuries. We therefore propose that developing impact assessments should be more collaborative—i.e., codedecided with academics—not imposed from the top down.

The second recommendation relates to the hierarchy of needs. University managers are often more concerned with following the law rather than ensuring the effective use of the data they produce. Universities as data factories are myopic in that university managers do not recognize the importance of translating data into comprehensible information. In anchored legitimacy, adherence to the general norms and values of the larger society is taken for granted, while the disclosure of new, secret, and unknown information has the potential to reveal novel aspects of an institution that everyone thinks they know [18], [61]. Hence, our second proposition is to develop and apply a new form of legitimacy—anchored legitimacy—to different knowledge-intensive public institutions, such as research centers, schools, and museums, so as to better understand their similarities and differences.

The third recommendation, which may be more of a risk, is disclosing data and communicating information that stakeholders may not approve. The risk is that any resulting disaffection might lead to a legitimacy crisis [61]. Communication is sometimes perceived to be individual-centric, deinstitutionalizing the university and its legitimacy for the benefit of personal legitimacy. However, myopic managers and directors may come to take the university's legitimacy for granted [21], [77], focusing their attention more on the bureaucracy than on the message that is being communicated [79]. Therefore, anchored legitimacy needs to be framed by stakeholder management theory to understand how to engage stakeholders.

Our findings also suggest that elevating third mission activities to a strategic level is important. Recognizing this means identifying the producer and receiver of communications, as well as having the ability to disseminate the outcomes of research to the right stakeholders so as to capitalize on them. This may mean implementing organizational changes, such as creating a culture of public engagement where academics have the soft skills to empower the contributions made by the social sciences, the humanities, and the hard sciences. Standardizing procedures and simplifying institutional processes impacts an organization's external reputation as does giving timely answers to external interlocutors because when public universities perform well, companies legitimize them [18].

Finally, implementing nonformal communication strategies can generate an image of an anchored institution that is engaged, along with a central administration and departments that are tightly tied to both each other and the public. Our study clearly revealed that large-scale spaces of public knowledge are composed of constellations of competencies that generate internal cooperation, such as between the science and humanities departments, and that managing disclosures at a central level can serve as tool to deflect donations from one area to another. What is required by researchers is the ability to adopt a mindset that can provide ex ante impact assessment strategies for the research projects they develop. This is certainly one of the most significant outcomes of prioritizing communication. If nothing else, this change will mean implementing new mechanisms and making investments in training to support the transition of activities from "what" to "how" [44]. This final proposition affects the area of anchored institution management.

1) *Limitations and Further Studies:* In summary, this study demonstrates some of the practical implications that reinforce the need for a process of anchored legitimacy—especially surrounding new communication strategies and media. Following these four recommendations may result in clearer and more transparent external communication with policymakers, who may both govern higher education systems and serve as partners in triangulating information between the university, private industry, and the government. The social implications are many, and this study shows the potential for unlocking and offering new relational opportunities between universities and localities [54] by sharing common goals. Continuous learning can contribute to reciprocal local development and reinforce a university as being outstanding both nationally and internationally [17]. Exogenous pressure typically gives rise to a changing role for universities in

society; hence, this article presents a broad framework for new strategies to ensure that the legitimacy of an institution is still anchored during its transition from an ivory tower to a civically engaged HEI.

There are, however, a few limitations of this study that need to be further investigated. First, although the longitudinal analysis targets a relevant case study, i.e., a large generalist university, further investigation is needed into other large HEIs in other cultural and national contexts. Indeed, analyzing the role and dynamics of anchor institutions strongly depends on the local context—cultural, economic, and social. Second, although we interviewed external stakeholders and held focus groups, the general focus was always on UniTo's role, i.e., it was organization centered. So, if we are to develop a complete picture of the ecosystem, further investigations would be necessary to understand the broader needs of society and their evolution, regardless of UniTo's role. Third, UniTo is a *city within a city* in that its buildings are spread all over Turin. Campus-like universities, outside the boundaries of an urban area, may adopt different strategies and different relevant aspects of their circumstances may emerge. Thus, future investigations need to broaden the different types of HEIs studied in different cultural, social, and economic contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, we investigated the main characteristics and processes required for an HEI to maintain its role as an anchor institution. We find that strategic evolution and the transformation of its attitude were strategic parts of this process. The literature is replete with studies on how universities have transformed their operating models from being, first, ivory towers and knowledge creators, to becoming more integrated as entrepreneurial universities [3], [4], [30] within a triple-helix model [29], [51], and more recently to becoming civic universities engaged in their communities [38]. However, within the literature on this last transformation, very few studies have examined the impacts of reputation, trust, and accountability and how these characteristics might serve to maintain or guarantee an institution's status as an anchor institution in its local community.

Starting from this premise, this research involved a longitudinal case study of a large generalist university, the University of Turin. Primary and secondary data were collected from multiple sources over a period of seven years from 2015 to 2022, including from observations, interviews, meetings, and focus groups with both internal and external stakeholders of the university. Additionally, sustainability reports, technical documents, and webpages were used to supplement and triangulate the analysis. What the data revealed was a wide range of communication, knowledge transfer, civic engagement, and third mission activities conducted by UniTo over past decades. The long timeframe and large scale of the data collection process allowed us to analyze the different strategies and actions an anchor institution can undertake to maintain its role in a territory in a great deal of detail.

What emerged from the analysis is that anchor institutions, in our case a large university, must continuously act with dual

strategies in order to maintain their status. In some cases, this means acting in contradiction to oneself, such as being rigid and flexible at the same time. In the past, anchor institutions have mostly been described as being stable and enduring [37], flexible [25], [27], and engaged [85], [9]. They are also noted to be large employers [25], [37], play a key role in local development [85], hold significant physical assets [86], [25], [27]), and maintain established partnerships [85], [86], [25].

To strategically manage a mission as complex as transitioning from an ivory tower into an engaged civic university while still maintaining their status as an anchor, universities must preserve their long-enduring reputation, and this can be very difficult. The main challenges include balancing static versus dynamic features, housing both centralized and noncentralized internal structures, maintaining both formal and nonformal relationships with external stakeholders, conducting both research and third mission activities, and serving both public and private interests. Here, top-down static actions and partnerships are necessary to be able to interact with public administrations, governments, and large corporations. However, bottom-up actions, such as personal initiatives are necessary for strong engagement with the local area. In order to not lose one's enduring reputation through these dichotomies, both typologies of action must converge at the intermediate level, such as at the department level. Moreover, a certain degree of homogeneity is needed, both in terms of dynamic structure—what we call *structural spontaneity*—and the required standardization—or *spontaneous structuralism*.

In practical terms, there are many ways such balances can be realized. For example, individual academics and practitioners can develop one-to-one relationships while the university can make formal agreements with the organizations those practitioners work for. Collaborations between private enterprises and academics might take the form of consultancies rather than formal research projects, where the university might lose its role as the knowledge creator. Alternatively, large corporations might use single researchers as an extension of their employees. To this extent, this study contributes to the already-developing literature on impactful research [12], [44].

Theoretically, this case study on UniTo illustrates the complexity of an anchor institution that perceives a potential conflict is undermining its legitimacy and the social contract it holds with its stakeholders [42]. However, as Dumay and Baard [22] find, the problems of a university must be addressed and resolved using intervention strategies. UniTo executed these interventions through a protracted process of change to its organizational and communication strategies. Our study of how these strategies were implemented and then developed gave rise to a new notion of anchored legitimacy. The complexity connected to the development of this new concept is especially apparent, given the long-term existence of the institution.

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