International Conference

Visible and Invisible Universities

> ## Call for papers

> **June 18-19, 2026**
> *15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd, Sofia, Bulgaria*
> *Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski"*

Presentation

For several decades, the situation of universities has seemed paradoxical. On the one hand, they are called upon to assert their visibility, or even to build and impose it within their own organizations, by their supervisory authorities in the public sector, by stakeholders (students, employers, funders), and by the very functioning of an "education market" (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007, Marginson, 2016), which requires them to obtain competitive advantages. On the other hand, universities must fulfill their fundamental missions, such as teaching and research, or new missions, such as regional development, the promotion of scientific culture, or sustainable development (Ory et al., 2024). Institutions must therefore make choices that they cannot always justify, as they must preserve the internal balance of their governance system. In addition, they must now strive to be visible in international rankings (Rouet, 2022), but also in public policies of excellence and, more generally, in global competition, in order to obtain and maintain funding and attract "talent." However, they often have to remain discreet internally to avoid conflicts and maintain the status quo in terms of governance.

The debates about the public expectations from universities and their role in the society have been long largely discussed (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 1995, 2000, Clark 1972, Kerr, 2000; Apple, 2012; Chatterton, 2000).

Universities have long been both visible and invisible (Aubert, Haroche, 2011). Their visibility is both physical and symbolic, tangible and intangible. They often occupy iconic urban spaces (the Sorbonne in Paris, Harvard in the United States, etc.), help shape the landscape, and are part of the history of cities. They award recognized degrees, certificates, and titles, which are visible on the CVs of their alumni, but also in social hierarchies. They organize conferences, graduation ceremonies, and research that receive varying degrees of media coverage, and their members may be rewarded with prizes and distinctions (Nobel Prizes, Fields Medals, Honoris Causa, etc.). As major beneficiaries of national budgets and players in industrial partnerships, their visibility is also political and economic.

However, they are also invisible, or in the process of becoming so, particularly in France, due to institutional mergers and restructuring. Their internal mechanisms, admission criteria, networks of influence, and social or territorial inequalities in terms of access are often opaque, and much of the work carried out in universities remains little known, reserved for "insiders"! Internal strategic decisions relating to recruitment or resource allocation are very rarely communicated externally. This invisibility is also linked to the development of digital practices, with student recruitment platforms, assessment tools, and management based on indicators that are constructed in a relatively opaque manner, both externally and internally. Scientific collaborations, lobbies, and private partnerships are also often driven by fairly closed informal networks.

The visible/invisible differentiation depends on political and economic contexts, but also on social and cultural contexts, particularly those of stakeholders and, more generally, the public. The supposed universality of the university, particularly its values, is combined with a relative disparity between visible and invisible dimensions.

However, a large part of the missions of universities, particularly public ones, remains invisible: their social and cultural role, their contribution to territorial cohesion, and their efforts to democratize access to knowledge.

Institutional visibility is based primarily on indicators, standardized measures, publication indexing, attractiveness to international students, the importance of industrial partnerships, and professional integration rates. These criteria feed into global rankings such as the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU), the QS World University Rankings, and the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings, the use of which establishes a form of symbolic and organizational hierarchy among universities around the world. Indeed, the visibility of universities is a construct linked to instruments, policies, and discourse. Competition between institutions is structured by public mechanisms (excellence programs, competitive funding) and by instruments of international comparison (rankings) (Musselin, 2017). Some institutions thus appear as "leaders," while others, less well endowed, remain on the margins. Visibility is based on standardized criteria that reflect normative choices and highlight certain aspects of the university's mission (competitive research, links with the economy) to the detriment of others (culture, inclusion, pedagogy) (Hazelkorn, 2015). Universities are therefore made visible according to a selective logic that favors what is measurable and valuable on a global scale.

Some institutions manage to meet the implicit standards of recognition in the rankings, often by changing their status and organization, or even by modifying their operations in order to improve their scores. The goal is to acquire or enhance their prestige and recognition in order to gain access to more resources, strengthen their visibility, and increase their attractiveness. Rankings provide little new information, weaken autonomy and put in risk universities' distinct missions and quality (Vidal & Ferreira, 2020). However, for most institutions that do not appear at the top of the rankings, particularly "regional universities," local universities, or those specializing in disciplines that receive little or less media coverage, their essential missions are relegated to relative invisibility, even though they clearly provide a public service and/or fulfill an indispensable mission. The criteria and indicators of global ranking systems have different logic and usuallya are not entirely aligned with the strategic goals and missions of the universities (Makki et al., 2023).

Market logic imposes criteria of performance, attractiveness, and competitiveness, and values above all the economic benefits and measurable employability of graduates, as opposed to a logic of public service and/or missions/values: social inclusion, cultural dissemination, civic education, and regional development. The former contributes to the visibility of universities on the international stage, while the latter is often neglected, particularly due to the lack of appropriate indicators to measure its real impact, but that's not all! The predominance of market logic ultimately obscures local knowledge and practices (Boaventura de Sousa, 2014).

Several authors propose rethinking university performance indicators. Altbach (2016), for example, emphasizes that visibility should not be reduced to global competition, but that the local and social impacts of universities must also be taken into account. For its part, UNESCO (2022) calls for a "new social contract for education" with a rehabilitation of cultural, social, and civic dimensions in the evaluation of higher education systems. The dissemination and use of international rankings are part of a market logic, which obviously makes it difficult to change the criteria.

Regulatory bodies, but also society as a whole, require universities to produce graduates who are employable and have acquired skills that are useful in the labor market. And it is also at this level that universities are visible or invisible. Indeed, not all skills are easily measurable, and alongside measurable "visible" skills (often measured indirectly by employment indicators), critical, cultural, and civic skills, which are essential to democratic life and the construction of a thoughtful society, escape indicators and are largely invisible in institutional rankings

and evaluations, even though they are generally part of the "official" missions of universities. The social and cultural role of the university is thus often rendered invisible, and its missions become invisible when the university is de facto reduced to economic utility (Nussbaum, 2010). This question of measurability is fundamental. Beyond the "tyranny of metrics" (Muller, 2018), rankings are constructed on the basis of indicators that are either factual (ARWU) or partially derived from a survey methodology (QS, THE). But not everything is measurable or reducible.

Moreover, invisibility is not only institutional, it can also be organizational (little-recognized internal services, such as student life, cultural mediation, and pedagogy). This obviously does not mean that they play no role, but rather that they are not recognized, even though universities play a decisive role in democratizing access to knowledge, lifelong learning, territorial structuring, and cultural life. These contributions, although essential to democratic functioning and local development, are largely overlooked by international indicators and serve a collective rather than a competitive purpose.

Universities are increasingly striving to increase their transparency, particularly with regard to the integration of social responsibility values (Lewandowsky & Bishop, 2017; Caron et al., 2019), which has the effect of making visible what is relatively or totally invisible, for example: open science, to make publications and research data accessible to all, at the level of external evaluations; the use of external evaluations and audits, such as surveys on working and studying conditions; the appropriation of social media, particularly in response to reports of misconduct (e.g., #PasDeVague or #ScienceOuverte).

The integration of digital technologies, selection algorithms, MOOCs, and AI(G) into education creates new gray areas, while the evolution of certain funding models (by companies or private foundations) can blur the boundaries between private and public interests and thus compromise transparency policies. Universities are increasingly being questioned about their social role and environmental impact, which can quickly lead to a crisis of legitimacy and undermine transparency efforts.

It is therefore not surprising that universities are increasingly developing communication and branding strategies (Thompson, 1995) on the one hand, and opening up to civil society and local communities, on the other. Universities are striving to improve transparency in response to growing internal and external demands for information on governance, budgets, and results. They are implementing inclusion measures and developing ethical frameworks, particularly to regulate partnerships and data use.

The question of universities' missions is at the heart of this visible/invisible dichotomy. How can we make visible the invisible contributions of universities, whether in terms of inclusion, culture, civic education, or regional anchoring? How can we reflect on the relationship between measurable (often professional) skills and non-measurable (critical) skills? How can we make invisible contributions visible? A visibility strategy can lead to moving beyond rankings (or even abandoning them, as some universities are currently doing) and developing more comprehensive assessment tools that reflect the plurality of university missions.

The challenge for universities is to articulate these two logics, to seek to remain competitive in a global higher education market while preserving their identity as institutions serving society.

There are obviously many possible approaches to this issue. In particular, from a public management perspective, universities can be seen as hybrid public organizations, subject to a double constraint: the logic of public service (mission of general interest) and the logic of the market (competition for funding, attractiveness, performance). The aim is therefore to try to understand how universities are adopting new management tools, often inspired by the private sector (indicators, benchmarking, contractualization), and the dissonance this can generate with their public service missions. It is also possible to focus on the evolution of governance at several levels, integrating the relationship between the state, evaluation agencies, local authorities, and universities. Invisibility can also result from institutional position. Internal organizational analyses are also interesting: how certain functions or services (student life, cultural mediation, social sciences and humanities) are made invisible in strategic or budgetary choices, in favor of areas considered more strategic (hard sciences, technology, research excellence, technological innovation). The example of the evolution of the doctoral studies framework is very significant in this regard, because in France, the humanities and social sciences must now adopt an organization directly derived from the exact and natural sciences (in particular physics), including with regard to the admission of candidates and their monitoring.

A communication-based approach is also fruitful, as the visibility/invisibility of universities is also a question of communication. Thanks to external communication strategies (branding, territorial marketing, institutional storytelling, digital communication), "visible" universities can project a strong image. However, the visibility of universities remains everyone's business, not just that of communication departments, even if invisibility can also result from a lack of communication, a desire to remain rooted in a local rather than international mindset, or a lack of resources to devote to a coherent communication policy in a context of budgetary constraints. The realities of internal communication must also be taken into account, particularly with regard to the recognition of "invisible" missions and the choice of priorities to promote. Political and media discourse is also a very interesting source for exploring representations of universities in the media, as well as by governments and economic actors. In (enlarged) Europe, it would be interesting to examine this issue in relation to programs such as Erasmus+, alliances, and research.

They are more approaches to address the visibility/invisibility as for institutional perspective and logic (academic, bureaucratic) shaping university life and their attempt to conform the global norms of excellence" to gain legitimacy. Additionally, the cultural and discursive approach based on framing theory and behavior of different stakeholders (state, media, public) act influencing what aspects of university's role become more or less visible/invisible. The network and ecosystem approach can underline other emerging aspects of visibility and/or which partnerships enhance the visibility and which remain hidden. The cross-national comparative approach shows the contrast in visibility in different governance regimes (e.g. France, Anglo-Saxon models, etc.), the European initiatives as Erasmus+, University Alliances, Horizon Europe contributing to new layers of institutional visibility.

In the current context, how do governance choices influence institutional visibility (allocation of resources, prioritization of certain services), how does communication reflect (or mask) organizational choices, and how could certain invisible missions (public service, culture, citizenship) be made visible through innovative communication strategies?

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Call for contributions

This conference invites interdisciplinary contributions (sociology, political science, management, economics, communication studies, geography, education studies, law) that critically examine how visibility and invisibility are produced, negotiated, and contested within contemporary universities.

Without being exhaustive, the conference welcomes contributions addressing questions such as:

- How are visibility and invisibility constructed within universities, and through which instruments, indicators, narratives, or governance mechanisms?
- Which missions, actors, practices, or forms of knowledge tend to remain invisible in the dominant frameworks of evaluation, ranking, and performance, and why?
- How do universities, particularly public ones, manage the tensions, distortions, paradoxes, or contradictions between global visibility (rankings, excellence policies, international competition) and locally rooted missions (social inclusion, cultural and civic roles, territorial development)?
- How do choices of governance, resource allocation, and management tools contribute to making certain activities, disciplines, or services visible while marginalizing others?
- How do communication strategies, brand images, media representations, and internal discourses shape the visibility, legitimacy, and symbolic hierarchies of institutions?
- What new forms of invisibility or opacity are emerging from digitization, algorithmic selection, data-driven management, and the growing use of AI in higher education?
- How do different national, institutional, or disciplinary contexts produce contrasting regimes of visibility and invisibility, and what can comparative or historical perspectives reveal?
- What alternative frameworks, indicators, or narratives could help make the social, cultural, civic, and public value of universities visible beyond market-oriented measures?

Comparative, historical, and multi-level (local, national, European, global) analyses are particularly welcome, as are empirical studies that highlight invisible actors, practices, or missions, and theoretical contributions that challenge dominant conceptions of performance, excellence, and public value in higher education.

Contributions may adopt empirical, theoretical, or methodological approaches and are encouraged to engage critically with established categories of performance, excellence, and transparency, as well as to propose new ways of understanding and evaluating the multiple missions of universities.

Conference language: presentation and contribution: English

The proposals for papers (title, summary of the proposal – 150 words – 4-6 keywords, personal presentation of authors) should be **sent before April, 25th, 2026**, to both Maria Stoicheva and Gilles Rouet:

stojchevap@phls.uni-sofia.bg & gilles.rouet@uvsq.fr

The selected papers should be sent after the conference and a publication will be then realized.

Scientific Committee

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