



Negotiating Languages, Building Shared Sense

*The Case of the PackInPro Foundation between Third Mission and
University–Industry Collaboration*

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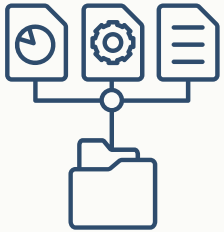
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Three propositions

What the university brings to a private certification scheme is not transferred knowledge, but epistemic authority.



- 1 · Epistemic authority as legitimation.** The university confers socially recognised credibility — not know-how — that lets the device attest that an ESG-consistent choice truly is one.
- 2 · Negotiation as quality.** Translating academic and industrial logics, measurable in the time it consumes, is a condition of the device's quality, not an incidental cost.
- 3 · A boundary object and a prosocial device.** Internally the standard lets different worlds cooperate without consensus; externally it makes a supply-chain choice inspectable and supportable.

A problem no single actor can solve



The Italian packaging sector is worth over €50 billion. Two pressures now converge on it: a tightening EU framework — the PPWR and the EmpCo directive on environmental claims — and a growing demand, from retail and credit markets, for verifiable proof of sustainability.

1. ESG ratings of the same firm diverge across agencies — largely a measurement problem. The sector is especially exposed: mostly SMEs without reporting structures

From a research programme to a Foundation



PackInPro — the Packaging Insight Project — began at the University of Pavia and became, in July 2025, a multi-university Foundation. Its Scientific Committee gathers seven academics from five universities (Pavia, Bergamo, Milan, Florence, Naples Federico II).

The scheme is private and voluntary, built on a public, inspectable methodology; conformity is assessed by an accredited third-party body.

Seven academics, five universities

The Committee

- **Flavio Antonio Ceravolo** — Sociology, University of Pavia (Chair)
- **Lorenzo Malavasi** — Physical Chemistry, University of Pavia
- **Pietro Carretta** — Physics, University of Pavia
- **Michele Meoli** — Management Engineering, University of Bergamo
- **Emmanuele Pavolini** — Economic Sociology, University of Milan
- **Giacomo Bazzani** — Sociology, University of Florence
- **Ilenia Picardi** — Sociology, University of Naples Federico II

The Universities

- University of Pavia
- Institute for Transformative Innovation (ITIR)
- University of Bergamo
- University of Milan
- University of Florence
- University of Naples Federico II



Four questions: process and object

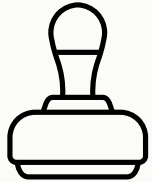
On the process

- How is a shared language built between divergent institutional logics — academic and industrial?
- What are the effects of that process on the robustness of the resulting device?

On the object

- What is the university actually conferring on a private certification scheme?
- Under what conditions is that conferral sustainable for the university itself?

Not knowledge transfer, but epistemic authority



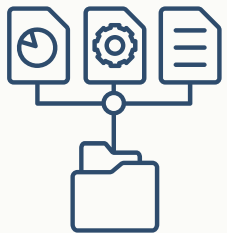
What the academy lends is not technical knowledge — largely co-produced with the firm — but **epistemic authority**: the socially recognised credibility that legitimises the whole device.

Its only guarantee is the third-party standing of those who lend it.

Read as a quasi-experiment, the case tests one hypothesis: **a transparent process, guaranteed by recognised epistemic authority, builds generalised trust — and, through it, the economic value that makes ESG-consistent choices sustainable without public funding.**

Third mission — and beyond its categories

The case belongs to academic engagement but crosses its boundaries: it is neither a patent, a spin-off, nor contract research.



The Triple Helix (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2000) frames university–industry–state interaction, but treats actors as symmetrical and neglects the symbolic-communicative work through which collaboration is actually built.

PackInPro is also a private, voluntary certification regime, to be read with the literature on non-state, market-driven governance (Cashore 2002; Bartley 2007). Here, unusually, the source of legitimacy is not an NGO or a multi-stakeholder coalition — it is the academy.

Three tools for reading the process

- **Sensemaking** (Weick 1995): shared meaning is produced by collaboration, often after the fact — action precedes rationalisation.
- **Boundary object** (Star & Griesemer 1989): plastic for each world, robust across all — cooperation without consensus.
- **Epistemic authority** (Gieryn 1999; Zagzebski 2012): credibility to attest that a claim is warranted — conferred by audiences, not by legal act.

From technology transfer to a governance device

The technical origin. Grifal S.p.A. approached UNIPavia to turn its machines into generators of verifiable production data — a conventional technology-transfer request.



The reframing. The university recast the project within its research programme on prosociality — asking whether third-party-guaranteed transparency can produce trust, and through it economic value. So the academy lends its authority: this is not a service to a firm, but the experimental device of a research programme.



The architecture. Two entities share the brand: PackInPro S.r.l. (marketplace and digital ecosystem, inside the firm's group) and the PackInPro Foundation (autonomous, hosting the Committee and holding the certification).

The system in five components

At full operation the device articulates into five connected components:



- **Foundation & Scientific Committee** — defines and revises the standard's criteria, indicators and limits.
- **The standard** — 42 organisational ESG indicators + 12 product indicators, cross-checked.
- **Certification** — by an accredited third-party body under ISO/IEC 17029.
- **Marketplace** — links certified offerings to markets; also a source of sustainability.
- **Data infrastructure** — a real-time data warehouse from machine servitisation.

A public traceability layer ties each certificate to an inspectable code, in line with the EU digital product passport — the channel to the final public.

A processual, longitudinal case study

- **Design:** process-tracing on decision episodes — how third-party standing is attained over time (Pettigrew 1990; Yin 2018).
- **Corpus 2024–2026:** Steering-Committee decks and minutes, Committee meetings, versions of the standard, public materials.
- **Plus** 11 interviews (Dec 2025–Jan 2026) and about one year of participant observation at the promoting firm.
- **Reflexivity:** the authors are part of the case — handled with external coding, negative-case search and triangulation.

Negotiation as a condition of quality

The construction of the Foundation, reconstructed from Committee meetings and documents:

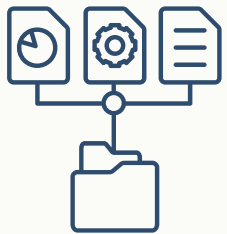
- **Oct 2024** — first Committee meeting: model structure and purposes fixed.
- **Jan 2025** — first list of indicators; alignment with GRI begins.
- **Jul 2025** — Foundation formally established.
- **Oct 2025** — first vendor certified; **Nov 2025** — standard finalised; **Feb 2026** — public launch.



The gap as a measure. Envisaged in May 2024 as “3–4 months”, the Foundation took ~14 months — nearly 4× the forecast, and the slippage recurs at every target. That time is the work of negotiating meaning — what made the standard both well-founded and workable.

Two documentary genres, one co-production

Read in isolation, the industrial-side decks place the Scientific Committee downstream, as final validator of indicators elaborated by the firm's R&D.



The chronology of the Committee's meetings corrects this: the model structure (Oct 2024) and the first indicators (Jan 2025) were defined in the scientific arena, upstream. The R&D unit intervened to verify that indicators were collectable in an SME.

The divergence is a datum, not a flaw. Neither authorship needs to win: each world recorded the process in its own genre. Collaboration proceeded precisely because authorship could stay unresolved — the mark of a boundary object.

Third-party standing as a continuous accomplishment



A continuous process, not a legal status. Independence is sustained by datable devices: the ISO/IEC 17029 split between who sets and who verifies the standard; the brand's transfer from firm to Foundation; departmental agreements binding Committee members; full publication of the methodology.



The smoking-gun test: divergence. It shows when the body takes positions the promoter would not choose — above all, certifying the promoter's competitors. The first certificate went to the promoter itself; credibility is played out in moving from that internal case to external ones.

The standard: boundary object and prosocial device

Internally

- For researchers: a construct translated into valid indicators.
- For the firm: an operational tool and a positioning asset.
- For the certifier: a verifiable procedure — each keeps its reading.

Externally

- Makes the supply-chain choice inspectable and supportable by the final decision-maker.
- Open question: packaging is invisible to consumers — B2C, or really B2B via buyers' pressures?
- Risk asymmetry: the firm risks recoverable capital; the university, non-recoverable credibility.

Fragilities and opportunities



Economic dependence. Sustainability rests on the number of certified firms — market dependence replaces public funding, but pressures the threshold.



Risk asymmetry. Capital is recoverable; scientific credibility is not — the academy risks more, justified only by the interest of the case.



Academic incentives. Seven academics oversee the standard voluntarily; no career metric rewards it, and continuous oversight does not scale.



Opportunity & implication. The regulatory window (PPWR, EmpCo) lets the university supply a public good the market won't. If quality lies in the process, assessment must shift from product to process.



Thank you.

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