

Beyond Third Mission: Hybridisation, Cooperation, and Emerging Competencies in Italian University-CSO Partnerships

Maria Chiara De Angelis 

Link Campus University, Italy.

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing and uncertain environment, universities are encouraged to move beyond traditional industry-focused partnerships and adopt a networking approach that values CSOs as co-creators of knowledge. At the same time, collaboration entails 'hybridisation' pressures that may challenge universities' missions and clash with CSOs' organisational cultures, routines, and resource constraints.

The explorative study reports findings from a qualitative inquiry involving university staff and researchers, as well as professionals and volunteers from diverse CSOs. Using an action research orientation and thematic analysis, it explores which competencies are consolidated and emerging within CSOs, and how higher education can support their development and integrate CSOs more effectively into curricula and third-mission activities.

Keywords: *University–Civil Society Collaboration; Social Innovation; Emerging Competencies; Civic Engagement.*

1. Introduction

Civil society organisations increasingly act as intermediaries between higher education and wider societal needs. Labour-market volatility and shifting skills demands prompt universities to reconsider how they contribute to social innovation and lifelong learning, not only through industry partnerships but also through sustained engagement with civic society organisations (CSOs) (Arocena et al., 2015, 2018; McCann, 2014). In this ecosystem, universities often combine curricular learning with field-based activities co-developed with CSOs, enabling students to practice transversal skills while responding to community challenges.

Against this backdrop, the study explores the skills needs of CSOs and the opportunities and tensions that arise when Italian universities and CSOs co-design cross-sectoral curricula and third-mission initiatives.

Two national exploratory focus groups were conducted to gather perspectives from both academic staff and CSO professionals/volunteers. The study is situated within the applied social research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Kemmis et al., 2014) and action research traditions (Argyris et al., 1985; Lewin, 1946), using thematic analysis to identify patterns and to construct an interpretative narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The analysis yields three interrelated themes: (1) consolidated relational skills that sustain trust, cohesion, and participation; (2) emerging strategic and ethical skills that connect people, organisations, and opportunities; and (3) a reframed university–civil society relationship centred on mutual value and ‘slow’ collaboration. Rather than offering definitive claims, the manuscript provides experience-based insights intended to inform institutional strategies and more inclusive forms of knowledge co-production.

2. Literature review

2.1. Co-Designing Competencies for Social Impact: The European Perspective

European policy discourse recognises CSOs as key actors in social cohesion, democratic participation, and citizenship, and as partners in enhancing graduates’ employability through soft skills and civic competencies. Within this perspective, collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), CSOs, and stakeholders supports innovative social practices and contributes to public value creation (EU, 2017).

EU initiatives and programmes encourage universities to expand their ‘third mission’—the translation of knowledge into societal outcomes—while bridging the gap between education and evolving labour-market needs (Guerrero et al., 2017; EU, 2018).

A core implication is a shift from viewing CSOs as recipients of academic expertise to treating them as equal partners in knowledge co-creation (Farr, 2018). This requires competencies on both sides: the ability to articulate social needs, collaborate effectively, and co-design learning experiences that integrate critical thinking, social responsibility, and intercultural communication (Ravazzoli & Valero, 2020).

2.2. The Convergence of HE and Civic Society Organisations in Italy

In Italy, a networking approach to higher education–society relations highlight the reciprocal benefits of HEI–CSO collaboration. Universities can access grounded knowledge about social issues and community needs, enriching research and teaching with real-world perspectives (Rey-Garcia & Mato-Santiso, 2020; della Porta & Pavan, 2017). CSOs, in turn, can gain methodological support, theoretical frameworks, and research capacity that enhance the effectiveness and visibility of their initiatives.

The national regulatory environment has progressively foregrounded third-mission activities within governance and evaluation. Reforms and quality assurance frameworks encourage universities to integrate social impact, public engagement, and knowledge transfer into institutional strategies, supported by dedicated units and assessed through national evaluation processes (Italian Republic, 2010, 2012).

Despite increased openness to external collaboration, a persistent mismatch remains between universities' willingness to partner and the availability of enabling conditions such as governance agreements, regulatory tools, skill development, and career incentives. This gap risks undermining long-term partnerships and the sustainable impact of collaborative initiatives on local communities (OECD, 2024).

Coordination is often fragmented, informal, and episodic; universities may approach partnerships piecemeal, limiting continuity. Differences in organisational cultures, timelines, and expectations can erode trust, and CSOs may become frustrated when academic outputs do not translate into actionable solutions. Resource constraints—limited staff time and capacity on the CSO side, and difficulties in managing interdisciplinary societal projects on the university side—further intensify these challenges (Polito & Girei, 2024; Zolezzi, 2016).

A notable example of university–civil society integration is service-learning, which links curricular learning to community engagement and reflective practice. Grounded in pragmatist and critical pedagogical traditions, service-learning frames civic participation as both a learning method and an avenue for producing tangible community value (Dewey, 1938/1997; Addams, 1902/2002; Kilpatrick, 1926). However, scaling such practices requires targeted communication strategies and institutional frameworks that align expectations, foster sustainable collaboration, and translate research into tangible social impact (Bornmann, 2013; Awashreh, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, inductive approach to explore how HEIs and CSOs interact within the Italian tertiary education system and how this relationship may evolve. It considers micro-level dynamics—such as curricular integration and individual experiences—while emphasising the collaborative processes through which CSOs can move from being 'beneficiaries' to becoming co-designers of learning pathways.

Guided by a cultural perspective that views universities as socially embedded institutions, the research aims to allow patterns to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined model. Data were collected through two online focus groups and analysed using

Braun and Clarke's (2008) thematic analysis, enabling the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring meanings related to co-design and collaboration.

3.2. Participant Composition and Selection

Two national focus groups were conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year, involving nine participants: three representatives from higher education and six from diverse CSOs (e.g., trade associations, social cooperatives, NGOs, and national voluntary organisations).

Participants self-selected through an open call circulated via academic and professional networks and social media. Sessions were moderated in accordance with the structured format, recorded under ethical safeguards (anonymity and confidentiality), and 2 lasted about 2 hours.

The second session included a participatory mapping activity using a shared Padlet workspace. Competencies were positioned along two axes: individual (people-level) versus collective (organisation-level) competencies, and available (already present) versus emerging (developing or anticipated) skills. This collaborative step supported dialogue and contributed to an initial competency framework intended for stakeholders' future use.

Thematic analysis followed standard phases: familiarisation, coding, theme generation and refinement, and final naming. Codes were aligned with the research questions and consolidated to reduce redundancy, producing a coherent interpretative structure for the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

Across the focus groups, three themes describe how competencies are currently expressed within CSOs, what capabilities are emerging, and how collaboration with universities is perceived: (1) consolidated relational skills and social cohesion; (2) emerging strategic and ethical skills connecting people, organisations, and opportunities; and (3) reframing HEI–CSO relations toward mutual value and 'slow' collaboration.

4.1. Theme 1: Value-Generating Relationships: Consolidated Relational Skills and Social Cohesion

Participants consistently described relational competencies as a core strength of CSOs (Fig. 1). These include active listening, empathy, needs analysis, reception, feedback, and communication (including intercultural communication). Such skills are not treated as 'soft add-ons' but as operational capabilities that enable CSOs to interpret situations, respond appropriately, and sustain trust-based relationships.

Relational skills are also linked to advocacy and democratic voice: CSOs are perceived as able to represent people's needs and vulnerabilities, transform individual fragilities into collective demands, and create participatory spaces where dialogue and conflict can be addressed.

Through cooperation, reciprocity, and trust, CSOs help counter social fragmentation and generate relational forms of social capital that complement, and sometimes overcome, public–private dichotomies (Donati, 2013a; Zamagni, 2007).

Volunteerism and personal commitment further reinforce these relational assets. Participants emphasised dynamism, creativity, availability, and altruistic motivations as drivers of engagement. CSOs are presented not merely as service providers but as generators of relational spaces that nurture belonging, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to democratic renewal and collective well-being.

4.2. Theme 2: Emerging Strategic and Ethical Skills in CSOs: Connecting People, Organisations, and Opportunities

Beyond consolidated relational strengths, participants identified emerging competencies that require intentional development. A priority is the capacity to connect people and opportunities—mediating between individuals/families and fragmented services, especially in complex domains where resources exist but remain poorly coordinated or insufficiently visible to end users. This ‘linking’ function includes guidance, navigation, and networking to make opportunities accessible and inclusive.

A second emerging area concerns connecting meaningful contexts: the ability to care for relationships among organisations, read contexts and interdependencies, and facilitate integration through team building and communication. Participants stressed the importance of moving beyond isolated or ‘stop-and-go’ projects by mapping initiatives, organising knowledge, and creating a ‘critical mass’ of experiences that can be shared, sustained, and scaled.

Strengthening inter- and intra-organisational cooperation was seen as essential for community development. Participants noted that effective external networking depends on internal collaboration, including the capability to coordinate teams, align roles, and build coherent networks among organisations working on similar themes.

The focus groups also highlighted strategic vision and planning as emerging needs. CSOs face pressures from turnover and generational change, which can lead to repeated ‘restarts’ without a stable long-term orientation. Developing medium- to long-term strategic planning, shared objectives, and a common value framework was described as critical for sustainability and for moving from project-based activity to strategic collaboration.

Ethical leadership was repeatedly framed as a distinctive competency requirement. Participants proposed a more holistic view of skills—grounded in practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—that integrates relational capabilities with value-based decision-making, community orientation, participation, and recognition of diversity. Diversity management (understood as valuing ‘human and

social biodiversity') and managing generational inclusion were positioned as key to renewal and complementarity.

Finally, digital literacy was emphasised as an increasingly necessary hard-skill domain for CSOs' sustainability. Alongside basic digital competencies, participants flagged issues such as online communication, digital identity, and security. They also pointed to a broader trend of professionalisation: growing needs for managerial, logistical, and communication competencies (e.g., project management, benchmarking, strategic communication, fundraising and funded project design), partly mirroring profit-sector skill sets while remaining rooted in civic values.

4.3. Theme 3: Reframing University–Civil Society Relations: Toward Mutual Value and Slow Collaboration

Participants described current HEI–CSO collaborations as valuable yet often informal, scattered, and event-based. CSOs increasingly recognise that volunteering alone is insufficient for addressing complex social needs and that research-oriented competencies developed in universities can strengthen organisational capacity. At the same time, CSOs seek recognition as meaningful partners—able to contribute beyond data provision, internships, or short-term support roles.

A recurring concern was compartmentalisation between educational, professional, and civic spheres: conferences and initiatives may showcase separate experiences without producing integrated, co-designed pathways. Participants also identified a cultural gap in formal education, where CSO culture and civic ethics are insufficiently represented, limiting students' awareness of social responsibility and collective engagement.

The manuscript therefore calls for a shift from extractive or transactional collaboration to mutual value creation. In this view, universities and CSOs should co-plan and co-learn, building 'virtuous chains' of collaboration that generate relational goods rather than merely accumulating outputs. However, two conditions are highlighted: time and resources. Networking is treated as skilled work that requires sustained commitment, enabling structures, communication practices, and funding to maintain relationships over time.

The temporal dimension is positioned as both methodological and ethical. Knowledge-building and effective practice are described as slow processes that rely on persistence, trust, and reciprocity—often in tension with fast-paced managerial logics. Consequently, 'slow collaboration' is presented as a necessary orientation for durable social impact partnerships.

5. Conclusion

The study argues that CSOs' consolidated relational and value-driven competencies—listening, empathy, advocacy, care, and community engagement—remain foundational for trust, participation, and social cohesion. However, the evolving landscape increasingly demands strategic, organisational, and ethical competencies: connecting people to opportunities, systematising knowledge, strengthening networks, developing strategic plans, and practising ethical leadership attentive to diversity and generational renewal.

Universities can support these emerging competencies through targeted training, participatory research, co-design spaces, and curricula aligned with third-mission goals. Equally, universities can learn from CSOs that knowledge is not only technical but also relational and generative—capable of creating meaning and belonging. This supports a shift from producing knowledge about communities toward co-producing knowledge with them, using approaches such as service-learning and participatory research.

Overall, the study proposes reframing HEI–CSO relations as long-term, reciprocal partnerships grounded in mutual recognition and value-based collaboration. By investing in the enabling conditions of 'slow knowledge'—time, trust, and adequate resources—universities can strengthen social responsiveness, enhance civic engagement, and contribute more effectively to democratic renewal and collective well-being.

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