

## University Social Responsibility (USR): Identifying an Ethical Foundation within Higher Education Institutions

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### ABSTRACT

Social responsibility is a responsibility not a requirement, of an organization for the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior that contributes to sustainable development, health and the welfare of society; which takes into account the expectations of stakeholders, is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behavior, and is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationship. By promoting sustainable development practices in the management at higher education institutions, universities can demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility practices. It should be embedded as part of the university's philosophy as a way of being, operating, and practicing. Social responsibility should be embedded into the core values and functions of universities' practices at every level. This paper explores the concept of university social responsibility (USR) and presents the SCOPE framework for identifying ethical issues in our modern day complex global world.

### INTRODUCTION

Education has been perceived as a basic and powerful tool that links economic, societal, and environmental concerns together under a sustainable development strategy and serves to move nations, communities, and households towards a more sustainable future. The point of education is to create a feeling of global responsibility. People are the center of education for whatever platform, environment, or society humanity is trying to establish. Education can be seen as a driver, a vehicle, a trigger, a core value, or a key factor in human development. For example, UNSECO believes that education is a key to social, economic, and environment development, and is also a key in the creation of learning societies and achieving a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2007). Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been perceived as a root that connects local setting to a larger international field of knowledge.

University social responsibility (USR), is a philosophy or principle for social movement, which can be perceived as a philosophy of a university to use an ethical approach to develop and engage with the local and global community in order to sustain the social, ecological, environmental, technical, and economic development. USR acts as a key player for social changes, as USR implies having a policy of ethical quality, governing the performance of the university community. This is done via the responsible management of the educational cognitive, labor, and environmental impact from the university, in an interactive dialogue with society and its communities, in order to promote sustainable human development through education (transforming knowledge), provision of service, research, teaching, and scholarship. All of these underline an ethical collaboration not only with the university community but also with business community in terms of stakeholder involvement (Esfijani & Chang, 2012a, 2012b; Esfijani, Hussain, & Chang, 2012; Reiser, 2007; Vallaeys, 2013).

### USR DEFINITION AND SCOPE

The term of university social responsibility (USR) can be defined as:

A policy of ethical quality in the activities of the university community (students, lectures, administrative staff), through responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts of the university, in a participative dialogue with society to promote sustainable human development in four steps: (1) commitment, (2) self-diagnosis, (3) compliance, and (4) accountability. (Vallaeys, 2013, p. 1)

USR can also be described as “university engagement and that university partnership with its communities is achieved through education (transferring knowledge), provision of services, research, teaching, and scholarship”

(Esfijani et al., 2012, p. 3). USR can be perceived as a philosophy of a university as an ethical approach to develop and engage with the local and global community in order to sustain the social, ecological, environmental, technical, and economic development.

Social responsibility is a responsibility not a requirement, of an organization for the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior that contributes to sustainable development, health and the welfare of society; which takes into account the expectations of stakeholders, is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behavior, and is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationship. This includes products, services, and processes (DRAFT ISO 26000 WD4.2.; Duckworth & Rosemond, 2010, p. 2). ISO 26000 (n.d., p. 1) addresses seven core subjects of social responsibility (SR) promoting sustainability in:

- (1) Organizational governance;
- (2) Human rights;
- (3) Labor practices;
- (4) The environment;
- (5) Fair operating practices;
- (6) Consumer issues; and
- (7) Community involvement and development,

and seven key principles in: (1) accountability; (2) transparency; (3) ethical behavior; (4) respect for stakeholder interests; (5) respect for the rule of law; (6) respect for international norms of behavior; and (7) respect for human rights.

Accordingly, the concept of ethics and SR need to be introduced everywhere in the teaching and learning process as the *Think Globally, Act Locally* approach. By promoting sustainable development practices in the management at higher education institutions, universities can demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility practices. It should be embedded as part of the university's philosophy as a way of being, operating, and practicing. SR should be embedded into the core value and functions of universities' practices at every level.

Vallaey (2013, p. 1) has indicated the importance of SR and has identified the key features of SR that a university should be aware, as follows:

1. Social responsibility is a responsibility of institutions' action and behavior for the impact they have influenced and caused to society.
2. Social responsibility requires a management practice that seeks to make society sustainable by eliminating unsustainable negative impacts and promoting sustainable forms of development.
3. Social responsibility is not beyond or outside the law; it works in coordination with legal obligations.
4. Social responsibility requires coordination between the stakeholders who are about to act on the negative impacts diagnosed.

USR, underlines an ethical collaboration not only with the university community, but also with ecology as a significant component of stakeholder involvement (Esfijani & Chang, 2012a, 2012b; Esfijani et al., 2012). The university needs to adopt a social responsibility strategy just like other business organizations as social responsibility usually refers to the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), in order to meet the expectations of the stakeholders (students, employers of graduates, funding agencies, and society) as well as internal stakeholders such as (administrators, faculty, and staff) in higher education institutions.

USR covers social, environmental, and economic issues that should not be separated from a university's strategic planning and operation, which is an important aspect of how universities interact with their internal and external stakeholders, and the society. The concept of USR was also a focal point at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia-Europe Education Workshop Austria with an emphasis on the theme of Knowledge Societies: Universities and their Social Responsibilities. During the discussion of the workshop, there was a clear consensus that a social dimension should integrate both policy and strategic planning in higher education institutions. In addition, the dimension of networking, accountability, and ethics should also be integrated as guiding principles for the role of universities in society.

There is a history of interest in USR and its relevance to the concept of MOOCs in Thailand (Nasongklha, 2013; Nasongklha, etc., 2014). This ongoing interest relates to aligning USR in Thailand directly with social change via MOOCs. This approach is intended to bring a level of social awareness to Higher Education Institutions within the country. Chulalongkorn University, recognized as the top research institute in the country, is paving a direction of sustainable development. The knowledge base of information has been accumulated for almost a

hundred years and more than a thousand items of content are being offered for publication in the form of open educational resources (OER) (Nasongkla & Chen, 2013).

### USR STUDIES

The concept of USR has been researched in previous studies from different perspectives. Ahmad (2012) conducted a study on students' awareness and behavior in terms of contributing to social responsibility practices in the context of Malaysian universities. The results showed that most respondents were aware of the need to preserve the environment but lacked exposure to actual activities. This study adapted the concept of CSR and was intended to make significant contributions to the development of CSR practices at the university level. Another study by Dima, Vasilache, Ghinea, and Agoston (2013) proposed a model of social responsibility with a focus on six main dimensions including: (1) alumni-oriented projects; (2) inter-university cooperation; (3) university – high schools / other institutions cooperation; (4) community-oriented university – business environment cooperation; (5) community – oriented international cooperation; and (6) socio-cultural and ecological projects examined at Romanian universities. The results showed that alumni-oriented projects, international cooperation, and socio-cultural and ecological projects had a major significant influence on the academic social responsibility practices. Moreover, Karimi (2013) conducted a study to examine the correlation between university public relations and external factors including: (1) financial resources, (2) environment, (3) management challenges, (4) perceptual and attitude challenges, (5) technological change, and (6) individual experiences as an independent variables and social responsibility as the dependent variable in order to identify the role of Islamic Azad University (IAU) and its responsibility. The results of this study showed that there was a strong significance shown by IAU public relations in its social responsibility practices.

Furthermore, Nejati, Shafaei, Salamzadeh, and Daraei (2011) stated that the top ten world leading universities have all taken social responsibility seriously in line with common CSR practices on their websites including the following areas: (1) organizational governance (accountability, transparency, providing facts and figures); (2) human rights (diversity); (3) labor practices (employment benefit and compensation, leaning and development, providing healthy work and life balance); (4) the environment (preserving the environment and offering specific academic program); (5) fair operating practices (responsible involvement with the public and promoting social responsibility); (6) student issues (providing sufficient information for current and prospective students); and (7) community involvement and development (providing grants for community projects, and providing funding and support to generate and preserve affordable housing). The findings of this study provided sufficient information on the common core areas of CSR practices from the top 10 universities.

Another research study conducted by Tetreva and Sabolova (2010) found that the following levels of university social responsibility practices should be considered as the key components of the USR practices: (1) Economic Level, (2) Ethical Level, (3) Sub-social Level, (4) Philanthropic Level, and (5) Environmental Level. The results of this study concluded that: (1) ICTs are not being used effectively to enable the interaction necessary to inform stakeholders in terms of the elements of accountability, (2) environmental information is not easy to find on university websites nor in the annual SR reports, (3) there is little awareness of the importance of SR among participants and stakeholders, and (4) university SR initiatives focus more on the legitimacy and public image rather than on the needs, expectations, and demands of the society in which they operate. The key question remains as to whether analysis of the online disclosure of SR information by universities offers useful units of analysis for the study of predictors of activism overall, and the diffusion of adoption of certain tactics or discourses, that could help to improve managerial commitment of USR.

### USR FRAMEWORK

The practice of university social responsibility has also caught the attention of the Asian regions. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) University Network (AUN, 2012) proposed an AUN University Social Responsibility and Sustainability conceptual framework with the following major components: (1) teaching and learning, research and academic services, (2) university's governance and administration, (3) community involvement, and (4) campus life in order to promote USR practice and address the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing in ASEAN Community. Moreover, USR was founded in 2008 in Thailand to address from a level of true sincerity and friendship in order to fulfill the following, (1) bridging communities, (2) goodwill commitment, and (3) sharing beyond border (Pookyaporn, 2011). Pookyaporn explained the common problems in the Thai context for USR practice includes: the environment, sufficient living conditions, mutual respect, integrity, gratitude, and true companionship. In alignment with the current bottom line for sustainable development, current research (Chen, 2015) has extended the framework to more dimensions based on the synthesis components of existing literature review. Chen's study has synthesized the components of USR as illustrated on Table 1. The USR components include social, sub-social, cognitive, organizational,

philanthropic, economic, ethic, environmental, and educational (SCOPE). Figure 1 is included to demonstrate the impact of SCOPE in each of the identified areas.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SCOPE framework (Chen, 2015) was developed as a result of a review of existing literature and research studies in the area of USR. Chen's research study found that although respondents indicated addressing the issues of university social responsibility, most of the actual practice and strategy plans are focused on achieving academic service. Thus, further investigation on the components of USR, practices, and how exactly to create such a USR impact should be examined in the future.

USR needs to be a component of each institution's strategic planning process. Strategic planning is a complex and time-intensive process. It is a process that should allow access for stakeholders from all level of the higher education system. The potential of strategic planning will not be realized until there is a strong and realistic strategic plan for the future. Such a plan must focus quite strongly on the details of how reform can and will be implemented, along with realizing the USR impact for not only the university, but also for the community and global society.

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**Table 1 Synthesis of USR Components**

<b>Components</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>
<b>Social</b>		Vallaey's (2013); Esfijani et al. (2012); Dima et al. (2013); Pookyaporn (2011)
	Human right	ISO 26000 ; Nejati et al. (2011) ; Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Sustainable human development	AUN (2012)
<b>Sub-Social</b>		Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Employment policy	Nejati et al. (2011) ; Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Faculty & Staff training	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Work-life balance	Nejati et al. (2011) ;Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Equality opportunities in the workplace	Vallaey's (2013) ;Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Cognitive</b>		Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010) Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Ethnicity	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Gender	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	Poverty	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010) ;Pookyaporn (2011)
	Disability	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Organizational</b>		Vallaey's (2013) ;Dima et al. (2013) ;Karimi (2013)
	Management ethics	Karimi (2013)
	Work culture	Karimi (2013)
	Aforementioned aspects	Karimi (2013)
<b>Philanthropic</b>		Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	University Volunteering	Esfijani et al. (2012) ;Nejati et al. (2011) ;Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
	University charity	Tetrevo'va and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Components</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>

<b>Economic</b>		Esfijani et al. (2012) ; Karimi (2013) ; Nejati et al. (2011)
Transparency		ISO 26000 ; Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Corporate governance principles		ISO 26000 ; Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010) ;AUN (2012)
Quality and safety of the provide products & services		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Ethic</b>		ISO 26000
Code of ethics		ISO 26000 ; Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Intellectual property protection		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Copyright protection		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Environmental</b>		Vallaeyes (2013) ;Esfijani et al. (2012) ;J. Ahmad (2012);Karimi (2013) ;Nejati et al. (2011) ;Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010); Pookyaporn (2011)
Environmental organizational structure (cycling, energy saving, etc)		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Natural sources protection		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Investments into environmental technologies		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Environmental products & services		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
<b>Educational</b>		Vallaeyes (2013);Esfijani et al. (2012);Dima et al. (2013);AUN (2012)
Arises student		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010)
Stakeholder awareness in values & in an understanding of the society that they are part of		Tetrevoova and Sabolova (2010);AUN (2012)

**Figure 1 USR SCOPE (Social, Sub-Social, Cognitive, Organizational, Philanthropic, Economic, Ethic, Environmental, Educational) Impacts**

