BEYOND METRICS: CONCEPTUALIZING ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND PUBLIC GOOD

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Abstract

Accountability regimes in higher education have become dominated by narrow, quantifiable performance metrics: graduation rates, research income, citation counts, employability scores, and league-table positions. While metrics have clarified some institutional activities, they have also displaced richer, normative understandings of what universities owe society. This seminar paper argues that accountability should be reconceptualized through the twin lenses of social responsibility and public good. Drawing on policy and higher-education scholarship, the paper (1) reviews the evolution and limits of metrics-driven accountability; (2) maps conceptual frameworks of social responsibility and public/civic purpose in higher education; (3) proposes an expanded accountability model that blends quantitative performance data with reflexive,

participatory, and impact-oriented evidence; and (4) discusses governance and practical implications for institutions and policymakers. The paper concludes with recommendations for moving from performance measurement toward democratic, socially embedded accountability that restores higher education's civic role.

Keywords: Accountability, higher education, social responsibility, public good, metrics, governance, university social responsibility

Introduction

Accountability in colleges and universities is not just some niche bureaucratic debate anymore; it determines how institutions recruit students, educate them, allocate funds, market themselves, and even what research gets promoted to the forefront. External stakeholders (governments, funders, accreditors, donors and the public) over the past three decades have demanded more open, faster evidence that the large public and private investments in universities bring significant returns and more often than not, evidence is asked for in numbers: graduation rates, placements into jobs, citations, revenue external to the institution, and rank stand (Kelchen, 2018). They're attractive because they seem easy to compare and show: policymakers like the simplicity of "an X% improvement," ranking tables slide easily into newspaper columns, and funding formulas can be coded to pay institutions back in terms of results. But it is just the virtues which make measurements worth having they are unambiguous, comparable, and quantifiable. And they are their limitations. Measurable output tends to bias towards short-term, concrete wins and to underestimate longer-term, spread-out, or qualitative contributions. Problems like creating civic graduates, sustaining local cultural life, co-producing knowledge with local collaborators, or safeguarding an open space for critical argument are central to the public good work of higher education; they matter to society but they tend not to fit neatly into a spreadsheet (Marginson, 2011). As success is narrowly defined, institutions learn to adjust: they channel time, focus, recruitment, and reward criteria toward actions that raise the indicators that are watched by donors, ministers, or league tables (Kelchen, 2018). It assists in visualizing the problem in mundane terms. If a university's yearly funding bonus is contingent on graduate income, faculty and administrators will automatically give precedence to programs and career services that maximize such income in the shortest time possible. If citation numbers and research grants are what secure nations global rankings, hiring and promotion can be biased towards producing more citable, publishable output perhaps at the cost of local-engagement research that benefits near communities but doesn't result in citations (Giroux, 2014). This isn't abstract theory; scholars have characterized changes in institutional action when certain metrics come to dominate (Kelchen, 2018). Universities themselves are in turn trying to answer a moral and political question: to what are we owing a debt to the society that supports us? The discourse of University Social Responsibility (USR) has grown

up as institutions try to prove they do more than deliver private returns to students and profitable research contracts. USR covers a lot from sustainability and public engagement to inclusion and public scholarship and it represents an ethical case that universities have an obligation to be part of shared social goods (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023). But here's the trick: while more and more universities include "social impact" jargon in strategic plans and mission statements, bringing that jargon to reliable, hard evidence for accountability is difficult. Social impact is multifaceted, contextual, and often slowly to reveal itself; it resists the tidy measure-and-pay formulas fashionable with contemporary regimes of accountability (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023). So this paper raises at once both a practical question and a normative question: How can accountability be reconceptualized to account for social responsibility and the public good without rejecting the useful transparency that some measures provide? My quick answer is that responsibility must become plural and purposive: retain useful quantitative measures where they provide transparency and comparability, but complement them with qualitative, participatory and outcomes-oriented evidence that gives more salience to democratic values, social results, and institutional purpose. That is, we should not leave metrics behind we should embed them within richer, more participatory practices of evidence and governance that record the full range of what universities do for society (Obizue, & Adamu, 2025).

From "Accountability" as Numbers to Accountability as Social Practice: a brief review

According to Obizue, Chukwuemeka & Iwezu (2025), accountability in higher education did not materialize overnight as it does now. Governments and regulatory agencies throughout history were focused on inputs and compliance: budget, minimums, accreditation checklists and legal compliance (Burke, 2005). The assumption was straightforward: public money was supplied to institutions and the state wanted assurance that public money was spent wisely and that there were minimum standards. Those audits mattered, but they were also circumscribed they told you how well an institution was complying with rules, not whether or not the institution was making social value. From the late twentieth century, two large forces collaborated to transform the terrain. New Public Management (NPM) reforms performance, outputs, managerial accountability and market-like incentives spread across a broad cross-section of public sectors, including universities (Hood, 1991). NPM placed citizens in the role of customers and compelled organisations to find outcomes which could be purchased, compared and rewarded. Budgetary constraints on the public purse and rising scrutiny of public expenditures created political pressure for results measurability: taxpayers and finance ministers demanded visible returns for substantial public subsidies (Kelchen, 2018). These pressures combined made performance measures a winning policy instrument. Concurrently, there was the spread of what Michael Power and others describe as the audit culture: verification, inspection, and quantification became common ways of establishing public trust and managerial control (Power, 1997). Audit-based practices diffused from finance into teaching evaluations, research impact audits and performance reporting. Audits provide objectivity and control but simultaneously redefine what organisations do because they create incentives to present

things positively to auditors sometimes at the expense of broader purposes. What followed was a concrete, observable shift in institutional behavior. States adopted performance-based funding tied to retention and graduation; accreditors and rankers ratcheted up some metrics; colleges and universities themselves established key performance measures and centralized reporting offices to respond to external pressures (Burke, 2005; Kelchen, 2018). According to Obizue, Oguh & Ogbuoka (2024), this made higher education more comparable across campuses and more readable to outsiders a simple plus. But it also introduced a set of problems that are now widely recognized by scholars and practitioners.

First, reductionism: measures inevitably simplify complex phenomena. The dynamic can be captured in the slogan "what gets measured gets managed": organisations will put effort into the measurable (and the measurable will be the immediate, the quantifiable, the market-relevant) (Kelchen, 2018). Subjects like civic learning, cultural reach, or the style of public debate are real university contributions but difficult to capture in single-figure indicators. This leads to distortion: not all that matters can be measured, and not all that can be measured matters.

Second, perverse incentives and gaming: when resources or status are tied to indicators, institutions and individuals may collaborate towards the metric rather than the mission. This might entail targeting graduating seniors to increase graduation rates, gaming admissions to increase selectivity, or advancing publishable rankings that garner citations at the expense of risky, socially-engaged projects (Kelchen, 2018; Power, 1997). Defending the mission then occurs at the expense of the mission: campuses become corporate-like in maximizing for unidimensionally defined KPIs rather than Defending public institutions that mediate multiple public purposes (Giroux, 2014).

Third, epistemic and temporal mismatch: public-good accomplishments such as the formation of democratic culture or well-being in areas take a long time to develop, through complex chains of causation and through numerous actors. Short-term measures of performance miss these long trajectories or mis-specify cause and effect. They prefer short loops of feedback to more profound, systemic reform (Marginson, 2011).

Fourth, erosion of academic freedom and collegial governance: external actions are accompanied by external sanction — conditions on funding, audit schedules, and league-table pressures that restrict internal debate. Governance cultures of the faculty, formerly mediating academic mission through collegial debate, risk being undermined when administrators and external stakeholders drive metric-based agendas (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Marginson, 2011). It is not internal politics; it reshapes the kinds of knowledge that universities value and the roles of faculty.

Finally, all but a few metric regimes suffer from democratic deficit. Metrics are typically developed by state authorities, ranking bodies, or funders rather than the communities they are supposed to serve through universities. As a result, accountability systems can privilege powerful

external agendas (e.g., economic competitiveness) at the expense of neighborhood concerns (community health, cultural heritage). That creates legitimacy problems: if citizens cannot understand how numbers connect to the results that they care about, trust is eroded (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023). These criticisms do not suggest abandoning accountability. Rather, they show the need to flesh out how we are doing it. Social practice of accountability must use numbers when they are helpful, but it must use narrative, context, and democratic voice too. It has to make visible the choices that institutions have to make, and it has to allow for judgments that cannot be reduced to a single indicator. In the sections that follow in this paper I develop conceptual frameworks and concrete tools that can enable a more plural, mission-sensitive kind of accountability one that sees both transparency and the slow, gradual, but necessary public goods that universities produce.

Theoretical perspectives: Social Responsibility and Public Good

1. The "public good" of higher education

When people use the term "higher education as a public good" they mean something that spills over from the individual graduate and benefits society on a collective level. To put it simply: universities don't just make people more employable they make communities healthier, more knowledgeable, and more resilient. Marginson (2011), approaches that idea: universities strive toward democratic habituation (habits and knowledge adequate for civic life), social integration (shared intellectual and cultural resources), collective health (through research and educated practitioners), technological and scientific capability, and the production and preservation of culture. Two drudgery-of-everyday-life implications follow from that vision. First, some of the most important contributions of universities are recondite and take decades to become apparent. Grads who become thoughtful citizens, or a research project that ends up changing public policy, create value decades or centuries later; that makes them hard to measure with quick, numeric indicators. Second, because those benefits are public (they accrue to a neighborhood, an industry, or the public at large) they are not typically captured by market transactions which think of outputs as private goods.

This analytical framework has several implications for how we think about accountability:

- It evokes what is most often out of sight for metrics public deliberation, social trust, and cultural life.
- It raises difficult questions about valuation: how do we find and pay off work whose payoff is diffused and delayed?
- It puts at the forefront the tension between short-run pressures of financing (which require measurable returns) and the extended time horizons of most public-good outputs.

Examples of this are legion: an educational hospital teaches nurses but also provides affordable care to a district creates both distinct human capital and tangible public health dividends; research in the community that coproduces with residents can create civic capacity but will not show up on traditional output measures like citations or graduate salaries.

2. University Social Responsibility (USR)

University Social Responsibility (USR) borrows a leaf from the language of corporate social responsibility but reinterprets it for the distinct mission of universities. USR is broader than philanthropy: it is a set of concepts for how an institution organizes teaching, research, engagement, governance, and campus operations such that activities of the university serve society's priorities and needs. Historically USR has progressed in phases. Early models were centered on philanthropic outreach (public speaking, occasional service projects). Later models are centered on stakeholder engagement long-term partnerships with communities, industry, and government. The latest phase stresses demonstrable social impact: funders and publics increasingly require that universities demonstrate that their work solves real-world problems (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; Vale, Bertuzi & Monteiro, 2020).

Key elements of an effective USR approach are:

- Governance and institutional frameworks. Offices of community engagement, sustainability officers, and incentive systems that embed societal values into reward and promotion systems ensure that everyday practice aligns with social goals.

- Stakeholder dialogue and co-creation. USR is not done "to" communities, but requires two-way conversation joint decision-making, participatory research approaches, and advisory groups so that projects address local needs and do not take an extractive mode.

- Systems of evidence beyond simple counts. While quantitative measures have their place, USR necessitates mixed methods: narrative case studies, qualitative impact stories, community feedback, and participatory evaluation to gauge complex social impacts.

But USR also poses risks. Poorly done it is window-dressing good-sounding initiatives on a report but with little actual worth. Power imbalances (institutions defining the problem and communities supplying data or labor) must be balanced by reciprocity and capacity building. Generally, the potential of USR is real, but it requires institutional will, financing, ethical practice, and monitoring systems that permit complexity.

Limits of a Metrics-Only Accountability Model

1. Epistemic narrowness

Metrics privilege what can be counted easily: graduation rates, research income, number of publications, citation counts, employment percentages. Those are important, but they tend to favour instrumental, market-oriented activities, programs and research that produce immediate, monetisable returns. What gets squeezed out are the subtler intellectual and civic missions: fostering critical thinking, public reasoning, arts and culture, and forms of knowledge that do not translate neatly into market value. The danger is institutional: curricula narrow, departments that produce less immediate economic return (often the humanities and arts) face marginalisation, and faculty feel pressure to produce outputs that score well on indicators rather than doing the deeper, riskier work that serves democratic life. In other words, a metrics-first culture reshapes what counts as legitimate knowledge and work inside the university. (See Giroux, 2014; Barnett, 2011.)

2. Temporal mismatch

Many public-good outcomes show up slowly: the community leader who was once a student, the piece of policy informed by years of local research, or the cultural shift that emerges from repeated public engagement. Short-term metrics usually annual or biannual cannot capture these long arcs. This mismatch incentivises short-termism. Universities chase projects and metrics that pay off within a funding cycle, rather than investing in research or education whose payoff is generational. Practical remedies include longitudinal evaluation methods, alumni life-course studies, and institutional memory mechanisms that track impact across decades but these require patience and resources that funders and managers do not always provide.

3. Perverse incentives and gaming

Wherever numbers determine rewards, behaviour changes to optimise those numbers. In universities this has several concrete manifestations: “salami-slicing” research into many small papers to inflate publication counts, overemphasis on easily measured KPIs at the expense of quality, manipulating student satisfaction surveys, or concentrating investments in high-ranking programs while ignoring local needs. These behaviours undermine the very goals accountability was meant to protect. If faculty spend time gaming metrics, the quality and integrity of research and teaching can decline. Mitigations include using a broader set of evidence types, instituting independent audits, peer review of impact claims, and designing incentives that reward quality, reproducibility, and public engagement not just high counts.

4. Democratic deficit

Finally, metrics often reflect the values of those who fund or rate institutions (governments, ranking bodies, employers), not necessarily those of local communities or the public. That creates a democratic deficit: accountability systems may be technically rigorous but lack legitimacy because they bypass stakeholder voice. For example, a rural community might value a university's work in local agricultural extension, cultural preservation, or affordable adult education things that national metrics don't always prioritise. If universities respond only to the metric-driven incentives, they can become disconnected from the communities they are supposed to serve. Addressing this deficit requires participatory accountability: giving communities and other stakeholders a real role in defining what "good performance" looks like, co-designing indicators, and embedding deliberative processes in review and reporting structures. (See Kezar, 2017; Godonoga & Sporn, 2023.)

Reconceptualizing Accountability: Principles and a Multi-Dimensional Model

Reimagining accountability means changing not only what we record, but how we think about responsibility. The practical proposal here is simple in idea but demanding in practice: keep the clarity that good metrics offer, but stop treating numbers as the whole story. Make accountability plural; a mix of counted outputs, contextual stories, and democratic judgement and make it responsive to each university's mission and the communities it serves. Below are some guiding principles and how those principles feed a three-stream accountability model.

Principles — what they mean in real institutional life

1. Plurality of evidence

Why it matters; Numbers are wonderful when you require comparability and transparency. However, many of the crucial outcomes are qualitative, contextual and long-term. Blending quantitative indicators with qualitative stories and longitudinal research provides a richer, truer picture of institutional contribution (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023).

How to make it happen; For every headline figure (e.g., graduation rate), append a short story summarizing context, caveats and future plans for improvement. Maintain a collection of case studies and impact briefs that document complex contributions (arts engagement, policy influence, neighbourhood health initiatives). Use mixed-methods evaluation teams (statisticians and social scientists) to triangulate evidence rather than letting a single figure dominate.

Concrete examples; Release a one-page case study describing how a local collaboration reduced hospital readmissions report the quantitative change, explain the causal logic, and include testimony of community partners (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023).

Pitfalls to watch; Steer clear of "evidence washing" abandoning token stories by the side of the road along with impressive numbers without actual integration. Quality control (peer review or external verification) is essential.

2. Stakeholder participation

Why it matters; For accountability to be effective, it has to respond to those who are affected by university actions. Students, neighbors, employers and civic groups should have a voice in defining what "good performance" is (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

How to make it happen; Set up standing stakeholder councils, rotate community members onto governing boards, co-develop indicators with partners, and hold bi-annual town-hall discussions in which preliminary results on accountability are presented for public comment.

Concrete examples; Use community scorecards wherein local constituencies measure university outreach; publish the scorecard results and the university's action plan in response (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Pitfalls to watch; Keep participation real, not show. Pay citizens, and design inclusive processes such that marginalized groups are heard.

3. Alignment with mission

Why it matters; There are different kinds of universities. A regional teaching-intensive university shouldn't be measured by high-end research income; a research university shouldn't be measured by local employment effects only. Accountability systems need to align with institutional mission (Kelchen, 2018).

How to make it happen; First, make the mission statement the centerpiece of measures and stories. Each strategic priority requires a tailored package of accountability: key comparables for cross-sector disclosure, mission-related indicators, and narrative evidence.

Concrete examples; A civic university can use community engagement hours, local partner satisfaction, and policy take-up as indicators, alongside conventional teaching and finance metrics (Kelchen, 2018).

Pitfalls to watch: Don't make mission alignment a facade for weak reporting. Mission-sensitive indicators still have to be rigorous and independently verified.

4. Reflexivity and deliberation

Why it matters; Accountability should not be a one-way scoreboard. Institutions must reflect on what the numbers mean, how priorities change, and what trade-offs are being made (Barnett, 2011).

How to make it happen; Build structured reflexive practices: annual "sense-making" workshops where faculty, administrators and stakeholders interpret the evidence together; institutional learning logs that record decisions and their justifications; and regular strategy reviews that explicitly cite accountability findings.

Concrete examples; After a drop in community participation metrics, an institution holds a facilitated workshop to analyze causes, hears from community partners, and revises incentives for engaged scholarship (Barnett, 2011).

Pitfalls to watch; Reflexivity requires time and honesty. It must be embedded in governance calendars not treated as an optional add-on.

5. Public-oriented impact

Why it matters; If higher education is a public good, accountability must include measures of public benefit not just private returns (Marginson, 2011).

How to make it happen; Include indicators that capture contributions to public health, democratic capacities, cultural life and regional development. Accept that many of these will be assessed through mixed methods and participatory judgement.

Concrete examples; Track alumni civic participation, policy citations of faculty work, and measurable changes in local environmental indicators tied to university research (Marginson, 2011).

Pitfalls to watch; Resist reducing public impact to proxy metrics (e.g., press mentions). Invest in methods that can plausibly link university activity to public outcomes over time.

A multi-dimensional accountability model — operational detail

Stream 1 — Performance metrics (core)

Role; Provide baseline transparency, comparability and early warning signals (Kelchen, 2018).

Design principles.

- Keep a small set of core, well-defined indicators (efficiency, access/equity, student outcomes, research outputs).
- Disaggregate metrics by socio-demographic groups to reveal equity patterns.
- Publish definitions, methodologies and data quality notes publicly.

Quality safeguards.

- Use third-party data audits and standardised definitions to reduce gaming.
- Avoid consequential decisions based solely on a single metric.

How to use them.

- Use metrics to flag areas for deeper investigation (e.g., a drop in retention prompts a qualitative study), not as final verdicts.

Stream 2 — Impact narratives & case studies (contextualised evidence)

Role; Make visible mechanisms, context and meaning behind outcomes; show causal pathways, unintended consequences and long-term change (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023).

Design principles.

- Standardise a concise dossier format: problem statement, intervention logic, mixed-methods evidence, stakeholder testimony, and independent assessment.
- Subject dossiers to peer review (internal or external) to ensure credibility.
- Link each dossier to relevant metrics (e.g., show how a community health programme relates to graduate placements and local health statistics).

Quality safeguards.

- Set evidentiary thresholds for inclusion (e.g., measurable outcomes OR independent corroboration).
- Use transparent signposting: where evidence is anecdotal versus where it is robust.

How to use them.

- Include dossiers in annual accountability reports, use them in promotion and reward decisions, and draw on them to inform strategic resource allocation.

Stream 3 — Participatory accountability (deliberative evidence)

Role. Allow publics to define priorities, interpret evidence and render legitimacy judgments (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Vale et al., 2020).

Design principles.

- Co-create indicators with stakeholders and rotate membership to avoid capture.
- Use deliberative techniques (citizen juries, community panels) for contested judgments.
- Publish minutes and decisions and require a university response to panel recommendations.

Quality safeguards.

- Ensure representative sampling of participants, clear facilitation, and transparent conflict-of-interest policies.
- Provide background materials in accessible language so non-experts can deliberate meaningfully.

How to use them.

- Use participatory findings to shape institutional priorities, to validate narratives, and to contextualise metric changes.

How the three streams fit together in governance

- Integrated reports. Annual accountability reports should present all three streams side-by-side for each strategic priority: the metric, the supporting dossiers, and the stakeholder appraisal.
- Decision protocols. Create governance rules that require at least two streams of evidence before major decisions (budget reallocations, programme closures) are made.
- Weighting and trade-offs. Avoid rigid weights. Instead, use deliberative panels to adjudicate cases where metrics and narratives conflict.

Assessment, quality assurance and capacity

- Establish an independent review board (scholarly and civic representatives) to audit the integrated system periodically.
- Invest in institutional capacity: data teams, qualitative researchers, stakeholder engagement officers.
- Build a learning cycle: evidence → reflexive deliberation → policy change → monitored outcomes.

Anticipated tensions and how to navigate them

- Ranking pressure vs. civic mission. Use mission-specific reporting to show diverse contributions; lobby funders to accept hybrid evidence.
- Resource limits. Start with pilots for one or two strategic priorities rather than institution-wide rollouts.
- Measurement disputes. Use transparent methods, independent audits, and deliberative arbitration to resolve conflicts.

Operational instruments and indicators

- **Public Impact Portfolio — curated impact dossiers**

Purpose. Build a compact, credible evidence bank that documents sustained social contributions.

Core components of a dossier (template).

1. Executive summary (1 page): problem, intervention, headline outcome.
2. Context and partners: who was involved and why.
3. Logic model: how activities were expected to produce outcomes.
4. Evidence section: quantitative results (with methods), qualitative data (interviews, focus groups), and documentary evidence (policy citations, media).
5. Independent validation: peer review, partner endorsement, or third-party audit.

Lessons learned and next steps.

Sample quantitative indicators for dossiers.

- Reduction in a local health metric (e.g., immunisation uptake change, if collected).
- Number of co-produced outputs used by partners (policies, curricula).
- Employment outcomes of programme participants.

Governance & frequency.

- Produce 6–10 dossiers annually; each dossier undergoes peer review and is published with redacted sensitive data. A portfolio editor (institutional research office) curates and connects dossiers to strategic priorities (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023).

Challenges & mitigations.

- Challenge: Dossiers can be resource-intensive.
- Mitigation: Prioritise programmes with clear public benefit and potential for learning; use graduate students and partnership staff for documentation work.
- **Community-Defined Indicators**

Purpose. Let communities tell the university what success looks like locally.

Design steps.

1. Convene diverse local stakeholders.
2. Facilitate a co-design workshop to identify 3–5 priority indicators.
3. Operationalise indicators with measurable definitions and data sources.
4. Agree on review frequency and who will analyse the data.

Sample community indicators.

- Percentage of local small businesses aided by university consultancy that report improved revenue.
- Satisfaction score from partner schools about curriculum co-development.
- Number of local policy briefs co-authored by community and university partners.

Governance & frequency; Annual review by a joint community-university panel; publish results with commentary from community members (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Challenges & mitigations.

- Challenge: Communities may propose indicators that are hard to measure.
- Mitigation: Use facilitation to turn priorities into practical indicators and pilot them before full adoption.

Narrative-Augmented Scorecards

Purpose. Prevent simplistic interpretation of metrics by pairing each metric with contextual narrative.

Format. For each metric: one paragraph on what the metric is, one paragraph on what changed and why, one paragraph on institutional actions underway.

Example. Metric: First-year retention down 3%. Narrative explains cohort characteristics (e.g., higher proportion of part-time learners), external factors (economic shocks), plans (targeted advising), and limits to interpretation.

Governance & frequency; Scorecards updated quarterly for management and annually for public reporting (Kelchen, 2018).

Challenges & mitigations.

- Challenge: Narratives can be spun to obscure failure.
- Mitigation: Require evidence and external spot checks; include stakeholder commentary.

Third-party Social Audit

Purpose. Independent assessment of the university's public good contributions and governance practices.

Core elements.

- Scope (what aspects will be audited).
- Standards and benchmarks (drawn from field-accepted frameworks).
- Methods (document review, interviews, field visits).

- Public report with recommendations.

Who performs them? Independent civic bodies, consortia of universities, or recognised research institutes (Marginson, 2011).

Frequency & governance. Every 3–5 years; findings presented to governing councils and to the public.

Challenges & mitigations.

- Challenge: Finding impartial auditors and funding audits.
- Mitigation: Pool audits across regional institutions; seek philanthropic support for first audits.

Longitudinal Civic Outcomes Panel

Purpose. Measure longer-term civic contributions (difficult to capture in annual metrics).

Design features.

- A rolling alumni and partner survey every 3–5 years.
- Measures might include civic participation, local leadership roles, community engagement activity, and policy influence.
- Combine survey data with qualitative life-history interviews for deeper causal tracing.

Sample indicators.

- Percentage of alumni serving in local public office or NGO leadership.
- Self-reported civic activity (volunteering, community organising).
- Evidence of policy change attributable to university research.

Governance & frequency. Panel reports every 3–5 years; data feeds into strategic reviews and long-term planning.

Challenges & mitigations.

- Challenge: Attrition and attribution difficulties.

- Mitigation: Use probability samples, triangulate with external records (where ethically permissible), and be cautious in causal claims.

Governance and policy implications

Accountability isn't just a technical exercise for reports and dashboards. It shapes what universities do every day; who gets hired, what research is rewarded, and how the institution shows up in its neighbourhood (Obizue, Abu, Agba & Babatunde, 2025).

1. For institutional leaders

Think of leaders as gardeners: your job is to change the soil so the kinds of work you want to grow can actually flourish.

- Embed the public mission into the basics. Don't leave USR (university social responsibility) on a single policy page put it in the strategic plan, in faculty promotion rules, and in department-level goals. For example, make community-engaged scholarship and teaching innovations explicit items in promotion dossiers so people know these activities count. (Kezar, 2017.)

- Invest in long-term learning. Create a small centre or team whose job is to track long-term social impact not just next year's KPI. Give them steady funding and mandate them to run longitudinal studies, gather alumni life-course data, and collect community feedback.

- Reward the right behaviours. Adjust workload formulas and incentives so that meaningful engagement, public scholarship, and creative teaching get time and credit. Offer seed grants for co-created community research, count meaningful outreach in workload models, and recognise those contributions in awards and promotions. (Barnett, 2011.)

2. For policymakers and funders

If policymakers and funders keep tying money to only short-term, narrow indicators, universities will naturally chase those numbers. A few practical shifts can change that dynamic.

- Move from one-year, punitive funding models to multi-year support. Multi-year grants or block funding let institutions plan for projects that pay off slowly; community partnerships, curriculum reform, or local research hubs. (Kelchen, 2018.)

- Accept diversity in mission. Not every university should look the same. Funders should support reporting standards that allow different institutions to demonstrate social responsibility in ways that fit their context urban research universities will show impact differently from small regional colleges. (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023.)

- Back independent and participatory checks. Fund independent public audits and participatory evaluation processes that include community voices not as token panels, but as genuine partners in defining success. That could mean supporting community representatives on review boards or funding civic juries to evaluate institutional plans. (Marginson, 2011.)

3. For academics and civil society

Academics and civil-society partners are on the front lines of making public impact visible and accountable.

- Use methods that capture richness. Mixed-methods work, participatory action research, policy briefs, and narrative case studies can show how academic work changes people's lives without squashing it into a single number. Champion these methods inside departments and journals. (Giroux, 2014.)

- Co-produce knowledge. Don't parachute into communities with pre-made solutions. Work with partners to define problems, share credit, and document outcomes, then include those outputs in promotion and funding portfolios. Make your outreach visible by collecting impact stories, testimonies, and community feedback. (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023)

Conclusion

Metrics will always play some role in how universities are assessed; they provide clarity, transparency, and comparability across institutions. However, if accountability in higher education is reduced to numbers alone, we risk distorting the very mission universities are meant to serve. The challenge, therefore, is not to abandon metrics but to situate them within a richer, more human-centered understanding of accountability, one that sees universities as social institutions with responsibilities far beyond producing graduates or attracting research funding. A reconceptualized model of accountability must be plural in the sense that it recognizes multiple kinds of value; economic, cultural, civic, and intellectual. It must be participatory, giving a voice to students, staff, and surrounding communities rather than leaving evaluation in the hands of governments, funders, or global ranking agencies alone. It must be mission-sensitive, acknowledging that universities differ in their histories, capacities, and community roles, and that a regional teaching university should not be judged by the same criteria as a large research-intensive institution. Finally, it must be oriented toward the public good, ensuring that universities are evaluated not just for what they do for private benefit, but also for what they contribute to democracy, equity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. This rethinking is not merely philosophical, it has urgent practical implications. When accountability frameworks are narrow, institutions are pressured to game the system, chase rankings, or prioritize short-term outputs that are easy to count but shallow in impact. By contrast, when accountability incorporates broader forms of evidence and community voice, it

encourages institutions to invest in work that is meaningful and enduring partnerships that strengthen local economies, programs that cultivate democratic values, and research that addresses pressing social problems. Moving forward, higher education needs a set of actionable reforms: hybrid reporting systems that combine quantitative indicators with qualitative stories; policy frameworks that reward long-term impact and protect institutional diversity; capacity-building structures that equip universities to measure and demonstrate social value; and independent oversight mechanisms that involve the public in assessing whether universities are fulfilling their democratic responsibilities. These reforms will not only make universities more accountable but also strengthen the trust that society places in them. In the end, accountability should not be about counting what is easy to measure but about recognizing and nurturing what truly matters. If higher education is to remain a cornerstone of democratic life and social progress, its evaluation systems must reflect those deeper values. A university that is judged only by graduate salaries and research income misses its broader calling; a university that is held accountable for equity, participation, and public impact fulfills it. The choice is clear: to build accountability systems that do not simply discipline institutions but empower them to serve the public good in all its dimensions.

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