

STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the past century, there has been an increasing focus of various organizations, either public or private, on their social responsibility. Therefore, the need for organizations to engage in socially responsible activities has been debated in the literature and constituted a topic of interest for researchers from different fields of study (e.g., business, economics, sociology, philosophy) in recent decades. As social responsibility has increasingly influenced all types of organizations it has become not only a new way of thinking and doing business, but also a strategic tool. This is why other types of organizations, such as universities, embraced the concept of social responsibility. The paper aims to define the concept of university social responsibility and to illustrate students' involvement in its specific activities in the case of a Romanian faculty. To such ends the authors used a quantitative research method and a case study. The paper shows that university social responsibility represents a challenging issue in today's education of students and the implementation of this concept in a higher education institution constitutes a complex process facing both opportunities and constraints. The research could become a starting point to analyze and assess the involvement of the students in university social responsibility activities in Romania and abroad.

KEYWORDS: *Romania, social responsibility, students, university, university social responsibility*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the past century, there has been an increasing focus of various organizations, either public or private, on their social responsibility (SR). Therefore, the need for organizations to engage in socially responsible activities has been debated in the literature and constituted a topic of interest for researchers from different fields of study (e.g., business, economics, sociology, philosophy) in recent decades (Toma, Stanciu & Irimia, 2011, pp. 1352-1360). In the beginning, business organizations gradually became aware of the importance of equilibrating the social, the economic and the environmental issues of their activities. Consequently, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) emerged as a way of understanding and framing the relationship between businesses and society (Schwartz & Cragg, 2009, pp. 113-42). In this respect, several theories (e.g., stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory) were designed in order to analyze and explain CSR (Moir, 2001, pp. 16-22; Garriga & Melé, 2004, pp. 51-71). As SR has increasingly influenced all types of organizations it has become not only a new way of thinking and doing business (Álvarez & Lozano, 2014, pp. 1-12), but also a strategic tool (Emezi, 2014, pp. 43-56; Bhattacharya & Kaurisar, 2016, pp. 88-106). This is why other types of organizations, such as universities, embraced the concept of SR. In fact, SR has been always an intrinsic element of higher education because universities, as higher education institutions, should behave responsibly towards their stakeholders (e.g., students,

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society). Moreover, education in general, and higher education in particular, represent key factors in human development (Chen, Nasongkhla & Donaldson, 2015, pp. 165-172). The social dimension of higher education has been debated within the subsequent meetings following the Common Declaration in Bologna in 1999, declaration which set the pace for the new Higher Education European Community and publicly recognized the paramount importance of higher education in defining and perpetuate the values on which the European society was built. The current universities are acting as economic and socio-humane organizations, and therefore, they have social responsibilities same as the corporations (Toma, 2013, p.14).

The paper aims to define the concept of university social responsibility (USR) and to illustrate students' involvement in its specific activities in the case of a Romanian faculty. To such ends the authors used a quantitative research method and a case study.

The paper was structured as follows. The theoretical framework was presented in the second part of the paper. The third part dealt with the research objectives, hypotheses and methodology. The results were discussed in the fourth part. The paper ended with conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

SR has become a very important issue for universities, although the concept had been mainly promoted by corporations. In this respect, the following reasons should be taken into consideration:

- Universities supply qualified graduates to public organizations, non-governmental organizations and private companies.
- Universities provide students a wide range of academic programs in order to become responsible citizens.
- Most universities join forces with other organizations to promote the concept of sustainable development within their communities.
- Universities carry certain responsibilities towards their stakeholders the same way as corporations.

Table 1: Definitions of USR

No.	Definition
1	“A socially responsible university engages with its communities (stakeholders) through service provision, imparting education, teaching-learning process, research activities, and ethical conduct”. (Esfijani, Hussain & Chang, 2012, p. 5)
2	USR is “the responsibility of the universities for the impact of their decisions and activities on the society and environment, as part of certain transparent and ethical strategies”. (Amorim, Freires, Loja, Rodrigues, Coimbra & Menezes, 2015, p. 4)
3	“USR includes the SR impacts of university institutional policies and practices. It is about not only that SR goals and impacts of academic institutions’ defining missions of teaching, research and service, but also extends to the SR aspirations and achievements of their policies and practices as corporate entities”. (Hollister, 2017, p. 9)
4	“USR could be understood as the responsibility shared by universities in contributing to social betterment through the integration of SR policies into institutional management, teaching, research, services and public activities”. (Shek, Yuen-Tsang & Ng, 2017, p. 13)
5	USR can be perceived as “the philosophy of a university which takes an ethical approach to the development and engagement with the local and global community in order to sustain social, ecological, environmental, technical, and economic development”. (Chen, Nasongkhla & Donaldson, 2018, p. 507)

There is a considerable division of opinion among researchers regarding the concept of USR (Table 1). However, this notion has received significant attention given the numerous challenges universities have to face all over the world in recent years.

The above mentioned opinions reveal the fact that there is no consensus in defining the concept of USR. Even so, they allow us to identify some characteristics of the term as follows:

- USR is derived from the concept of CSR. Some researchers assert that "corporatization of universities has drawn parallels between contemporary universities and business corporations, and extended analysis of corporate social responsibility to universities." (Chile & Black, 2015, p. 234)
- USR refers to various activities and processes such as education, research or internships.
- USR implies a higher engagement of the universities with both their internal and stakeholders (e.g., students, researchers, staff, community).
- USR can contribute to social betterment through a greater alignment between universities and society and/or community.
- USR has a twofold dimension: inside the university (e.g., designing and implementing modern educational methods, providing extracurricular activities, etc.) and outside the university (e.g., monitoring the integration of the graduates into the labor market, assuring the collaboration with stakeholders, etc.).
- USR is highly influenced by the impacts of the universities on their stakeholders such as organizational impacts, educational impacts or cognitive impacts (Vallaes, 2014, pp. 88–96).

SR is viewed as a topic of interest by both corporations and universities mainly because they can contribute to solve many issues of the community within they act. Universities, as key actors in today's society, should create long term relationships with their stakeholders based on the philosophy of USR.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research objectives were to:

- Assess the level of students' involvement in USR activities;
- Establish the main factors determining the students to get involved in USR activities;
- Identify the best communication channels to promote the USR activities;
- Identify the most popular types of USR activities among students.

Based on the research aims, four hypotheses were formulated:

H1. The level of students' involvement in SR activities is directly connected to the degree of knowledge of the concept of USR.

H2. The level of students' involvement in SR activities depends on the diversity of tools used to transfer the know-how of SR.

H3. The level of promoting the SR activities depends on the degree of accessibility and novelty of the communication channels used.

H4. The level of students' involvement in SR activities depends on the type of USR initiatives.

The research was conducted in two stages by using a quantitative research method and a case study. In the first stage, the authors searched for data from several libraries (e.g., the Central Academic Library "Carol I" Bucharest- Romania, the Library of the University of Aveiro- Portugal) and from the LEX EXPERT Program. All the references related to the concepts of CSR and USR were saved, classified and recorded in a data base. The second stage consisted of submitting an online questionnaire to a sample of 111 students (43 male and 68 female aged between 18 and 48) from the Business Administration specialization (undergraduate and master programs), Faculty of Business and Administration, University of Bucharest.

The questionnaire aimed to achieve the above mentioned objectives, comprised 19 items, (open, closed and mixed questions), in order to measure the interest shown by students to the concept of CSR by taking into account their gender (Figure 1), age (Figure 2) and level of employment (Figure 3). The main themes of the questionnaire were related to the level of students' involvement in CSR activities, the instruments used to transfer know-how on CSR, the communication channels used to promote CSR initiatives, and the types of CSR activities in which students participated. It was distributed online in the period 1-15 May 2018.

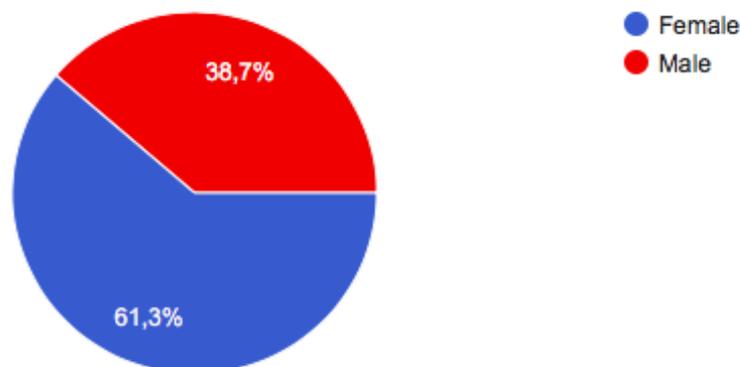


Figure 1: The gender of respondents.

Source: authors

38,7% out of the target sample of 111 students were male and 61,3% female which leads to the conclusion that females are more receptive and demonstrate a higher awareness with regards to the subject and their contribution to the research.

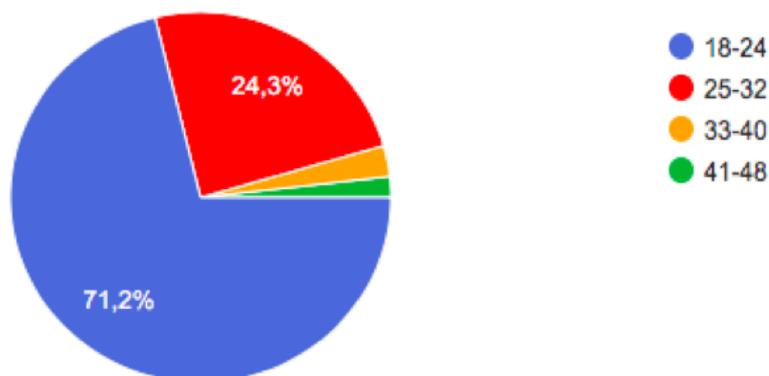


Figure 2: The age of the respondents.

Source: authors

71,2% of the 18-24 age group was highly interested in completing the questionnaire and in the importance of CSR concept, manifesting flexibility and initiative towards everything novel while the 40 and over age group was rather stagnant, with a lower level of receptivity towards this concept and a longer time for acceptance.

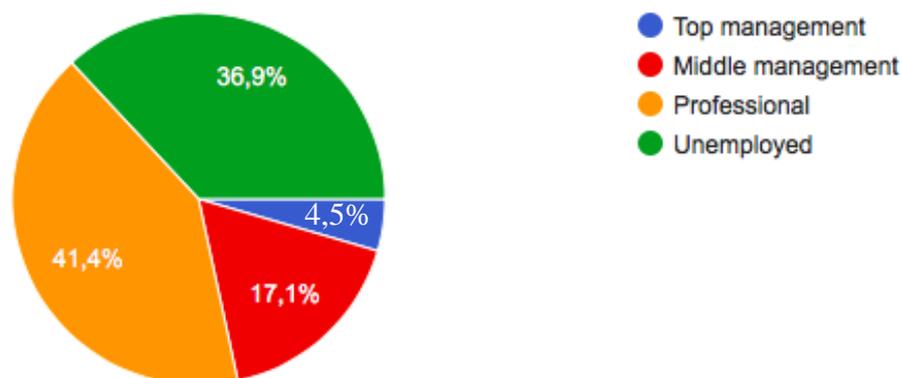


Figure 3: The level of employment of the respondents.

Source: authors

The research shows that workers – 41.4%, and the unemployed people- 36.9% demonstrate a higher awareness of the subject, most of them being career oriented. The other two categories analyzed, middle management – 17.1% and top management – 4.5% are already settled into their positions and are more concerned with their own personal development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected on the level of acknowledgement of USR and on the level of involvement and motivation to be part of university social responsibility initiatives as well as the identification of the best communication channels and solutions to attract and involve as many students as possible, were analyzed and statistically processed by using Rstudio program.

A comparative analysis of the distribution of responses given by the students according to their involvement in SR activities, but familiar with the concept, shows that there are differences indicating a more structured attitude of the students (Table 2). On one hand, there is a well-structured group of 51 students which is familiar with the concept and has participated voluntarily in concrete activities mainly due to better information, clear goals and a better understanding of the importance of USR. On the other hand, 38 of the respondents of the target sample analyzed, although being familiar with the concept and being informed on the subject, are reluctant to participate possibly because the lack of time, trust or other more personal reasons.

Table 2: Students' involvement in SR activities according to the level of awareness of the USR concept

Are you familiar with the concept of USR within the university?	Have you ever been part of any SR activities? (no. students)	
	Yes	No
Yes	51	38
No	6	16

Source: authors

With regards to the respondents who have shown no interest in being informed about SR initiatives but have participated to concrete activities (6 respondents) the analysis shows that the motivation

was peer pressure, curiosity or their need to establish new relationships. The rest of 16 respondents which have not been clearly informed about the SR programs and didn't participate are either ignorant for not being aware of a concept that changed the world we live in, or kept in the dark by the faculty's inability to better promote its SR initiatives.

Some of the most important instruments used to transfer know-how are already known by the students in the 18-24 age group (Table 3). The analysis shows that 79 of the students were more interested in completing the questionnaire and in the importance of the SR concept, showing flexibility and initiative. In what concerns the instruments, 30 students consider that learning by doing and their involvement in USR activities, the workshops or internships have the potential to support them in developing their abilities, their teamwork spirit and new competencies. E-learning is also another preferred tool mainly due to the time saving.

Table 3: Index of diversity of the instruments used to transfer know-how on SR, by age groups

Which of the following do you consider as best tools for competency transfer related to USR?				
Age	All above mentioned	Classic session	E-learning platform	Learning by doing
18-24	26	13	10	30
25-32	14	1	3	9
33-40	1	1	1	0
41-48	1	0	1	0

Source: authors

The respondents in the 40 plus age group were rather stagnant which shows a lower level of awareness and receptiveness to novelty, requiring a longer time for acceptance. Another reason why these instruments are less visible and used is the faculty's inability to balance the content of the SR activities and programs with their advertisement through such instruments. Overall, 42 of the respondents consider that all three instruments provide for an efficient transfer of knowledge.

The analysis shows that the 18-24 age group are aware of most of the communication channels through which USR initiatives could be promoted (Table 4). However, there are differences in how they appreciate each channel. The respondents aged 40 plus show very little interest in knowing all the communication channels.

Table 4: Index of diversity of the communication channels used to promote SR initiatives, by age groups

The most appropriate communication tools to promote USR initiatives						
Age	Social networks	Radio and TV	Media	Workshops and conferences	Board written notifications	Others
18-24	36	6	11	18	6	0
25-32	10	2	7	4	3	1
33-40	1	0	3	1	0	0
41-48	0	0	0	2	0	0

Source: authors

According to the inquiry, 36 students aged 18 to 24 are especially interested in using social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc.), mainly due to their energetic and trustworthy nature and their willingness to express freely in a democratic environment and play by the rules. Another advantage of using this type of channel is the low-cost feature since most of the students own the technology and are active users. In the same time, 24 students of the same age group consider that the workshops and conferences, although more expensive, allow for face-to-face communication, develop practical abilities and guarantee the transfer of know-how by experts aware of the requirements of the labor market. At the low end we find radio, TV and board written communications mainly due to the lack of time and/or attention span necessary to flip through TV channels or search through countless panels with low visibility and no attractive graphics. The students of 25-32 age group also shows a favorable opinion with regards to the same communication instruments.

Overall, the social networks rank no. 1 for 47 of the respondents, workshops and conferences rank no. 2 for 25 of them and both instruments are being considered the most efficient to promote social responsibility initiatives.

According to the research, 23 students participated in social type activities, taking into consideration the low standard of living, the low-cost nature of the activities and the greater number of social cases in need of attention (Table 5).

Table 5: Students' involvement in specific types of USR activities

Type of USR activities	Number of students involved
Social	23
Environmental	6
Cultural	9
Civic	9
Health	9
Others	1

Source: authors

Based on the target sample analyzed, 27 students participated equally in social, civic and health type activities. The environment protection type activities rate last mainly due to the fact that they are more expensive due to the amount of necessary resources. According to the data collected this is due to a low level of information on the activities of the faculty with regards to SR. The main reasons why the students are reluctant to get involved in future

USR activities are the incomplete information, even though the existing programs are consistent, the lack of trust, no knowledge of the rules of the game and a defective communication.

The research paper validated the four initial hypotheses, as follows:

With regards to the first hypothesis, the research shows that the number of students involved in USR activities is increasing when the students are better informed about these initiatives.

- The second hypothesis reflects that the majority of the subjects consider that all three instruments provide for an efficient transfer of knowledge. However, there are differences on how they appreciate each channel.
- The third hypothesis confirms the fact that young generation prefer the new communication channels, meanwhile the others are used to the classic methods. The most efficient channel to promote SR is social network, followed by workshops and conferences.
- The last hypothesis highlights the fact that the social initiative is the most appreciated among the students. The low degree of participation of the subjects in the other types USR initiatives is due to an imbalance between the presentation of the programs and their consistency, as well as a defective

communication.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The social responsibility concern that emerged firstly in the business organizations had become a global phenomenon and took center stage in most activities. Consequently, the concept of CSR appeared and spread in the business world. In the case of universities, the literature provides numerous definitions of the USR concept without agreeing upon just one due to the fact that the opinions expressed by several well known authors from different schools of thought and different intellectual backgrounds are often contradictory.

The paper shows that USR represents a challenging issue in today's education of students and should be integrated within the strategic management of the universities since they have a paramount role in training qualified people and responsible citizens who will become future employees or entrepreneurs. USR is closely connected to the development of education and society as education, research and training are key prerogatives of universities.

Also, the paper illustrates that the implementation of the USR concept in a higher education institution constitutes a complex process facing both opportunities, such as the diversity of the communication channels, and constraints, such as limited financial resources.

This research could become a starting point to analyze and assess the involvement of the students in USR activities in Romania and abroad, in spite of the low size of the sample.

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