Article

Italian Universities for Territorial Sustainable Development and Responsible Communities—The Case Study of the University of Trieste

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Abstract: Today, the active promotion of sustainability is acknowledged as a pivotal task for universities. Under the flagship of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the demand is to help cities and territories tackle complex challenges by providing innovative solutions and local actions. The call is for deep change in the ways universities address their fundamental missions and organisation, and the relationships with their internal and external stakeholders. From this perspective, a key issue to be investigated further is how new approaches and measures can concretely foster universities' social responsibility towards SDGs. Taking a research-based approach, the article addresses this question through the critical analysis of actions and tools delivered by the Italian Universities Network for Sustainable Development (RUS), and the University of Trieste (UniTS). From sustainability and social reporting to civil engagement practices, the focus is on the nexus between the upgrading of universities' overall performance, and the ways they can act as living labs, capacity builders, and hubs of knowledge transfer. Discussion and conclusions highlight some fields and key factors that can drive universities towards a more effective integration of sustainability measures involving their spatial assets, governance, and stable collaboration with their hosting cities, territories, and communities.

Keywords: universities; sustainable development; social responsibility; public engagement; knowledge transfer

1. Introduction

In recent years, under the flagship of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and taking the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as a lever [1], the support of public higher education institutions (HEIs) in cultivating knowledge and transferring research outcomes and innovation outside the academic community has been increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental means to foster sustainable and pioneering policies and measures [2–4]. Universities are asked to play a pivotal role in promoting a new culture and "educating for another possible world" [5] (p. 25), by acting as a model and a driver for change within their seats and in the territorial contexts where they are located.

From this perspective, the issues of "university social responsibility" have become highly significant [6,7]. The demand is for a stronger commitment to convey into action the message that sustainability is not a 'luxury' involving and impacting a few people. Rather, it must become an opportunity for human and social promotion, an essential vehicle through which rights, capabilities, inclusion, fair and equitable wealth can be pursued and guaranteed to all. To meet these challenges, universities need to focus their fundamental 'missions' (education, research, knowledge transfer and engagement with the civil society—this latter called 'third mission') on SDGs; consistently revise the ways these missions are provided to address new topics and their interconnections; and develop effective tools for assessing and monitoring their results.

However, in the midst of a structural economic, social, environmental, and sanitary crisis, this overall cultural and organisational reform is difficult to achieve [8]. It prompts universities to make a step toward deep and fast change in their governance and functioning, as well as in the relationships with the various communities they intercept—both internal (students, professors, and researchers) and external (citizens, social, economic, and institutional actors).

In the face of a growing international debate on these issues, and of the claim to tackle them from an applied and integrated perspective, not only literature review essays and general surveys are numerous as compared to critical analyses of practices and case studies, but scientific production also tends to separately deal with single universities' missions and their progress, e.g., [9]. In fact, teaching and research are mostly addressed, while the 'third mission' concept remains ambiguous due to its being a more recently institutionalised HEIs' field of action, ranking, and evaluation, e.g., [10]. Moreover, although sustainability reporting, quantitative and comparative assessment of universities' internal management and governance are fairly debated issues, the demand for better tools and their more effective application remains strong, e.g., [11–13].

In this frame, how new approaches and measures can concretely foster universities' social responsibility towards SDGs, and how they affect both the overall governance of HEIs and the building of new alliances with other institutions and civil society, stand as questions that have yet to be fully addressed. The need for further reflection based on their actual implementation appears to be particularly true in Italy, but not only there.

To investigate these issues, this article focuses on some Italian experiences and a specific case study. By taking a research-based approach, the aim is to discuss how HEIs' social responsibility, consistent tools and actions can be put into practice. A bifocal—and integrated—perspective is proposed, according to the assumption that there is a need to better work in-between the upgrading of universities' internal and external performance towards SDGs. On the one hand, the article questions how universities can effectively play a role of 'leadership in innovation' both by incorporating sustainability practices into their governance, core business and operations, and by reporting, monitoring and sharing their commitments with external actors and policy-makers. On the other hand, some examples show how third mission activities fostering the implementation of place-based sustainable development agendas can help leverage multidisciplinary skills, as well as create new synergies between education, basic and applied research. The core hypothesis is that only by concurrently acting as living labs, capacity builders, and providers of updated and sound expertise will universities succeed in being cultural engines of SDGs achievement; empowering citizens and communities; building dialogue and co-learning processes with social and economic systems, public institutions and the private sector; and promoting interaction among different stakeholders. No less important is the assumption that the dissemination of concrete experiences, the critical evaluation of their outputs, potentials, and constrains can help universities make necessary and fast advancements.

These research perspectives and objectives address the following paragraphs. Starting from the worldwide importance acknowledged to universities in the pursuit of SDGs, significant Italian practices are introduced and discussed: the Italian Universities Network for Sustainable Development (the Italian acronym is RUS), its advisory role and delivered tools; the case study of the University of Trieste (UniTS), where some measures and projects have implemented the RUS instruments and recommendations by working both at the micro-level (to orientate behaviours and habits within its spaces and community) and at the macro-level (to raise public awareness and support local administrations with reference to larger urban and territorial contexts and dynamics). Finally, the discussion and conclusions reflect on the challenges universities meet when addressing SDGs through the lenses of social responsibility. The aim is to provide some key points that can help HEIs more effectively integrate a plurality of measures involving their spatial assets, governance and communities, as well as stable collaboration with other public and private local institutions and stakeholders.

2. A Growing and Challenging Role for Universities

2.1. A View to International Debate

At the global and European levels, the strategic role that universities can play in the economic, social, environmental, and cultural sustainable development of cities and territories has been recognised since some years now [14–16]. More recently, the centrality of HEIs has been emphasised with reference to the achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs [17,18]. Today, universities are explicitly called upon to support the fulfilment of each of the SDGs, as well as of their overall framework.

Areas of contribution not only refer to traditional universities' missions:

- "Learning and teaching: Providing students with the knowledge, skills and motivation to understand and address the SDGs" and "to implement SDG solutions";
- "Research: Providing the necessary knowledge, evidence-base, solutions, technologies, pathways and innovations to underpin and support the implementation of the SDGs by the global community—through both traditional disciplinary approaches and newer interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sustainability science approaches; [. . .] collaborating with and supporting innovative companies to implement SDG solutions; improving diversity in research; and student training for sustainable development research".

These areas also need to strongly intertwine with:

- "Organisational governance, culture and operations of the university: Implementing the principles of the SDGs through governance structures and operational policies and decisions, such as those relating to employment, finance, campus services, support services, facilities, procurement, human resources, and student administration";
- "External leadership: Strengthening public engagement and participation in addressing the SDGs; initiating and facilitating cross-sectoral dialogue and action; ensuring higher education sector representation in national implementation; helping to design SDG based policies" [19] (p. 2).

By addressing universities' tasks across the fields of teaching, research, and the 'third mission' (namely, the economic valorisation and transfer of knowledge, and the production of public goods—the latter specifically defined as 'public engagement') [20], the UN 2030 Agenda provides a general framework to address higher education bodies when building their action plans [21]. The challenge is to pursue environmental protection, community well-being, social and inter-generation equity, and economic development in a systemic way. Furthermore, this process should actively engage and enable all sectors of knowledge and the civil society in a co-learning and generative dialogue with a focus on ensuring balance among the different aspects of sustainable development, both inside and outside universities [22–25].

In Europe, with an acceleration due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, these issues and the role of HEIs are currently understood as highly strategic. Today, there is a strong awareness that the ambitious European agenda and the substantial funding programs addressed to recovery and transition (e.g., EU Green Deal, Next Generation EU, Horizon Europe) cannot be met without cities. From this perspective, "'Just-in-time' research can make a significant difference". However, a criticism is that "professionals and decision-makers often do not get the research they need, while academics operate too much in isolation and do not align their research with the cities' needs" [26].

In fact, cities and territories ask for more research and knowledge transfer in order to be capable and ready to face upcoming challenges and to take the necessary steps towards sustainability, particularly in the fields of climate-resilient urban areas; clean energy and energy efficiency in smart cities; mobility; culture driven regeneration and adaptive reuse; health and wellbeing; innovative human-centred planning and design; social innovation and inclusion; and the circular economy. To meet these needs, in 2019 the EU City Science Initiative was settled, pulling together a number of European cities (their administrations, universities, and research institutions), European Commission services,

and different networks of stakeholders (NGOs, enterprises, etc.). The aim was to jointly reflect and work on a science-policy gap, improve the uptake of research at the local level, solve the lack of access to data, and build a new City-Science paradigm. A strategic goal is to help European cities establish a local City Science Officer in charge of connecting the interests and activities of research, innovation and urban policies, and of networking with other cities' initiatives [27].

2.2. A Research-Based Focus on the Italian Context

From this perspective, and thanks to the funds of the Next Generation EU program, European member states' National Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) have initiated major reforms and investments for universities. The availability of new funding opportunities raises some relevant questions: how can they prompt innovation in the role of universities and increase their capacities to act as levers for sustainable development? How can they incentivise working in-between the change in universities' missions and governance, and the sustainable transition in their hosting cities and territories? A focus on the Italian context helps develop critical reflections on these issues.

In Italy, the national program Futura—Education for the Italian Future, addresses two main goals: (i) strengthening the supply of education services (from schools to universities); and (ii) supporting the investment in research and development (R&D), in order to promote innovation and technology dissemination and to bridge the gaps among training, research, and labour demand [28].

By addressing green, economic and social recovery, the Italian RRP is trying to work in an integrated manner across education levels, reforms, and investments for technological infrastructures, the upgrading of spatial equipment, and new competences [29]. Being that these processes are still underway, the time is not yet ripe for the full assessment of their overall and concrete results. However, an action worth mentioning consists in the settlement of a number of Innovation Ecosystems (IEs) across the Country. IEs are networks of state and non-state universities, public research and administrative bodies, and other highly qualified and internationally recognised public and private entities. IEs intervene in the fields of technological specialisation that are consistent with the industrial and research vocations of regional or supra-regional reference contexts. Their aims are to facilitate technology transfer and to accelerate the digital transformation of production processes, with a view to economic and environmental sustainability, and its social impacts on the territory. The available national resources (a total of EUR 1.3 billion to be spent in only 3 years, 2023–2026) finance applied research, activities and services for open innovation and training to reduce the mismatch between the skills required by enterprises and those offered by universities; and the valorisation and transfer of research results through the development of industrial incubators, start-ups, and spin-offs. By covering different territories (from dynamic metropolitan areas to inner and marginalised contexts), and with the aim to foster a more balanced national development, the 11 financed IEs focus on some SDGs-related issues, providing one of the Italian RRP's key operational and place-based support tools in the fields of climate adaptation, energy, and sustainable mobility; digital and technological innovation in the sectors of industry-manufacture, agriculture, building and urban regeneration, tourism and culture, health and food; and robotics and artificial intelligence for socio-economic empowerment [30,31].

In the face of unprecedented financial resources, the preparedness of Italian universities to make use of these opportunities, supporting each other and their territories in the construction of innovative projects and activities, needs to be attentively examined.

The following paragraphs investigate significant Italian experiences that reveal new and promising perspectives. The first is that of the Italian Universities Network for Sustainable Development (RUS). The relevance and potential of this network is understood in its guidance towards innovative methodological approaches, the integration of different action fields, the sharing of good practices, and the delivery of standards and guidelines for sustainability reporting and monitoring tools. The second experience and specific case

study is that of the University of Trieste (UniTS). Here, RUS' advice is being put into action by working both inside and outside the university, showing how social and sustainability reports can be drivers for the activation of flagship projects, and how practices of 'public engagement' can be concretely developed.

These experiences are analysed according to a research-based approach, whereas the direct participation of the authors in a number of UniTS' actions and projects allows their investigation from an inner and not yet explored perspective. The assumption is that matching the analysis of general inputs and instruments with that of their implementation can provide useful insights into their concrete potentials, constraints, and criticalities. As a result, this can encourage further discussion and changes in the ways practices are conceived and performed by the university and all the actors involved.

3. RUS: Providing Support and Guidance

In 2016, before the pandemic and in the frame of a collaborative approach among key-actors in the sustainable development process, Italian universities set up the RUS (It. Rete Universitaria per la Sostenibilità) [32]: a unique experience of cooperation among HEIs that somehow anticipated some of the EU City Science Initiative's goals [33,34]. The Conference of the Rectors of Italian Universities (It. CRUI) officially established the RUS as the result of a debate that started in November 2013. To date (December 2022), 83 universities are involved, roughly 96% of the national total.

3.1. Methodological Approaches and Action Fields

The RUS fosters the sharing of policies, skills and practices with the aim of spreading the culture of sustainability both within and outside universities. The goal is to increase the positive impacts of environmental, ethical, social, and economic actions, which are currently implemented by each of the involved institutions, in order to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, and to strengthen the value of the Italian experience at an international level. Universities have a mutual advantage in fostering sustainability policies together, as they can more effectively promote new national policies, projects, and processes towards a circular and just transition.

Specifically, universities joining the RUS are called on to disseminate, transfer, and adapt their best practices to contexts that are different from those where they were generated and implemented in order to fuel and simplify the path to sustainability of a larger number of research and educational institutions. Similarly, the RUS aims to share its policies and actions with different sectors of the public administration, acting both on local and national contexts. The goals are to strengthen the collaboration between universities, cities and territories, to spread social innovation, and to prompt the co-development of ideas and projects through the establishment of technology transfer offices, incubator services and spin-offs. From this perspective, the RUS—welcoming the 'civic university model' and leveraging the principles of the third mission—supports the active and continuous collaboration with civil society, industry, and public bodies.

In the last years, the RUS has enhanced its impacts by setting regional sub-networks and by increasing its efforts in promoting educational initiatives and the active involvement of local communities from a view of stronger stakeholder engagement. Through the RUS Working Groups (on climate change, food, education, energy, inclusion and social justice, mobility, waste), universities collaborate in the definition and implementation of local and national level projects dealing with environmental, technological, economic, social, and governance issues. In addition, the technical-scientific and cultural support of the RUS to the so-called universities' 'local units of resilience' provides models to carry out ex-ante prospective analyses and ex-post evaluation of projects in order to harmonise territorial actions with the 2030 Agenda targets, assess their compliance with "Equitable Well-being and Sustainability Indicators" [35], and their concrete impacts on the life of citizens.

As a tangible proof of its engagement, during the pandemic crisis, the RUS community's creativity and commitment have provided valuable support to the delivery of

innovative solutions and to keeping high attention and awareness on the issues of sustainable development and health. An overview of the large number of activities enacted from March to June 2020 is offered by the dedicated sections of the RUS and the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (It. ASviS) websites [36,37]. Furthermore, the RUS has recently contributed to the setting of a 'network laboratory' offering services and the integrated qualification of new products and processes to support the post-COVID phase, with the aim to exchange experiences in crisis management and to pool their benefits and results at the regional levels.

In parallel, within the universities, the RUS focuses attention on developing the transdisciplinary educational dimension of university programs. The purpose is to contribute to the growth of sustainability culture and to influence the adoption of correct lifestyles by students also using new pedagogical approaches and engagement initiatives. To achieve these goals, the network addresses training to the teachers and technical-administrative staff of all Italian universities, as well as of other school levels.

Lastly, the RUS is committed in the harmonisation of institutional activities and the improvement of the management of environmental and social aspects through a Permanent Observatory of the State of Sustainability within each university. University campuses are spaces where important measurable transformations can happen. Therefore, they can act as places where innovative solutions and good practices can be tried out, reported and monitored through the construction and use of new tools—as the following paragraphs highlight.

3.2. Standards and Guidelines

The RUS Working Groups have recently focused on the definition of a shared framework of metrics for monitoring environmental, social and economic performance and their related benchmarking activities. Among them, two significant tools are illustrated below. Focusing on the transformation of university locations into SDGs living-labs, they are aimed at: (i) setting a standard for the delivery of universities' integrated Sustainability Reports; and (ii) guiding universities towards the achievement of the net-zero emissions targets. The objective is to overcome the fragmentation and incoherence that still hinders a more general and harmonised use of these instruments by Italian universities [38].

3.2.1. A Standard for Sustainability Reports

Drafting a standard for universities' Sustainability Reports is the result of collaboration between the RUS and the Study Group for the Social Report (GBS), an Italian NGO established in 2001 and made up of a number of researchers, universities, and institutions [39]. The assumption is that the universities' commitment to spread behaviours and actions based on social and environmental responsibility can be fostered by the use of assessment tools accounting for the pursuit of the SDGs and of pro-active visions.

The Sustainability Report is meant as an instrument to support both the Italian universities' duty of transparency and accountability and the measurement of their performances at single and aggregate levels. Up to now, the tools that universities adopt to 'account for' their activities are mainly the financial statements, ruled by the general directives and guidelines used by public and private companies. Widely accepted standards dedicated to universities' non-financial reporting are not yet available, and these types of tools have just started to be delivered [40,41]. The standard proposed by the RUS and GBS precisely aims to help fill in this gap by offering instructions that public and private universities can follow when drafting their non-financial reports.

According to the RUS-GBS addresses, when reporting on the achievement of sustainability objectives, universities cannot disregard the accomplishment of the SDGs that their activities directly affect (SDG 4 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", as well as SDG 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"). Nonetheless, they must also report on other

SDGs that are considered priorities according to the specific Strategic Plan each university periodically delivers.

In particular, this implies:

- highlighting the consistency of actual choices and behaviours with the university's identity and its system of reference values;
- measuring the university's performance in terms both of achieving institutional goals and of allocating resources among various sustainability objectives and activities;
- providing an integrated and coordinated framework of the already existing monitoring and communication tools in order to identify possible actions for their improvement.

To support this process, the RUS-GBS addresses offer a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators referring to the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the activities carried out. The dimensions to measure and monitor depend on the different institutional fields of activity (teaching, research, and third mission), whereas each university should take on the responsibility to carefully adapt the proposed structure and measurements to its own peculiarities. Furthermore, in order to limit the risk of self-referencing and to increase the reliability of sustainability reporting, the RUS-GBS document recommends validation by an independent third party and the involvement of territorial stakeholders in the assessment process.

3.2.2. Guidelines to Net-Zero Emissions Targets

Despite the great interest in the 'net-zero emissions' targets, the meaning of this expression is often not fully clear (namely, the difference between 'carbon neutrality' and 'climate neutrality') [42], and many aspects need explanation when adopting this commitment. In order to prompt Italian universities to reach net-zero emissions, the RUS has worked on suggestions to achieve the expected performance and to make this commitment transparent, verifiable, and credible.

In 2021, the network presented the Guidelines on Italian Universities' 'Net-Zero Emissions' Commitments as part of its annual Report [43] and as a response to the global Race to Zero Campaign supported by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [44].

The Guidelines suggest that universities rely on solutions that already offer guarantees in terms of results. They concern the achievement of three main goals: (i) a significant reduction in absolute terms of total energy requirements; (ii) the growth of the share of renewable sources covering energy requirements until they are completely satisfied; and (iii) the direct or indirect contribution to the removal of CO_2 from the atmosphere by means of an ambitious emissions reduction strategy.

The document emphasises that net-zero emissions commitments must be clearly expressed and consistent. In particular, it must be established whether this target is related to CO_2 alone or also to other greenhouse gases. To be clarified is whether the objective relates to direct emissions (e.g., heating, university-owned vehicles, etc.), indirect electric emissions (from purchased electricity consumption), or to other types of indirect emissions (e.g., transport for access to the campus, staff missions, etc.). Furthermore, when adopting the net-zero target, universities should state to what extent (and when) it is expected to be achieved, and whether via the direct reduction of university emissions, by means of CO_2 removal actions, or of measures of compensation and credits (e.g., from emissions reductions, or CO_2 removal).

Specifically, the Guidelines suggest that universities focus on CO_2 emissions and, at least, direct and indirect emissions from heat consumption and purchased electricity, as well as emissions deriving from staff missions. Furthermore, the university commitment should be accompanied by the definition of a strategy drawn by a working group of energy technology experts. A good strategy should outline a roadmap and the possible development of energy generation from renewable sources; the increase in energy efficiency and in the reduction of energy consumption; and the method for progressively integrating and substituting renewable sources into the current energy system. The commitment

should also be expressed with reference to intermediate goals—at least by 2030 and 2040 (or, better, every five years)—, and its assessment should be supported by the definition of a monitoring system based on an inventory of emissions and an energy balance reporting.

Since 2021, eight Italian universities have declared a net-zero emissions target: gearing for 2030 are the University of Sannio in Benevento, the University of Genova, and the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts in Torino; the University of Pavia and the University of Roma Tor Vergata are targeting 2040; and the Polytechnic of Torino, the Almo Collegio Borromeo, and the University of L'Aquila are aiming at 2050.

4. UniTS: Implementing Sustainable Actions Inside and Outside the University

As part of its commitment to sustainability, and to the SDG 17 "Build partnerships for the goals", the University of Trieste (UniTS) joined the RUS in 2017.

UniTS is located in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Italian region, at the North-Eastern border of the country (Figure 1). It has about 1230 employees (45% of them are teaching and research staff). Education, research and third mission are organized into 10 departments (life sciences; physics; mathematics and geosciences; chemical and pharmaceutical sciences; medical, surgical and health sciences; economic, business, mathematical and statistical sciences; political and social sciences; legal, language, interpreting and translation studies; humanities; engineering and architecture): they cover a variety of subjects, from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) to social sciences and humanities (SSH).
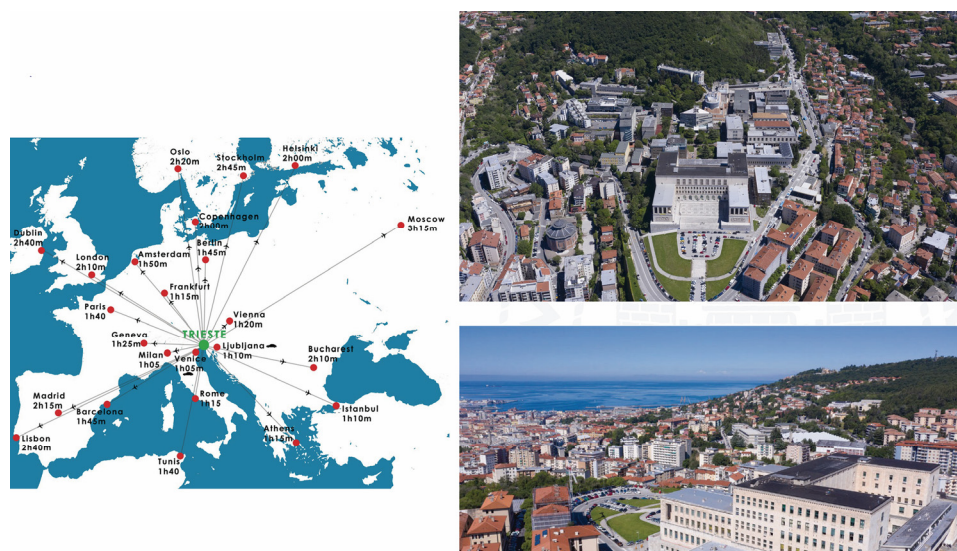
Figure 1. UniTS. Localization and head offices in the capital of the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia. Source: UniTS, Marino Sterle.

UniTS offers 30 Bachelor's Degrees, 28 Master's Degrees, 6 single cycle Master's Degrees, 28 Specialisation Schools, 15 PhD Programs, 9 first level University Master's Programs, and 12 second level University Master's Programs. From the latest official data (2020–2021), 17,200 students are enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's programs, and 1035 in Postgraduate Courses. Teaching and research take place in four locations in theFriuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto regions: Trieste, Gorizia, Pordenone, and Portogruaro [45].

In recent years, UniTS has developed a number of activities addressed to translate the overall framework of SDGs and their integration into concrete measures and policies. With the aim of fostering a better quality and sustainability of life inside its locations, these measures and policies actively involve a number of fields and stakeholders: (i) the functioning and spatial assets of the university itself; (ii) the services addressed to its students, professors and administrative staff, and their behaviours; and (iii) some 'public engagement' projects finalised to help local institutions and stakeholders meet sustainability goals.

4.1. Integrated Social Responsibility Report

Since 2016, UniTS has included SDGs in its overall governance. In the last Strategic Plan 2019–2023, the importance of pursuing the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda is strongly emphasised, as is the commitment to protect the environment, enhance human well-being, and promote the transition to sustainability [46].

Specifically, UniTS strategies focus on the implementation of the more responsible consumption of non-renewable resources and the improvement of the environmental performance of the university's overall functioning by embracing multiple aspects: the management of architectural design, construction, restoration and renovation of its institutional seats; saving energy and water, reducing waste and greenhouse gas emissions; transport policies; health and productivity; community engagement, research, teaching and learning. UniTS governance shares its paths with all internal stakeholders (in particular the student population, the teaching and technical-administrative staff), in order to reach their largest involvement, and to spread awareness of the benefits of appropriate behaviours.

In 2020, the first UniTS Integrated Social Responsibility Report was released, following the above-mentioned RUS-GBS Standard [47]. The aim of this document, which will be periodically revised, is to offer a transparent and complete reporting of each of the SDGs. One focus is on the topics of environmental sustainability and the gender gap that have been undervalued or not considered until a few years ago (Figure 2).

Figure 2. UniTS. Integrated Social Report. Source: [47].

Setting a new governance perspective has also required the development of a baseline dataset and performance indicators that are useful for reporting sustainability issues; this in order to highlight the grey areas where action needs to be taken towards systematic data collection and their validation and maintenance over time. The work carried out so far has demonstrated significant margins for improvement:

- the introduction of sustainability issues from the planning stage of all the university's activities;
- the enhancement of risk-management activities by extending them to SDGs in order to improve the management of potential negative impacts;
- the extension of internal audit activities in order to stimulate a more effective administration both of the mitigation of negative impacts and of the valorisation of positive externalities.

Furthermore, the aim of the Integrated Social Responsibility Report is to build an overall framework for pilot actions understood as flagship projects. Some of them have already been implemented and gained a good rating for their achieved results.

As an example, in 2020, UniTS developed the project Trieste Water Network (AReTS—It. Acqua di Rete a Trieste) in order to contribute to SDG 6 "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" by providing free access to clean tap water, encouraging responsible consumption, and reducing plastic waste (Figure 3a). A

total of 25 green corners were set-up, with micro-filtered water dispensers and containers for waste sorting (Figure 4). Next steps refer to the creation of communication points on environmental issues, with information boards on responsible consumption. Parallel to this, an awareness raising action was addressed to the municipal administration; and as a result, with the financial support of the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, the decision was taken to install a public water dispenser nearby the University's main campus entrance (Figure 3b).

(a)   (b)

Figure 3. (**a**) UniTs. Project Trieste Water Network: billboard for the awareness campaign. Source: UniTS. (**b**) Municipality of Trieste, Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia. Public water dispenser: billboard for awareness campaign. Source: Municipality of Trieste.

However, the principles and values of sustainability not only permeate UniTS governance; they are also the basis for building stronger relationships with territorial stakeholders and local communities in the joint effort to seek solutions for sustainable life models, and consistent operational activities. In this way, acquired knowledge and skills from scientific research feed education, and are also made available to cities and territories, fostering new partnerships to create and share mutual benefits.

4.2. Practices of 'Public Engagement'

The development of transversal skills such as entrepreneurship, creativity, critical thinking, and civic engagement is among the key objectives of the Italian strategies for sustainable development and for assessing the quality of universities' research and transfer to social and economic contexts [48,49]. The Italian Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (It. ANVUR) has recently highlighted the importance of 'public engagement' (PE) as part of HEIs' third mission activities. PE specifically refers to the production of public goods, namely to institutional non-profit social, educational and cultural activities, including universities' participation in the making of long-term programs of public interest (e.g., urban development projects, spatial planning tools, awareness raising processes), participatory democracy initiatives, consensus conferences, and citizen panels [50,51].

Figure 4. UniTS. Indoor and outdoor micro-filtered water dispensers. Source: Ilaria Garofolo.

Today, the importance of PE is acknowledged by many universities around the world [52]. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically brought to the fore the issues of proximity, mobility, accessibility to public spaces, in addition to the upgrading and development of essential services. Add to this the need to tackle the worsening impacts of the climate, environmental, energy, and economic crises [53]. These conditions call for a substantial renewal in the ways public, urban and territorial policies are built and implemented, and, from this perspective, the role of university research transfer is strategic.

In recent years, the UniTS Department of Engineering and Architecture (DIA) has initiated a number of PE projects, with the coordination of the authors, and the participation of PhD students and young researchers. These projects mostly involve the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, which is the public administration in charge of delivering and implementing tools and procedures for the government of territorial and urban transformations.

Focusing on SDG 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", and thanks to the co-funding of public institutions, the action-oriented research experiences hereafter described provide insights into some scales and implementation modes that this SDG can concretely take on to become a lever for regenerating cities and territories. Specifically, they highlight the different roles that the university can play as a useful support to public administrations through the activation of processes and the delivery of solutions in a number of fields: (i) public debate and participation; (ii) technological instruments and design guidelines; (iii) planning tools; and (iv) R&D applied to sustainable spatial, social and economic transition.

4.2.1. Urban Design and Participation to Open School Spaces to the City

The Regional Decentralisation Body of Trieste (It. EDR) is the public institution in charge of the maintenance of secondary schools owned by the Municipality. Since 2021, the collaboration with EDR has offered the opportunity to reflect on how to make the facilities of a large school complex, located in a central district of the regional capital, also available for neighbourhood activities. The initial request was to help organise a design competition for the reuse of an abandoned school swimming pool.

However, the presence within the educational precinct of gyms and outdoor courts, as well as the proximity to other schools of different levels, parks and public equipment, led to the rethinking of the scope of the initiative and to propose the re-arrangement of the competition into two phases and outcomes: a masterplan for the entire neighbourhood, and a technical-economic feasibility study for the reuse of the swimming pool and its adjacent spaces. Parallel to this, themes and places for the upgrading of the urban district and new uses for the school plot were investigated through a participatory process addressed, on the one hand, to the community of students and teachers and, on the other hand, to inhabitants [54]. Not only did strong expectations emerged, but also some deep conflicts: the demand for a new lecture hall and educational spaces beyond the school boundaries was opposed to the pressure to restore the swimming pool in order to favour a more pervasive use of the school grounds by the neighbourhood (Figure 5).
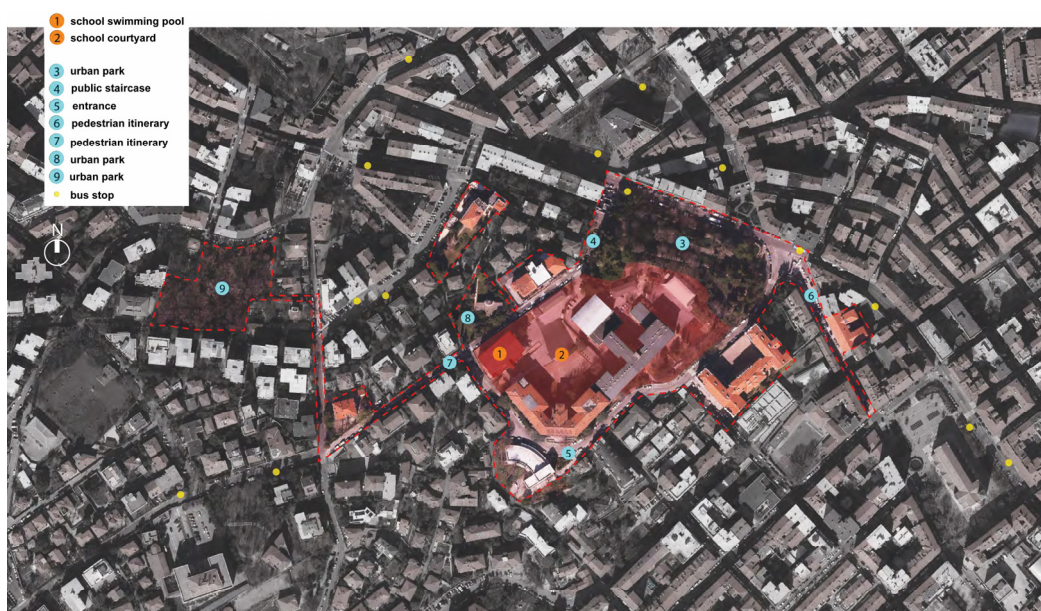
Figure 5. UniTS, EDR. The school complex in San Giacomo neighbourhood (Trieste). Source: UniTS (Michele Gammino, Giulia Paron).

The process is still underway. However, the university's role appears to be fundamental in building a bridge among the expectations of the Region, the Municipality, and the citizens. Furthermore, the university's research and engagement highlighted how the renovation of schools (normally practiced by administrations as mere maintenance) can be understood as a strategic opportunity for the regeneration of large urban sectors through the design of more flexible (in time and space) accessibility conditions both outside and inside school buildings and plots.

4.2.2. Technological Tools and Spatial Solutions for Barrier-Free Cities

In 2018, by adopting the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [55] and the Universal Design perspective, the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia delivered a law on General Principles and Implementation Provisions on Accessibility. Since then, with the support of UniTS, the University of Udine (UniUD), and the CRIBA (the regional reference centre for training, information, and consultancy on accessibility), the Region has incentivised the implementation of this law.

Specifically, activities have focused on the development of instruments addressed to transform the Plans for the Removal of Architectural Barriers (It. PEBAs) from sectoral tools for the elimination of single spatial criticalities to ordinary components of municipal town plans. The aim is to build conditions of inclusion for all citizens (regardless of their age, gender, capabilities, or wealth), by guaranteeing the autonomous and safe accessibility

and usability of collective urban spaces and equipment. Universities have collaborated on the writing of guidelines meant to foster the delivery and implementation of a new generation of PEBAs through the involvement of stakeholders and citizens. This tool will soon be complemented by a software and a 'library' of solutions for the upgrading of public/collective open spaces and buildings, aimed to support administrations and professionals in carrying out the drafting of PEBAs, and in collecting information and feedback from inhabitants and city users [56] (Figure 6).
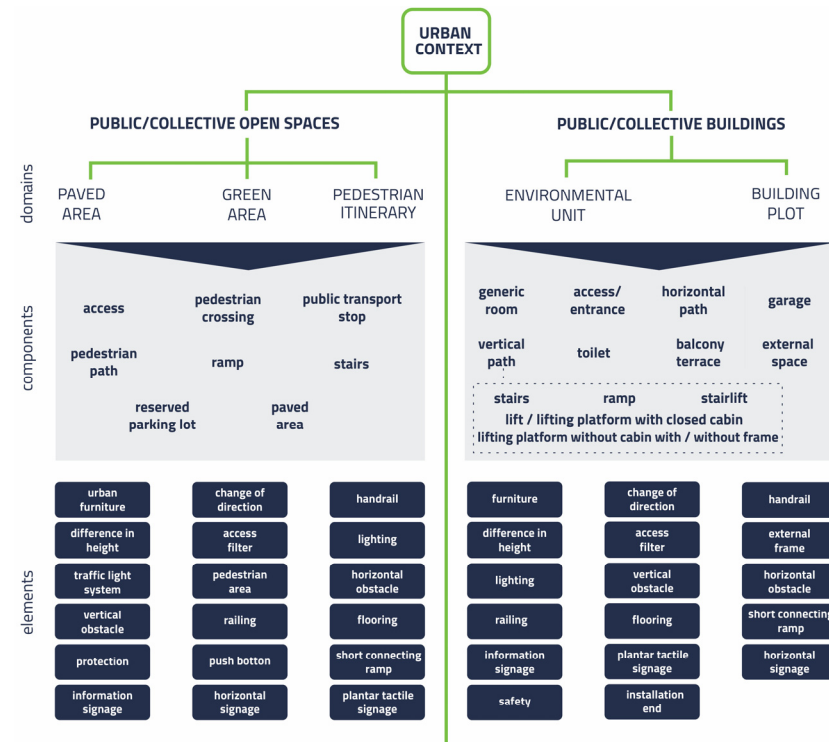
Figure 6. UniTS, UniUD. The taxonomy of urban components and elements at the basis of the software for the drafting of PEBAs. Source: UniTS, UniUD (Valentina Novak, Teresa Sambrotta).

In general terms, the goals are to rethink the quality standards for building and planning, set an observatory on the actual conditions of accessibility to urban spaces and facilities, and to address their improvement. It is precisely in relation to this technical contribution that universities are playing a fundamental role, helping regional staff organise reference databases for municipalities, a repertoire of good practices and of integrated spatial solutions. All of this is in order to stimulate stronger synergies between different offices, tools and fields of action that, within regional and local public administrations, are often still referred to as 'organ pipe' and scarcely integrated working styles.

4.2.3. Planning Regional Strategies for Rebalancing Territorial Divides

In 2022, the Department of Landscape, Territorial and Strategic Planning of the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia involved UniTS, UniUD, and the University IUAV of Venezia in the review of the regional Territorial Government Plan (It. PGT). PGT is the main instrument used by the Region to define strategies and actions for its spatial policies, and to direct and coordinate municipal and supra-municipal planning. The review of the Plan is addressed to face the challenges arising from climate change, demographic decline, and the need for a decisive revival of economic competitiveness. According to the Regional Strategy for Sustainable Development [57], the new PGT pursues seven strategic objectives: (i) the improvement of territorial resilience and prevention of natural risks through the creation of ecosystem services, green and blue infrastructures; (ii) the transition from urban expansion and land consumption to the regeneration and improvement of urban quality;

(iii) the cohesion, equity, and re-balancing of urban settlements and services on a large scale; (iv) the upgrading of accessibility and increasing of sustainable and slow mobility; (v) the increasing of energy production from renewable sources and consumption balance; (vi) the revitalisation and attractiveness of productive and commercial agglomerations; and (vii) the enhancement of rural areas in support of agriculture, the bio-economy, and tourism.

The work universities are in charge of is complex. It is not only a matter of providing technical tools for mapping and planning territorial assets, settlement and environmental dynamics and solutions for climate change adaptation. The various research groups are also engaged in the training of regional technical structures, and in the co-design of new approaches to territorial, social, and economic cohesion. In particular, among the activities developed by UniTS, the construction of analyses of the location of collective facilities (schools, health and cultural, green and sports areas), of their accessibility times (15-min isochrones) and modes (private vehicle, railway, local public transport, bicycle), shows strong territorial diversity and the spread of marginalisation conditions (Figure 7). From the intersection of these maps with the spatialisation of the demographic shrinkage trends affecting large portions of the region, significant overlaps emerge not only in the mountainous and inland areas (accounting for 43% of the total regional surface), but also in hilly, plain and coastal contexts. We call the latter "middle lands"; punctuated by small urban centres and dispersed settlements, these contexts have not yet reached extreme conditions of economic, environmental, and demographic crisis, nonetheless they struggle to adapt to new dynamics, and are somehow still invisible to public policies [58].
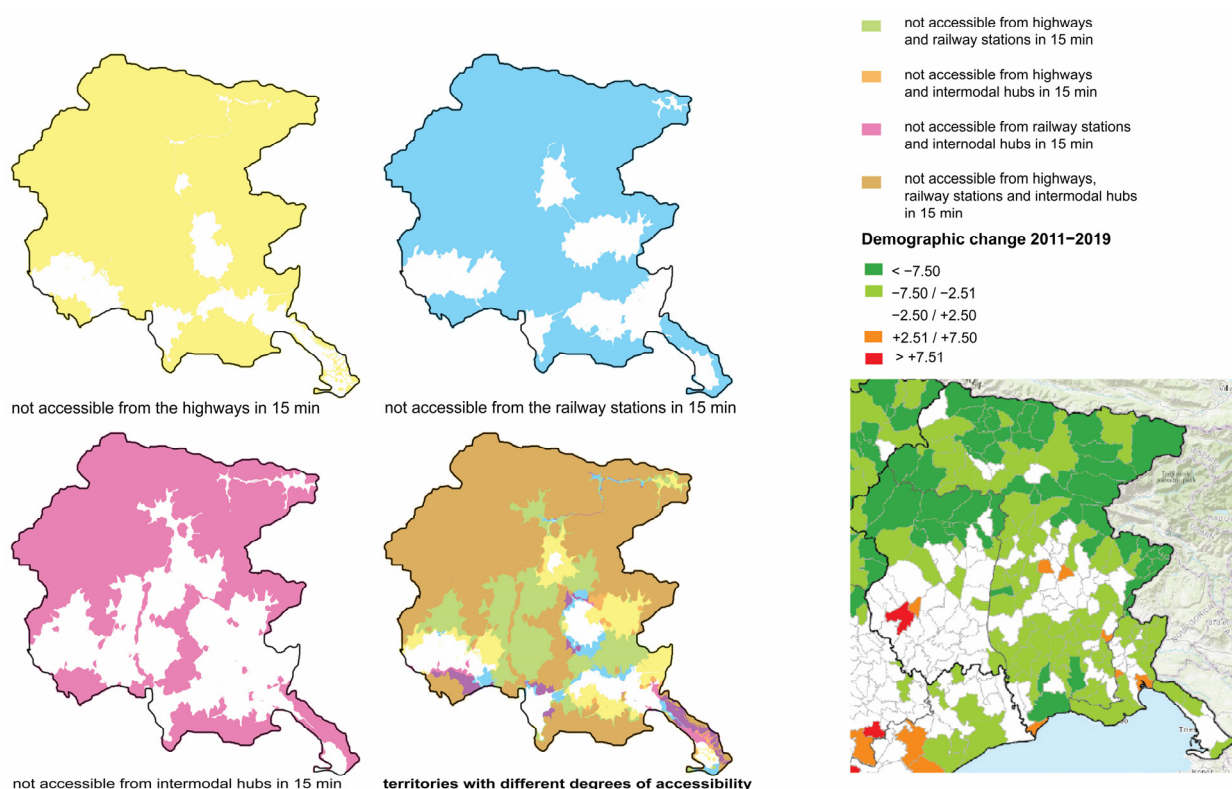
Figure 7. UniTS. Territories with different degrees of accessibility. Source: UniTS (Andrea Peraz).

The representation of the region according to different 'degrees of accessibility', although not sufficient to address territorial rebalancing, calls for an important change in perspective: from the persistent attention to the design of road and rail corridors, and the focus on the main nodes and urban centralities, to the planning of strategies and actions that can help recalibrate the distribution of intermodal infrastructures, public transport and soft mobility, as well as the provision of services.

Specifically, the critical advice UniTS work gives the Region is to deal with the organisation and location of new types of public facilities not only as responses to the present demand for traditional services for culture, education, and health (which is in fact decreasing in many territories). They can also be used as a lever to counteract abandonment and depopulation, contributing to relaunch local economic chains (e.g., agriculture, forestry, manufacturing), energy production from renewable sources, and the reuse of a growing number of brownfield sites (e.g., for ecosystem services).

4.2.4. Building an Innovation Ecosystem in the Italian North-Eastern Regions

As already mentioned, in the frame of the Italian universities' third mission activities, Innovation Ecosystems (IEs) are mainly oriented towards industrial research. This is also the case of iNEST— Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem, the project funded by the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) that UniTS participates in [59].

iNEST's overarching aim is to extend the benefits of digital technologies to the 'key specialisation areas' of the North-Eastern Italian territory (namely, the Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto regions, and the Trento and Bolzano provinces): the industrial-manufacturing sector, agriculture, sea, mountains, building construction, tourism, culture, health, and food. The partnership is rich and qualified, and includes nine universities, three research institutes (the National Research Council, the National Institute of Oceanography and Experimental Geophysics, and the Eastern Adriatic Port System Authority), and a number of private research bodies and companies (Figure 8).
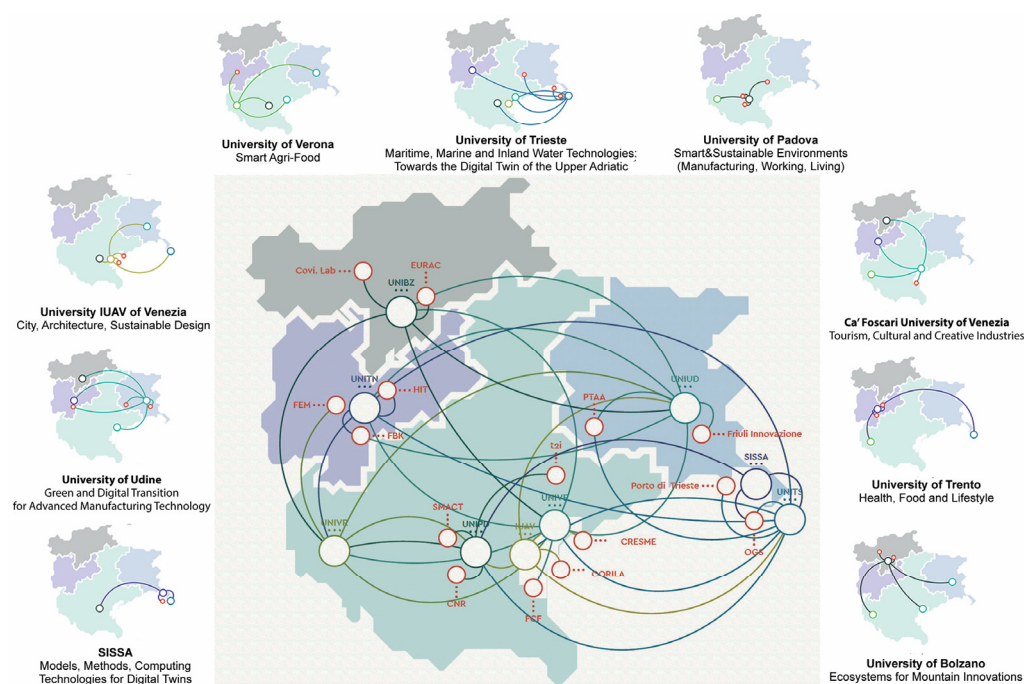
Figure 8. iNEST. The partnership and the nine spokes. Source: University IUAV of Venezia.

iNEST's overall governance is highly complex. Similar to other IEs, it works as a 'hub' organised into nine 'spokes', each led by one of the universities located in the North-East and dealing with different aspects of the main issue. The hub and spokes will be in charge of managing cascade funding to ensure strong interaction with the private sector and to support the development of SMEs, the generation of research start-ups and spin-offs. In line with the EU City Science Initiative, one of the final aims is to establish new 'collaboration structures', namely a network of joint strategic laboratories ('lab villages') for advanced research and development, where university researchers, Post-Docs, Master's and PhD students, and R&D company employees work together, in a continuous and systematic

way, by sharing their know-how and research structures with the objective of contributing to territorial development.

iNEST started in early 2023, and will run over 36 months. A critical examination of its possible results is therefore premature. However, the activities that the UniTS' architecture, technical architecture and urban planning group will develop within spokes 4 and 8 are addressed at strongly integrating R&D with PE. Specifically, the goal of the spoke 4 "City, Architecture, Sustainable Design" (leader partner IUAV of Venezia, project partner UniTS) is to identify and test innovative integrated approaches and solutions for a fast and significant improvement of the functional, social, and environmental performance of existing real estate assets and infrastructures. When doing this, a focus will be on the development of some pilot local actions, where the co-organisation of mutual learning, co-design and engagement processes with administrations, economic stakeholders, communities, and the civil society will take place. Within spoke 8 "Maritime, Marine and Inland Water Technologies: Towards the Digital Twin of the Upper Adriatic", a specific topic refers to integrated marine and spatial planning (leader partner UniTS, project partner IUAV of Venice). The proposed concept is that of the Upper Adriatic as a cross-border 'solid sea', namely as a space that can be actively put into play when imagining an integrated land-sea plan for sustainable mobility and logistics related not only to commercial purposes, but also to tourism and everyday commuting. Here again, a pilot project will be addressed to the study and testing of a water route and service for public and sustainable transportation, with the purpose to offer the regional and local administrations a planning model and a methodology for collecting real-time data and assess the impacts on road traffic reduction, the upgrading of tourist attractions, and the adaptability to climate change.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

At such a difficult time as the one we are going through, the experiences this article discusses show how universities, being hubs of different expertise and knowledge, can be a strategic resource. Their transformation into innovation centres and living labs where experimenting new sustainable behaviours and solutions can help local communities, stakeholders, and public administrations face current and future sustainability challenges with a positive and constructive outlook.

However, to act as powerful drivers for change, universities are called to strengthen their commitment in terms of teaching, research, technology transfer, public engagement, development, and qualification of technological equipment and human resources. In fact, only by investing in more systemic and systematic knowledge, by cultivating new skills, implementing good practices, and widely sharing them, may our era have the possibility of being remembered "for the awakening of a new reverence for life, for the resolve to reach the sustainability, for the acceleration of the struggle for justice and peace" [60].

The commitments universities have to seriously take on are, therefore, not simple, and require a deep renewal of the ways HEIs act towards their hosting cities and territories. Some fields and key factors of innovation are highlighted below.

1. *Investment in the internal organisation and training of administrative, teaching, and research staff.* As the RUS and UniTS experiences show, in order to periodically deliver and monitor environmental and social responsibility reports, a dedicated budget and prepared personnel are equally necessary. New data have to be collected and innovative procedures must be put into action, as well as the capacity to build and implement integrated actions and projects helping raise the universities communities' awareness towards SDGs. Thus, a first group of key factors should be considered:
   - the active involvement of all the administrative and scientific skills a university can rely on; to do so, a huge effort should be dedicated to breaking the barriers that often still exist between the operational modes of governance structures and the competences that each university department and research and disciplinary group bears;

- parallel to this, the organisation of life-long learning processes addressed to the overall universities' staff; specifically, not only updated hard skills, but also soft skills (e.g., good communication, interpersonal relationships and teamwork, leadership, problem solving, work ethic and empathy) should be enhanced.

2. *Stronger intertwining of teaching, research and third mission—PE activities*. Students (from Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD courses, up to advanced education) are the first and main addressees of universities' work. During their career, they should have the opportunity to participate in applied research and PE activities in order to become not only active/reflective learners, but also direct promoters of a renewed attitude towards the future. To this end, another factor gains importance:

- the adaptation of educational programs to new challenges, by providing adequate theoretical and operational know-how also through the formal inclusion of a number of real-life, 'teaching' and 'research in action' experiences.

3. *Stable collaboration with territorial institutions, communities, and stakeholders.* This is somehow the expected outcome of the Italian Innovation Ecosystems. IEs are understood as a fundamental step towards the transformation of individual and discontinuous support to external actors towards the establishment of 'institutionalised' structures in charge of working in-between universities, administrations, economic subjects, and the civil society. The final aims are multiple: to build more useful synergies between scientific research and technical transfer; to activate co-design and participatory processes; and to organise periodical and repeated training opportunities for professionals and private and public actors. However, even if IEs' purposes are promising, the complexity of their implementation and expenditure procedures risks undermining their innovation capacity. To seize this strategic opportunity, some key factors should therefore be carefully addressed:

- take advantage of the intermediate position between government bodies and territorial stakeholders that universities already hold, in order to stir new demands and perspectives (not just provide responses to actual requests), and help overcome the conditions of inertia, staff shortages and the reduction of skills that often affect public and private organisations;
- renovate internal management structures in order to develop the capacity to play a role that HEIs are not yet fully prepared for, namely that of expenditure centres for cascading funding addressed to economic and production enterprises;
- overcome the imbalance between different types of third mission activities, namely between the stronger economic position of industrial research and the still poorly financed public engagement practices. To do so, universities should dedicate a specific budget to PE, understanding it as strategic both to address the integrated territorial and governance dimensions sustainability calls for, and to start enacting a new City-Science paradigm.

Overall, this first (and partial) list of fields and key factors of innovation confirms the need to go on working on a broader and more structured reform of universities and their activities, and to interface with cities and territories, as well as the importance to share and discuss already developed practices (being either 'good' or 'bad'), and to provide adequate resources for the reorganisation of HEIs structures and routines. In more general terms, the invitation is not to forget that a truly useful and operational university must be free to investigate new themes, and to open up new perspectives—even those that are not yet mainstream, nor currently understood as directly profitable.

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