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University Social Responsibility Strategies

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As the social responsibility notion developed, it caught the interest of not only businesses but also other organizations, including universities. Drawing from various experiences, they began to create their own strategies in this respect. The objective of the article is to explore the relatively new phenomenon of universities creating formalized social responsibility strategies. Although far from being a mass-scale phenomenon (only a small percentage of universities have developed such strategies so far), it already has a global range (the strategies are created by universities on various continents). The research problem addressed in this article involves diagnosing whether the phenomenon of creating university social responsibility strategies is becoming more commonplace, as well as identifying the emerging variants of such strategies and how they are related to the general development strategies of universities.¹

The concept of activities going beyond the personal, egoistic interest of an individual or the group to which the individual belongs and of considering the interest of the whole community in which the individual or group functions in such activities has accompanied the humanity since the dawn of time. The roots of such conduct may be sought in biological determinants analyzed from the perspective of evolutionary psychology or in axiology, and the rules that lay the foundations for the oldest religious systems, or perhaps in the economic benefits described both in the literature in this field and in the literature devoted to management science. Management is an area that has been the most committed to taking a wider social interest into consideration, in the context of not only the actions of single individuals or their informal groups but also of entire organizations. This commitment can be found in the development of such concepts as: corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate social responsiveness, corporate social performance, corporate citizenship or sustainable development.

The notion of corporate social responsibility is considered to have originated as an object of scientific

deliberations in 1953, when the book *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* by Howard Bowen came out. For over half a century, businesses were the main – if not the only – area of interest for CSR researchers. In time, however, the interest started to extend to other entities, including universities. As their strategies failed to account for social responsibility activities, they were not treated as subjects worth studying for quite some time. That element was missing in university strategies largely because of the implicit assumption that such organizations are socially responsible *per se*. However, this approach has been changing over the past few years.

The objective of the article is to explore the institutionalization of university social responsibility and to identify the strategies that are being adopted in this respect. Social responsibility is understood in the spirit of the Erfurt Declaration – as a commitment to play a central part in *the identification of social and economic needs and in helping to meet these needs* (The Erfurt Declaration on University Autonomy, 1996, p. V). One might adopt a thesis that due to the growing interest in this issue on the part of universities from various countries, more and more universities introduce social responsibility strategies, which in turn results in their diversity.

The article consists of three parts. The first part presents various research trends in studies related to organizational social responsibility. Such trends emerged based on corporate social responsibility research, as it was the discussion about the scope of such responsibility that triggered the development of the concept as a whole. The presentation of such trends makes it possible to illustrate how the deliberations on university social responsibility fit into that research. After the overview of the wider background, the subsequent part introduces the results of the author's studies on the proliferation dynamics of the active approach to the implementation and communication of various social responsibility activities among uni-

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versities. The geographic distribution of universities involved in such activities is also presented. The final part of the article includes the results of in-depth studies that depict how the scope of social responsibility strategies differs from university to university and how these strategies are related to the general development strategies of particular entities.

Development of the concept of organizational social responsibility

Initiated in the 1950s, the organizational social responsibility research focusing on entities from the business area has always been, and continues to be, diverse. The range of the issues covered has evolved, which resulted in various research trends (Maignan, Ferrell, 2004, p. 4). The initial discussion centered on the attempts to establish the boundaries of the area of social responsibility. The supporters of restricting this responsibility to the performance of mainly economic obligations (Levitt, 1958, pp. 41–50; Friedman, 1962; Friedman, 1970, pp. 32–33) clashed with those who advocated extending the concept beyond that sphere (Frederick, 1960, pp. 54–61; McGuire, 1963; Davis, 1973). Despite numerous proposals (Carroll, 1979, pp. 497–505; Carroll, 1991, pp. 39–48; Elkington, 1997), it seems that such limits cannot be set in a way that is fixed and universal. Their nature is rather temporary and specific – they are dependent on the evolving social attitudes determined by cultural reassessments and are connected with the dominant expectations towards a particular organization that prevail in societies at specific stages of their development. This is also applicable to universities, as the expectations towards them started to go beyond education and research (Etzkowitz, 2008; Puukka, 2008).

The new impulse in social responsibility research took form in the 1990s in connection with the growing popularity of the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Although the view that such responsibility means balancing the interests of various groups can already be found in the 1970s literature (Johnson, 1971), it was not until the stakeholder category had been introduced and became commonplace that a research trend focusing primarily on establishing the recipients of social responsibility activities developed. The crucial question that was asked was no longer ‘what are organizations responsible for?’ but ‘to whom are they responsible?’ – to the whole society or just to their stakeholders? The supporters of the latter option argued that responsibility to society as a whole is too broad and as such becomes an abstract notion (Clarkson, 1995, p. 92). Referring to stakeholder categories, identifying them, responding to their expectations and striving to balance the interests of various groups are yet another important aspect in the analysis of university social responsibility (Leja, 2008; Tetreva, Sabolova, 2010, pp. 224–233; Geryk, 2010).

The trends presented thus far have focused on social responsibility primarily in the context of the relationship between an organization and the environ-

ment. And this responsibility can also be approached in relation to other aspects and intra-organizational areas of activity. For example, there is a trend of exploring the ethics-based endogenous factors that encourage organizations to engage in socially responsible conduct. It is assumed that socially responsible conduct of an organization is the outcome of its members appropriate and moral choices dictated by the organization’s standards in this respect rather than an effect of their commitment to perform the obligations towards the whole society or single stakeholder groups. The organizational culture, including the system of values it is based on, is believed to play a crucial role in the development of ethical standards (Jones, 1995, pp. 404–437). As far as universities are concerned, the issue of ethics is usually analyzed in two contexts. First – as the application of moral values in the relations between universities and their stakeholders (both internal and external) or in a broader sense – as the professional ethics of academic teachers and scholars that arise from the ethos of those professions. Secondly – as a university subject and a field of study (Davis, 1999, pp. 43–195).

The intra-organizational perspective is present not only in the ethics trend but also in the management trend, which is a trend primarily preoccupied with finding the model for combining social responsibility with the general strategy of the organization (Gazzola, Colombo, 2014, pp. 331–338) and with finding a method of implementing social responsibility principles that would define how the organization may or should put those principles in practice. In the case of the latter, there are various standards supporting the implementation of social responsibility in organizations, such as: ISO26000, AA1000 standards, the SA8000 standard or GRI guidelines for sustainability reporting. There are also international and national initiatives that promote following those principles. Those are usually: The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (www.oecd.org), the Caux Round Table Principles for Business (www.cauxroundtable.org), or the UN Global Compact (www.unglobalcompact.org). The following apply to universities: The Erfurt Declaration on University Autonomy, 1996, the Talloires Declaration (ulsf.org) and the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) developed within the UN Global Compact (www.unprme.org).

In recent years, the integrative trend has been gaining significance in organizational social responsibility research and discussions. Its representatives are strongly convinced that the existence of social or environmental problems should be approached through the market opportunities that emerge in connection with solving such problems (Drucker, 1984, pp. 53–63; Prahalad, 2004; Porter, Kramer, 2006, pp. 78–92; Porter, Kramer, 2011, pp. 62–77). Engaging in pro-social activities is in this context a way of seeking new opportunities, so far undiscovered. Such view is characteristic of some entities operating in the business area and has not been popular with universities so far, despite the fact that a vast

majority of universities are non-public entities that strive to generate profit through their presence on the education market. However, the university social responsibility literature already has first publications that can be considered as representing this research trend (Karwowska, Leja, 2018, pp. 1–11).

The presented heterogeneity of the organizational social responsibility research areas is a proof of the maturity of the concept. That maturity is also confirmed by the growing circle of entities interested in that concept, declaring themselves ready and willing to engage in activities that would signal their high social responsibility level. Initially, social responsibility was a concept that concerned only business entities, but in time it became employed by other organizations too, including universities.

Growing interest of universities in creating and communicating a social responsibility strategy

The universities' growing interest in including social responsibility activities in their development strategies, or even in creating separate strategies in that area, is determined by various factors. They include:

- the growing popularity of social responsibility and its active promotion within international initiatives and organizations, such as the UN Global Compact or the European Union;
- the growing competition on the education market, forcing universities to seek new ways to gain a competitive edge by turning to uncharted territories to reinforce their reputation;
- the expanding and thickening network of university stakeholders, whose assessment and the related support (or lack thereof) becomes crucial for the conditions in which those entities function (the growing expectations of accrediting institutions in terms of organizational social responsibility are a part of that phenomenon);
- the growing gap between the education models and the market need for new skills, including

skills related to the development of organizational social responsibility policies;

- the growth of universities and their campuses in terms of size – resulting in considerable consumption of resources, such as energy and water, by those entities and thus their growing environmental impact (and growing awareness of the university in this respect).

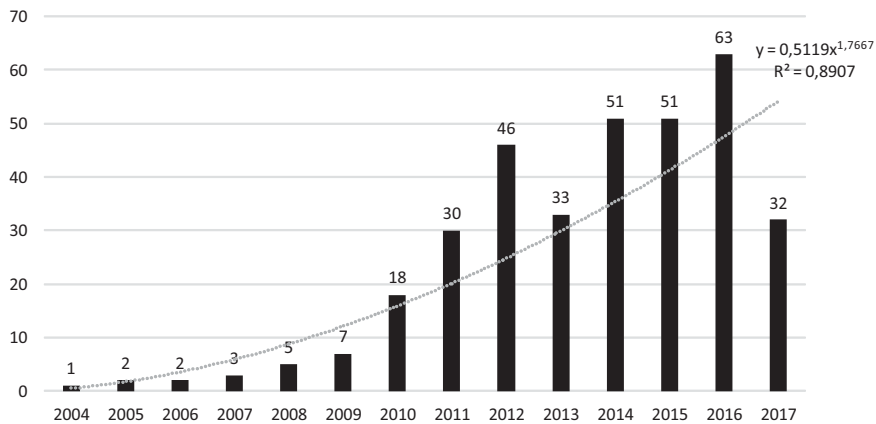
Universities are becoming increasingly interested in the impact that the development of their own social responsibility strategies has on the way they are perceived, as evidenced by their increasing activity in communicating social responsibility strategies, measures and performance. In such communications, universities build on the experience of businesses, using similar tools, such as non-financial reports and university websites with separate tabs dedicated to the activities that signal the university's social responsibility. To capture the growth dynamic of universities' interest in social responsibility, a study was conducted to analyze a GRI database (www.globalreporting.org) subset with social responsibility and sustainable development reports² filed by universities, using appropriate temporal and territorial filters. The assumption was that the fact that such a report has been prepared, published and uploaded to the database is a good measure of a university's social responsibility activity. The approach differs from the case study method often applied in university social responsibility research (Hill, 2004, pp. 89–100; Vasilescu et al., 2010, pp. 4177–4182; Metha, 2011, pp. 300–304; Karwowska, Leja, 2017, pp. 4–13) as it permits observing the changes from a quantitative perspective. The results confirmed the increasing interest of universities in developing, implementing and communicating a social strategy and in the proliferation of the information about the results of such strategies. This is illustrated by the data in Figure 1.

The first university report was recorded in the GRI database in 2004 – it was a report by Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. Up until 2007, all database reports of educational institutions were prepared by European universities. The first report of an American university (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth)

² While explaining the relationship between social responsibility and sustainable development, we must note that these concepts initially developed concurrently. However, it quickly became obvious that social and economic problems are correlated with environmental problems so the trends merged, leading to the interchangeability of the terms. In 2010, the ISO26000 standard ultimately stated that social responsibility focused on an organization and pertained to its responsibility to the society and the environment, and the primary objective of the concept was to maximize corporate contribution to sustainable development to provide stable and lasting conditions for the existence of the global society (Polish Committee for Standardization (PKN) 2012, p.21). Since the sustainable development paradigm applies to the macro scale, sustainable development strategies may (and should) be developed by transnational corporations due to their genuine global impact. However, the distinction between sustainable development and social responsibility was not entirely acknowledged by businesses, who were even more confused by the related concepts that emerged in this area (e.g. TBL, CSV or CCI). Ultimately, it were the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2010) that popularized proper understanding of sustainable development. In practice, it is still common belief that all those concepts mean that corporations must be responsible for more than just the economic dimension of their activity. Due to the nature of the studies, which were largely based on reports published by universities, this article treats university social responsibility and sustainable development as one and the same concept, and the terms are used interchangeably. This is because such approach was adopted in the available source materials (non-financial reports and other documents presented on university websites).

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Figure 1. The number of universities filing a social responsibility report in the GRI database (2004–2017)



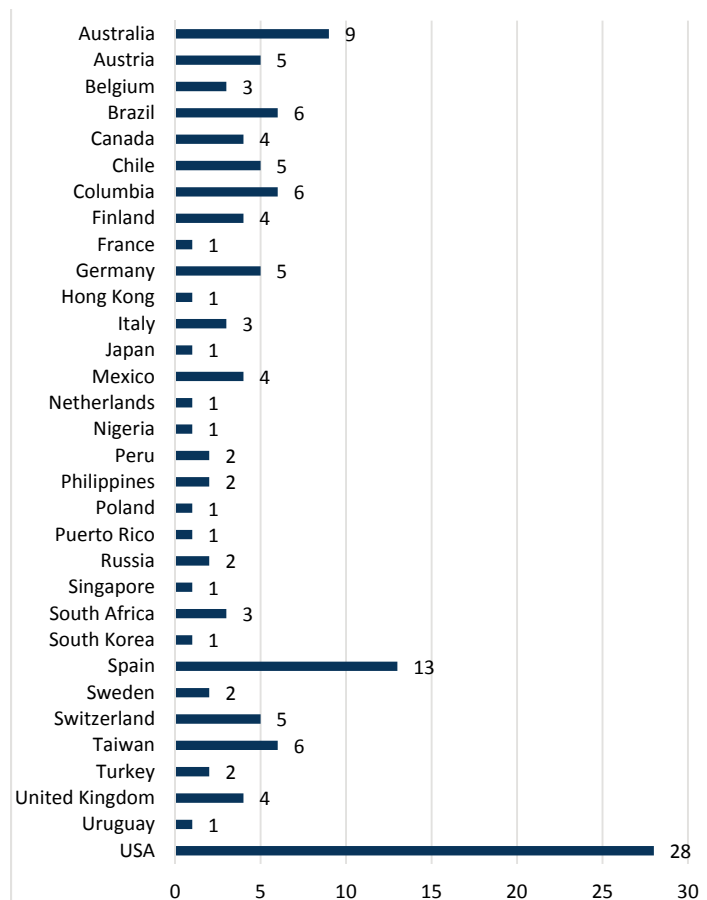
Source: authors' own work based on <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx> (access date: April 20, 2018).

and an Australian university (University of Southern Queensland) was filed in 2008. In the next year, 2009, a report published by a university from Latin America (Universidad de Santiago de Chile) was recorded, while reports of two African universities (University of South Africa and University of the Witwatersrand) were submitted in 2010. The last continent to have been represented in the database was Asia, with a report filed by Taiwa Gakuen Education Inc. Kyoto in 2011. While analyzing the entire 2004–2017 period, one may clearly notice that the number of universities communicating their social responsibility strategies, measures and performance was growing. Only in two years (2013 and 2017), the number of reports filed was lower than in the preceding year.

An analysis of the geographic distribution of the universities publishing their social responsibility/sustainable development reports and filing them in the GRI database reveals considerable diversity of the countries of origin. Most universities come from Europe (Spain being the leader) and North America (the United States leading the way). The reporting is also quite popular in Latin America (Brazil being the leader). In Asia, where Taiwan leads the way, and Africa (with the RSA as the leader), such reporting is not very common. Detailed data are presented in Figure 2.

The GRI database contains social responsibility reports of a total of 133 universities from 32 countries. The only Polish university unit that filed its report was the Department of Computer Science and Communications of the University of Economics in Katowice.

Figure 2. Countries of origin of universities that publish social responsibility reports and record them in the GRI database



Source: authors' own work based on <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx> (access date: April 20, 2018).

We may want to ask ourselves why it is American universities that lead the way in social reporting, and in Europe – Spanish universities. When it comes to the USA, this might be unsurprising as the country is

the fastest in adopting new trends or ideas. Besides, the USA is the place where corporate social responsibility originated and where transparency is considered to be a matter of great importance. In turn, the social reporting initiatives of universities from Spain and Latin America may be culturally motivated. Organizations in countries where relationship building is considered more important – pro-partnership and polychronic cultures (Gesteland, 2000, pp. 18,58) – may be more prone to recognizing social responsibility as a constitutive element of their functioning. This issue may be addressed at a further stage of researching the university's social responsibility. Moreover, another aspect should be noted. Some universities introduce social responsibility principles to their strategies (in various forms) but do not publish reports. This may be the outcome of a still prevalent belief, as has been already mentioned, that universities are socially responsible by nature. In this context, we may ask: what guides the universities that decide to institutionalize the reporting process? This is yet another research area worth exploring.

Social responsibility strategy versus the university development strategy

Universities that create university social responsibility strategies (USRS) and communicate them both within and outside the organization are completely free to define the scope of such strategies in relation to their general development strategies. To examine how various universities set the frameworks of their social responsibility strategies and how they position both strategy types against each other, we analyzed the content of the reports available in the GRI database and of the websites of the universities that publish those reports. This involved primarily reports created in English in accordance with the latest GRI guidelines (version G4). The analysis additionally covered selected reports developed based on the previous versions of the GRI guidelines as well as reports created without any reference to those guidelines. Furthermore, an overview of the reports and websites of the top ten universities from the World University Ranking 2018 by *Times Higher Education*³ was conducted. Social responsibility and sustainable development reports, as well as websites of universities, are quite common sources of information about the social involvement of those entities (Nejati et al., 2011, pp. 440–447; Dagiljene, Mykolaitiene, 2015, pp. 586–592). They are accepted and their use is encouraged also by authors who use other sources (Karwowska, Leja, 2018, pp. 9–10). Our analyses show that entities from Europe and North America (mostly the United States), that is regions where such reporting is the most common, generally differ in their approach to university social responsibility strategy. European universities have a broad understanding of this strategy and use it to

address various aspects of their social responsibility, while American universities focus mostly (and in many cases – only) on issues related to the natural environment and on limiting the negative environmental impact of the campus.

In addition to that general trend, we identified seven more specific models reflecting the differences between the universities in terms of their approaches to their social responsibility strategies and in terms of the relationship between such strategies and the development strategies. Those are:

- Model 1 – the university social responsibility strategy is a component of its general development strategy; sustainable development elements are incorporated in the latter but they do not form a separate segment thereof; such an approach was adopted for example at Deakin University (2016) or ETH Zürich (2017); the latter identified four areas (research, education, campus and dialogue) for the development of social responsibility initiatives within the general strategy of the university;
- Model 2 – the social responsibility strategy is included in the general development strategy of the university but forms a distinct part thereof; the solution is applied, e.g. by the ESADE Business School (2016) or The University of Melbourne (2016); at the former, the social responsibility policy covers the following areas: teaching, research, social debate, ESADE community, institutional policies, environmental responsibility, institutional social activities, transparency and accountability, and at the latter the sustainable development policy includes only three areas: organizational, financial and environmental & social;
- Model 3 – social responsibility strategy as a standalone document of the same importance as the general development strategy of the university; the solution is applied, e.g. at the Ghent University (2016) or the Nanyang Technological University (2016); the social responsibility strategy of the former consists of the following elements: including organizational units and their members in the implementation and promotion of sustainable development, integrating sustainable development with research and services, and implementing it in university management; the social responsibility strategy of the latter lists the following areas: the campus (mostly in the context of its impact on the natural environment), sustainable education and research, and social involvement;
- Model 4 – social responsibility strategy as a standalone document but subordinate and auxiliary to the general development strategy of the university; such an approach was adopted, e.g. at the University of Plymouth (2016), where

³ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com>

financial sustainability was the goal and it was to be achieved through sustainable development of teaching and scientific research and sustainable operating activities of the university;

- Model 5 – social responsibility strategy as a standalone document but superior to the general strategy from which it stems; such a solution is applied, e.g. at the Aalto University (2017), which, just as the University of Plymouth, focused on sustainable development of teaching, research and the operating activities of the university;
- Model 6 – social responsibility strategy as a standalone document but limited to one sustainable development aspect only, i.e. the impact of the university (its campus) on the natural environment; such an approach was adopted for instance by Caltech (2017);
- Model 7 – a social responsibility strategy applied to one of the university units (department) rather than to the whole university; such a solution was adopted by the Department of Computer Science and Communications of the University of Economics in Katowice (2014); the areas included in the social responsibility strategy for that unit were: high usefulness of the research conducted within the collaborative network, high quality of teaching developed based on inter-sectoral cooperation, good organization of an institution supporting its staff and a recognized brand built based on the commitment of the department community.

An issue that is worth exploring in the context of the above seven models are the factors that contribute to the decision to develop and implement a social responsibility strategy at a university and the factors that determine the nature of the relationship between the social responsibility strategy and the general development strategy. The place of the social responsibility strategy in the development strategy and the scope of the USRS may be connected with identifying the main problem from the social responsibility area and adopting it as the most significant one from the perspective of the university's impact on its surroundings. This may be also tied to how the authorities of the university see its role in the business environment and to the relationship between issues which are important for business and those which are important for the university. If a university considers itself an equal partner for business, then any issues crucial for the whole economy are also of interest to the university. For instance, if the areas crucial for the economy are issues connected with environmental pollution, then the university will also include them in its strategy as important. However, if the university sees itself as an entity shaping opinions in the business area, thus positioning itself in the hierarchy as an entity defining the directions of activity for business, then its perception of social responsibility may considerably differ from that of business entities, and its scope of activity will differ accordingly. The above issues may be researched

further. The authors believe that they are important in the context of the changing education model and the transformation of the management model.

The presented models illustrate the differences between universities which develop their own social responsibility strategies, both in terms of the relationship between that strategy and the general development strategy of the university and in terms of the scope of the issues addressed in the social responsibility strategy. Despite such differences, we may identify certain areas that are characteristic of such strategies and form a kind of canon. Those areas include: teaching – understood in the narrowest sense as including sustainable development issues in the syllabus; research – understood as broadening the knowledge about sustainable development; and operating activities of the university taking into account sustainable development – understood primarily as limiting the negative impact of the organization on the natural environment and reducing the use of its resources. Nonetheless, the literature may present a slightly broader perspective on the scope of university social responsibility – one that goes beyond the areas of teaching, research and operating activity (Esfijani et al., 2013, pp. 271–281; Teneta-Skwiercz, 2017, pp. 613–617).

If we use the presented models as the starting point and synthesize them, we may identify four general approaches adopted by the universities under analysis:

- the first one assumes that the social responsibility strategy is separate from the general development strategy of the university (Model 3, 4 and 5);
- the second one assumes that the social responsibility strategy is incorporated in the general development strategy of the university (Model 1 and 2);
- the third one assumes that the social responsibility strategy is a standalone document, but it is limited to environmental issues only (Model 6);
- the fourth assumes developing a social responsibility strategy for single university units, e.g., departments (Model 7).

Assessment of each of the above models reveals their main strengths and weaknesses. We only assessed the initial three approaches as we believe that a CSR strategy applies by nature to the entire organization. The first approach differs in terms of the relations between the social responsibility strategy and the general development strategy of the entity, with those two types of strategy remaining separate from each other. An indisputable strength of such an approach is that it makes it easier to implement the social responsibility strategy and assign responsibility for the coordination of the activities thereunder to a specific unit in the university structure. It is also easier to monitor goal attainment since this takes place based on measures developed specifically for the USRS. However, it must be noted that separating university social responsibility from the organization's

development directions also has some downsides. It increases the risk that the USRS will serve purely image-building purposes due to the mostly symbolic nature of the activities thereunder as they will be unrelated to the areas significant from the perspective of the university's development.

From the point of view of the full implementation of the university social responsibility strategy, the second approach is the most appropriate. That approach permits incorporating social responsibility measures across all areas of the university's functioning – scientific research, teaching and operating activities. Nonetheless, proper implementation of this approach requires social responsibility knowledge and awareness of both the management and the staff of the university. A potential weakness of the approach is that social responsibility issues may be dominated in the university strategy by other development-related issues. If this is the case, the USRS may be reduced to nice slogans that make the general strategy of the organization sound better.

The third approach, focusing on environmental aspects, may stem from the academic community being highly aware of that area and of the impact it may have on the ecological awareness of other stakeholders. Another aspect which may provide the USRS with such a framework may be the significance of the environmental impact of the university campus or the profile of the university (for instance, life sciences). The third reason for the approach may arise from the experience to date, connected with the failure to include environmental issues in the general development strategy of the university. The primary weakness of the approach is that the university social responsibility is reduced merely to environmental issues (analogically to the cases where sustainable development is reduced to green development, focused mostly on ecological, nature-related aspects).

Before concluding, it should be noted that the approaches presented do not have to be mutually exclusive. They can also be seen as a sign of evolution and adaptation to various evolutionary stages. The standalone USRS approach may prove better for universities at an early social responsibility implementation stage – where the staff and the management are not adequately knowledgeable about social responsibility issues. It will be easier to implement the strategy and coordinate the related activities in such circumstances. As the university gains experience, it may change its approach to one where its social responsibility strategy becomes a component of the general development strategy. This way, social responsibility can be incorporated in each of the university's key areas in a more comprehensive way.

Summary

The social responsibility concept and its application were originally connected with businesses and their social obligations until they evolved into a comprehensive notion covering various organizations, including

their internal and external stakeholder relations. Nowadays, social responsibility is associated with economic benefits – it helps building a competitive advantage and in identifying and taking new opportunities to create value for the organization and its environment – in a broad sense of the term.

The growing interest in social responsibility, the increasing competition in the education market and the expanding and thickening university stakeholder network have prompted organizations to create their own USRSs and to communicate the results of the activities thereunder through non-financial reporting. Analysis of the GRI database revealed a clear growth trend when it came to the number of such reports published by universities. However, the global distribution of the reporting universities remains uneven. The United States is the current leader in university reporting, although the first reports from American universities were included in the GRI database as late as in 2008. As far as Europe is concerned, the reporting is the most commonplace in Spain. The factors which have put those two countries at the top of the ranking are certainly worthy of further research.

The USRSs analyses communicated by the universities under discussion confirmed considerable differences between the universities in their approaches to shaping their social responsibility strategies and combining them with their general development strategies. Seven different models were identified in this respect. The majority of them can be grouped into three broader approaches, each having certain strengths and weaknesses. Such diversity may stem from the fact that universities began to prepare their social responsibility strategies relatively recently. Therefore, standards related to the place of such strategies in university development plans, to the areas to be covered by the strategies and to the strategy creation process or communication methods are yet to emerge. Particular universities develop their own solutions by drawing from various standards (e.g., ISO26000) or guidelines, or building on the experience of other organizations, mostly from the world of business, where CSR strategies are more prevalent and have a longer tradition. Last but not least – will such standards develop one day and are they indispensable in the case of universities? Since the authors do not have the answer to this question, they believe that this issue requires further research.

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Abstract

As the social responsibility notion developed, it caught the interest of not only businesses but also other organizations, including universities. The project described in the article aimed at researching how higher education institutions develop their social responsibility strategies. The desk research carried out covered the analysis of GRI database entries where the universities' social responsibility and sustainable development reports are stored as well as the analysis of selected reports and universities' websites. The two main findings of that research are: the growing social responsibility of the universities has been proved, and a vast diversity of the strategies applied was observed. As a result, seven models of creating the university strategy have been identified and described in the paper. In conclusion, we must stress that there are no universal standards regarding the placement of the strategy in the university general development plans, neither its scope, the process of creation nor the way it is communicated.

Keywords: university; social responsibility; social commitment; social responsibility strategy of a university; sustainable development

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