

UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The social responsibility actions of the universities are beneficial both for these organizations and for the society as a whole and should be included in their missions and strategies. This article provides information regarding the main characteristics of the university social responsibility as well as the factors and barriers coming from its implementation. The study was conducted as a qualitative research while the data was gathered by using document analysis method in order to highlight the new directions in research on social responsibility of the university. The results of the research showed that universities should perform in the interest of those they serve and ensure the balance between the stakeholders' expectations and needs.

KEYWORDS: *younger generations, equality of opportunity in higher education, sustainable development of the society*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of social responsibility can be approached from several dimensions (Marková, 2008; Păceșilă, 2018), generally referring to awareness and understanding of the social impact of any action (Jones, 2002). The most well-known dimension of this concept is corporate social responsibility which analyzes the role of business within society.

When investigating the more contemporary literature, it can be noticed that the concept of social responsibility is extended to other sectors as well. Moreover, certain authors (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2006; Chile and Black, 2015; Păceșilă and Colesca, 2020) are of the opinion that it is necessary to approach this concept from several perspectives in order to have a better knowledge regarding the impact of the actions carried out by all types of organizations (public institutions, non-governmental organizations, universities, etc.) within society. Therefore, the concept of social responsibility can also be analyzed at the university level.

In the last decades, the higher education institutions have undergone profound transformations (Dima et al., 2013; Hîntea et al., 2022), affecting and being affected by socio-demographic, political and economic phenomena. Since higher education has become a "mature, highly competitive industry", and the sector has diversified over the past few years, the universities had to reinvent themselves in order to meet the new challenges (Burcea and Marinescu, 2011).

Nowadays, the strong universities are highlighted by their ability to follow their vision and to preserve their identity in the context of changes in the global higher education market (internationalization, marketing and deregulation of the universities). Their responsibility is increased because they have to meet the needs of the different stakeholders (students, parents, employees, companies, society) (Vazquez, 2015; Resch, 2017) and engage in solving social and environmental problems (Vallaey, n.d.; Vasilescu et al., 2010; Baraibar Diez and Luna Sotorrio, 2012).

In the contemporary society, the university has a complex role (Marga, n.d.):

- University - trainer for younger generations

The universities should produce good citizens, prepared for their future jobs as regards the knowledge

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and the skills. The universities are not only providers of educational services, but also of identity trainers with fundamental responsibilities to the nation and the world.

The universities should ensure not only multidisciplinary quality training, but also facilitate the transfer of knowledge at all educational and social levels (students, graduates, representatives of the business, political and cultural environment).

- University - actor in the sustainable development of the society.

The fundamental role of the universities is to serve the society where they operate. They should reduce social and economic inequalities, produce competent people in the labor market, optimize the way the society is run, provide rational solutions to the new realities of the environment and the society (Păceșilă and Popescu, 2022).

The universities play an important role in achieving the objectives of the national economy, the most important being the revenue generation. They should prepare individuals able to adapt to the economic conditions (Geryk, 2016), eager to adopt the idea of permanent self-training and change of career path in case of failure.

The universities should correlate the educational offer with the labor market needs, otherwise their role becomes only formal (Korka, 2009). In this case, they should communicate permanently with the employers who represent the demand on the labor market.

As a major social responsibility, the education is also a national security element because a well-trained and educated population represents a greater force of stability and has technologies as well as staff prepared to discourage different types of threats (Popescu, 2011).

- University - center for scientific research and culture sending entity.

The universities are a generator of culture, influencing the artistic perception of many generations. They are not quite known as sources of technological innovation, although many innovations come from their laboratories. In fact, under the pressure of the market competition, the companies are no longer waiting for universities to adapt to the economic environment constraints, but they themselves are looking for technological solutions.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper used document analysis method in order to provide an overview on the new directions in research on social responsibility of the university. Document analysis is an analytical method in qualitative research allowing the evaluation of printed and electronic materials. It involves examining and interpreting the data obtained for a better knowledge and understanding of the field, and more specifically of the topic studied (Rapley, 2007; Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

As for this method, the researcher is required to check the authenticity and usefulness of the materials used and to take into account the purpose of each publication used as well as the context of its elaboration and the target audience (Bowen, 2009). The method involves thorough examination and interpretation of the information identified, requiring elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis involves organizing information into categories according to the research questions. The researcher should demonstrate that he has the ability to separate the relevant information from the irrelevant one (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Thematic analysis involves the careful review of the data in order to identify aspects relevant to the topic studied. The researcher should demonstrate that he is objective in selecting and analyzing information from the available documents (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Bowen, 2009). The documents used for the analysis can be quite varied. The present study used secondary data which have been collected from scientific articles, books, reports, websites and other related reviews.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- To highlight the characteristics of social responsibility in higher education institutions;
- To describe the steps to follow in the implementation of university social responsibility;
- To present the main factors and obstacles in the implementation of university social responsibility.

2. FEATURES OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The idea that the university's mission also includes a social dimension is quite recent. Promotion of knowledge and research, concerns for students' personal and professional development as well as promotion of active and committed citizenship have recently been labeled as a social responsibility of the universities.

There are many reasons explaining why the concept of social responsibility should also be applied to the universities:

- The university is a way of promoting values. The universities should aim to change the values, attitudes and behaviors of the community members (Dima et al., 2013), making them aware of issues such as sustainable development, gender equality, energy saving, equity, social cohesion, non-discrimination, inclusion, equal access, etc.
- The social responsibility is a mandatory mission of the universities. Education is a public good and the universities have a social commitment to society. They should be examples of responsible management, civic participation, democracy and positive social impact, inspiring the students and the other stakeholders (Chen et al., 2015).
- The universities should generate national intelligence (Geryk, 2016). In many countries of the world, they have a nation-building role. By preparing the human resource, they can have a decisive impact on the future of the state, the region or even the continent, in the short, medium and long term (Alaa, 2015).

A socially responsible university should consider the following:

- The social responsibility is an asset of competitiveness that could improve the reputation of the universities.
- The social responsibility is an educational responsibility, a priority area of study for the master programs and the business courses.
- The social responsibility of the university involves linking higher education to the reality of social life. The universities should be concerned about linking theory to practice, be able to ensure an optimal transfer of knowledge (Abdoul et al., 2007), to promote methods combining information from courses and seminars with student experience.
- In general, the social responsibility involves increasing the transparency and the capacity of the universities to provide answers to the society problems. The universities need to improve their dialogue with the community in order to identify training programs' needs, new research standards, etc.
- The social responsibility of the university involves improving the quality, relevance, flexibility and attractiveness of courses through student-centered learning. The universities should develop the skills of the future graduates in order to integrate into the labor market (Minea, 2013). They open the access to professions.

The university social responsibility (USR) also involves:

- Involving the university in the current global debates: global warming, bioethics, etc. This would maintain a permanent dialogue with the society allowing the articulation of the values promoted by the university in society and their defense or re-examination depending on the changing social needs.
- Increasing the accessibility and the social cohesion. The university should ensure the equal access in tertiary education for all socio-economic groups (Shek and Hollister, 2017), especially for those disadvantaged, regardless of their social and/or economic background.
- Diversifying the research opportunities for teachers/graduates, not only for the applied research, but also for the investigative one. The universities need to improve and expand the research networks in various fields as well as to encourage the interdisciplinary debates.
- Increasing the contribution of universities to strengthening the business environment's capacity to cope with economic, technological, marketing and environmental problems as well as risk,

etc. Universities should step up cooperation with the business community, which is a challenge because the two are still far from each other.

- Increasing the involvement of the universities in the cultural sphere of society through extra-curricular events and debates regarding the validation/invalidation of individual values (multiculturalism, racism, etc.).

Despite the institutional autonomy and academic freedom, the universities are not developed independently of society, and cultural missions are part of the university's relationship with the society. A metaphor of the political theory describing the relationship between the university and the society is the one of the social contract between the university and the democratic society emphasizing the democratic role of the university. The university responds to the needs and aspirations of democratic societies, and the social contract is continually reformulated according to the needs of each epoch.

3. PERSPECTIVES AND STEPS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ACTIONS BY UNIVERSITIES

The concept of RSU should be analyzed from two perspectives (Popescu, 2011; Resch, 2017):

a) Internal perspective: profile and curriculum content, teaching methods, student relationship (grant scholarships and financial support for students, timetable, improvement of dialogue), research, etc.

b) External perspective: cooperation with all the stakeholders involved in education; permanent education; correlation of education with the labor market and the insertion of graduates into the job market, protection of the environment, of disadvantaged people, etc.

The social role of universities is a concern of the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Union and other entities. However, the awareness strategies are not developed in all countries and many well-intentioned actors are confronted with uncertainty and lack of support when implementing the changes.

In recent decades, various international bodies have made efforts to clarify the possible definitions, standards, policies and practices that could be integrated into the USR sphere. However, compared to other sectors, the social responsibility in the European university sector is underdeveloped.

Three important steps can be highlighted in implementing the USR actions (Dima, 2015):

- The first step: Knowledge

Universities have an essential role in disseminating the concept of social responsibility, especially by including it in their curricula. In the context of environmental, social and ethical issues (Russo et al., 2022), many stakeholders such as public entities, consumers, employees, NGOs, request the development of CSR practices as well as their dissemination (Kolk and Tulder 2010; Schimperna et al., 2022). Moreover, universities are expected to play an important role in achieving the 17 sustainable development goals established in 2015 as part of the UN 2030 Agenda (Caputo et al. 2021; Venturelli et al. 2021).

- The second step: Awareness and conviction

The social responsibility has an impact on the university's internal management and usually involves creating a specific structure for coordinating and implementing the social responsibility policies, strategies and actions. However, many universities implement the USR activities without an USR policy.

Managers of higher education institutions could significantly contribute to increasing the social responsibility of the organizations they lead. Thus, the highest authority of the university turns into a change-generating agent, a person capable of mediating between opposing interests and having the capacity for strategic planning (Leaming, 1998).

- The third step: Acceptance and involvement

The universities reach this level when their specific organizational structures collaborate with other academic research centers and entities to implement the USR actions. Furthermore, the heads of

universities are convinced that the university's internal management should be socially responsible, and the university community (teachers, students, administrative staff, etc.) is involved in CSR actions.

Moreover, universities have a particularly important role in disseminating the idea of corporate social responsibility. By including this concept in their curricula, universities contribute to the training of future social and economic managers (Geryk, 2016).

4. MAIN FACTORS AND MAIN OBSTACLES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ACTIONS BY UNIVERSITIES

The final report of the EU-USR project, developed as a response to the European Commission's policy priority regarding the necessity for a common social responsibility strategy for all the universities in Europe, identifies the main factors favoring the implementation of a social responsibility strategy in the universities (Dima, 2015):

- *Cooperation and communication channels.*

The universities should develop cooperative relationships, ensure the free flow of information, seeking new ways of communication between its departments and its external environment. This idea is embraced by few universities in the world, but the need for change is widely accepted. Opening and communication depend on the patrimonial facilities and the access to high-technology, as well as the training of staff and the values of the organization in which they operate (Minea, 2013; Păceșilă and Ciocoiu, 2017).

- *Interest and personal involvement.*

The professors and the administrative staff play an important role in implementing the social responsibility practices and policies. According to Geryk (2016), higher education institutions have not integrated into society for a long time, keeping a certain distance from its expectations and needs. However, in today's knowledge-based society, they should turn into responsible entities aware of the effects produced as well as of the need to interact with the community. In light of social transformations and technological breakthroughs, universities should need to demonstrate their adaptability until both profitability is ensured and accountability is guaranteed.

- *Coordination.*

The universities should create specific structures for coordinating and implementing the social responsibility policy policies and strategies.

- *Strategic plans.*

In the contemporary society and in the knowledge-based economy, the university should rethink its role and develop new strategies in order to adapt to the society's requirements (Sanchez-Hernandez and Mainardes, 2016). Nowadays, important challenges regarding the traditional status of the university arise: massification, computerization, internationalization, fierce competition at a global level (Păceșilă, 2016). In this regard, the existence of a true leader within the organization becomes extremely important. Ensuring a stable leadership and implementing the university's strategy should be the key elements of the leader's agenda (Thomas and Fragueiro, 2011).

- *Access to information.*

The success of the university also depends on informing the public about the educational offer. Its advertising and marketing strategy is crucial in disseminating information about educational offer and in correlating it with the student needs.

Moreover, universities make a lot of efforts to increase their market share, paying special attention to the needs related to the process management, to improving teaching and research activity, as well as to the factors influencing student participation in the educational process. Their marketing activities are not different from those of the business sector and other sectors. However, they should put more emphasis on providing accurate and detailed information when recruiting candidates, while harmonizing the marketing message with the actual content and quality of the educational service provided (Geryk, 2016).

- *Starting pilot programs.*

In Europe, the universities had a positive impact on the development of several towns (Cambridge in England and Twente in the Netherlands). The spin-offs from the university generated the bulk of growth mainly based on high technology (Marga, n.d.).

In the context of the university role in local and regional development, an important concept is the "triple helix", based on the double helix model of the DNA structure. This model involves the interaction between industry, public authorities and universities (Noguera et al., 2014) seen as a key factor in the knowledge-based economy.

As regards the main obstacles, in addition to the limitations caused by the lack of economic resources for the implementation of the planned activities, the above-mentioned project report highlights other aspects:

- *Lack of internal monitoring and of evaluation systems.*

The universities should be evaluated not only by the quantitative criteria (how many scientific publications produce) but also by the state of society: the technological level, the well-being of the people, the administrative skill. More and more universities are becoming aware that they are not just the traditional host of the exchange of ideas, but also organizations that have success or have failed in the market competition (Marga, n.d.).

- *Formalism and excessive bureaucracy.*

The bureaucracy and corruption can lead young people to focus on private or foreign education system. Moreover, the bureaucracy with its hierarchical structure, the identification of objectives to be fulfilled, the correct establishment of roles within the organization as well as the rules of conduct and procedures have always been a problem for many entities, not only coming from the university environment, but also from other sectors: public, non-profit, business (Geryk, 2016).

- *Deficient institutional support for students.*

The universities need to change their student-related optics, which are no longer just income sources, but also the "raw material" which should be transformed into a "finished product". This product is offered to the employers who should not be regarded only as mere clients, but as collaborative partners that can come with solutions in the training process (Minea, 2013).

The universities should better explain the contractual conditions (scholarships, timetables, discounts to subscriptions) and improve dialogue with students regarding the quality of courses and seminars. Moreover, the teachers should encourage personal initiatives and creativity in their relationships with students and communicate effectively. In addition, universities should make students become more aware of society's needs, getting involved in solving them as dedicated and socially engaged individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is important for its contribution to strengthening the knowledge base and facilitating understanding of the concept of university social responsibility as well as of its new trends in the literature.

The main conclusion of this paper is that universities should clearly establish the final recipient of the services provided, namely those they really serve: students, parents, potential employers. Moreover, they should be able to ensure a balance between the expectations and needs of students, public authorities, business environment and society as a whole. Another important aspect is that they should know exactly if their way of administration is in accordance with the stakeholders' expectations and if they are willing to provide an answer to the suggestions and recommendations coming from their social environments.

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