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**Abstract**

The weak performance of Italian universities in for-profit third mission activities can be explained by taking into account different interrelated factors at national, local and individual level. The purpose of this article is to introduce and develop a specific argument: the low success and the ineffectiveness of universities' third mission may be understandable also looking at the surrogate use through which professors and researchers exploit some third mission tools. In particular, the discussion concerns university spin-off companies, a typical for-profit tool that often can be activated for goals other than the official ones. Through three case studies carried out in three Italian universities, the article aims to shed light on actual reasons behind the engagement in a spin-off and to put the surrogate use of this tool in relation to old problems and constraints of the Italian university system. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)