Foresight and the third mission of universities: the case for innovation system foresight

Purpose – This paper aims to argue that innovation system foresight (ISF) can significantly contribute to the third mission of universities by creating an active dialogue between universities, industry and society.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper’s approach is conceptual. The authors analyse the third mission and relevant literature on innovation systems and foresight to explain how and why foresight contributes to the third mission.

Findings – The authors propose that foresight contributes to the third mission of universities, particularly to the research and development and innovation dimensions through the development of joint understanding of the agendas and future needs of stakeholders. In addition, foresight enables education to be designed to address identified needs.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are both conceptual and exploratory in nature. Thus, the argument needs further examination through a broader study on foresight in the university–industry context and/or longitudinal research on the outcomes and impact of foresight in this context.

Practical implications – The findings highlight the importance of understanding the systemic nature of innovation and its role in economic development. Universities must understand their role within the larger innovation system to fulfil the potential of economic development and by extension, their third mission.

Originality/value – The paper outlines a novel approach of using ISF to promote university–industry partnerships and the growth of innovation systems. The paper also contributes to the discussion of the third mission by outlining that mission in practical terms.

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