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## Student Awareness of University Social Responsibility Initiatives: A Pilot Study at a Polish University

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** Understanding students' awareness and perceptions of University Social Responsibility (USR) is crucial, as it can influence their engagement with sustainable development initiatives and shape the university's overall impact on society. The aim of this study was to analyse the awareness of the USR concept among student at a selected Polish university. Additionally, various aspects of USR and USR practices implemented at the investigated university were assessed.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study aimed to answer three main research questions regarding students' knowledge of USR terms, their perception of the university's USR efforts, and their recognition of good USR practices. The survey involved 60 non-randomly selected students, with the questionnaire validated through a pilot study. USR practices implemented at the investigated university were chosen due to their range, longevity and repeatability.

**Findings:** While most respondents were unfamiliar with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) concept, they demonstrated an understanding of its derivative, University Social Responsibility (USR). They assessed the university's compliance with USR requirements in specific aspects rather positively, although the high uncertainty level was stated. The best recognized USR practices were mainly focused on community building.

**Practical Implications:** The knowledge about students' familiarity with USR concepts can support proper implementation of USR strategy, especially in the educational field. The relatively low recognition level of chosen USR good practices demonstrated by students show the strong need for better promotion of university activities among stakeholders.

**Originality/Value:** This research contributes to the broader understanding of how USR is perceived by students and highlights areas for improvement in USR communication and implementation.

**Keywords:** University Social Responsibility (USR), sustainable development, student awareness, higher education, social engagement.

**JEL Codes:** M14, I23, Q01, D83, O35.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) is derived from the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Vallaey, 2014). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves a commitment to ethical and moral duties towards people and the environment beyond just pursuing economic growth. It offers organizations an alternative path to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) by collaborating with all parts of society, assuming that stakeholders are all those affected by the organization's activities (Ayala-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2019).

International Standard Organization defines Social Responsibility (SR) as “the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment through transparent and ethical behaviour that: contributes to sustainable development, including the health and welfare of society, takes into account the expectations of stakeholders, is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behavior, is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationships” (ISO 26000:2010).

This definition emphasizes the large influence of SR on the whole organization and its stakeholders, as well as its source in organizational values. As CSR is known as a management concept in which companies accept social, economic and environmental responsibility for their actions, USR focuses on the role of the university in the environment. The systematic literature review made by Ali *et al.* (2021) shows the adaptation process of SR ideas by universities through indicators in the industry and points to the university's role as an agent of change through SR activities.

In addition, evidence suggests that university practices in the areas of teaching and learning, research and technology and social responsibility (SR) have a positive impact on regional gross domestic product (GDP) indicators and the share of research and development activities in regional GDP (Pedro *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the role of USR is important, but so is the awareness of USR activities among university stakeholders, including students.

## 2. Literature Review

Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes (2016) show three basic areas of USR: responsible research, responsible management, and responsible education programs. Chen *et al.* indicated USR's scope has a social, sub-social, cognitive, organizational, philanthropic, economic, ethical, environmental, and educational impacts (Chen *et al.*, 2015). Ali *et al.* added to this list of ethical issues (Ali *et al.*, 2021).

It is also worth mentioning social factors, which in the case of enterprises include managing relationships between the organization, employees, customers and local communities in which the company operates and often contribute to building and

improving the company's image (Araújo *et al.*, 2023). A similar impact of the external environment on the university's image can be expected.

The qualitative analysis papers related to USR made by Larrán and Andrades (2017) touched on topics such as education, community engagement, socio-economic regional development, responsible citizenship, research focused on transferring knowledge to society and university management. The university can demonstrate SR through various activities (Larrán and Andrades, 2017):

- Training: Integrating social, ethical, and environmental issues into curricula to meet societal demands,
- Research: Transferring knowledge to benefit society,
- Management: Implementing good governance and accountability practices, including developing governance codes, reporting on social and environmental issues, and involving external stakeholders in governance,
- Community Engagement: Promoting corporate citizenship, civic values, and contributing to the socio-economic environment.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase of the relationship between University Social Responsibility (USR) and sustainable development strategies, particularly evident in the last few years (Pactwa *et al.*, 2024; Michalos, 2022). This trend is not only reflected in academic papers but also in international guidelines, such as those from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2018).

Students' groups value USR activities. According to the research made among Russian, Italian and French students, they perceive university importance in community building (71% of students see universities as key to social and cultural development), sustainability aspect (69.5% of students emphasize ecological responsibility), equality and diversity building (69% of students value equal opportunities for all) as well as creating equal opportunities for women and men (Belyaeva *et al.*, 2018).

Since corporate social responsibility (CSR) plays a key role in shaping the competitive advantage of enterprises (Lew *et al.*, 2024), it can be expected that in the case of universities, social responsibility will bring an advantage in the choice of university by future students. Social responsibility is expected to enhance students' motivation, satisfaction, and retention (Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016).

USR plays a crucial role in boosting student satisfaction, as the overall USR perception directly influences it (Vázquez *et al.*, 2016). Summarizing, the awareness of USR as a concept is important among students as main university stakeholders and a part of academia, and their knowledge and understanding of SR activities taken by the university is vital for their own SR education.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research is a pilot study, which is typically exploratory and aims to test the feasibility of the research design, methods, and instruments. Its main goal was to identify further potential research directions. It focuses on the awareness of USR and the USR activities at a selected university in Poland, as perceived by one of its stakeholder groups. The student group was chosen because it is a crucial part of academia and simultaneously represents a customer group. While students actively participate in university life, they often show limited interest in university governance issues.

Furthermore, as graduates, students become part of the broader societal environment, making their education in SR and their attitudes toward various SR aspects essential for the dissemination of USR. The awareness can be understood as knowledge or perception of a situation or fact. In that context three main research questions were stated:

1. Do the students of the selected Polish university know basic concepts connected with USR?
2. How do students perceive their university in the context of USR and its different aspects?
3. Do the students of the selected university recognize good USR practices identified at the university?

The research was made with Google Forms to ensure the respondents full anonymousness. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study with 5 participants. Besides editorial corrections, no changes were required. The survey was conducted in May 2023 among students of investigated university with non-random selection. Sixty of respondents answered. As a pilot study is designed to test study designs, measures and procedures for application in a subsequent study (Moore at al., 2011), and therefore smaller sample size are sufficient. The predominance of men (60%) and students of bachelor or engineering studies (63,3%) approximately reflects the gender and study level distribution among students of investigated university.

### **4. Research Results**

To answer the first research question the respondents were asked if they know USR concept and the deriving concept of CSR. The summary of these results in percentage form is presented in Table 1.

Further questions concerned various aspects related to USR. Respondents were asked if the university met USR requirements in different aspects: sustainability, community building, equality, diversity, equal opportunities for women and men and supporting people with special needs. Respondents chose one of the five answers.

**Table 1.** Knowledge of basic concepts related to USR

Term		<b>definitely not</b>	<b>rather not</b>	<b>I have no opinion</b>	<b>rather yes</b>	<b>definitely yes</b>
Corporate Responsibility (CSR)	Social	35,0%	38,3%	5,0%	13,3%	8,3%
University Responsibility (USR)	Social	15,0%	18,3%	6,7%	53,3%	6,7%

**Source:** Authors' calculations.

For the recognition evaluation, nine top USR related practices and set of practices were identified and chosen. The main choice criteria were: (1) the range of the practice application for the whole university, not for a single faculty and (2) activities that are long-lasting or repeated at least a few times. These identified practices were:

1. University sweatshirt day - an annual event promoting sweatshirts and other university-related gadgets. One of the aim is community building
2. Breakfast with the Rector - an event held during the university's annual students' holiday (called Juwenalia). An opportunity to talk informally with the university authorities. An event that promotes community building
3. Night-time Letter Writing – an event of hand writing letters to local businesses asking them to support a scholarship fund intended for top students with disabilities. An activity that support for people with special needs and community building
4. Air quality monitoring at the university campus - air quality monitoring, visible on site and online. Action to promote sustainable development
5. Ulopolis - a project to promote beekeeping in an urban setting consisting of a garden and monitored hives. Activity promoting sustainable development
6. University Climate Days - an annual action to promote environmental thinking among academia. Activity promoting sustainable development
7. Activities of the Center for Sustainability and Climate Protection – a series of activities to implement the SDGs promoting sustainable development
8. Equal University - a series of activities promoting equality at the university with a particular focus on equalizing opportunities for women and men. Activity promoting community building, equality, diversity
9. Activities of the university's equality policy team - a series of activities aimed at countering discrimination. Activity promoting community building, equality, diversity

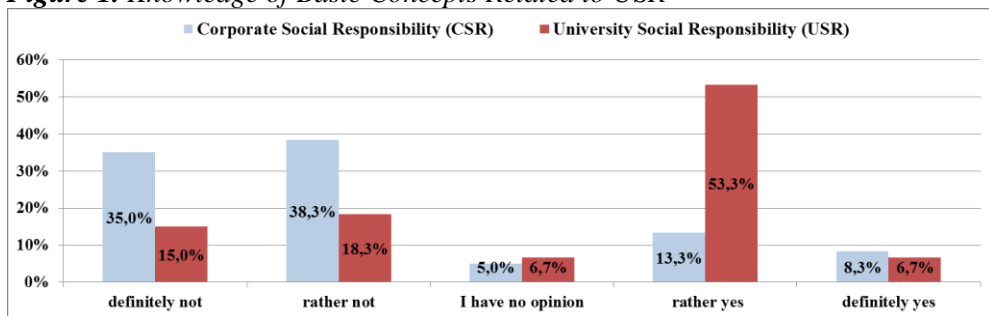
## **5. Discussion**

**Awareness of definitions:** The majority of respondents were not familiar with the concept of CSR, but they can demonstrate an understanding of its derivative definition, USR. Other research conducted in Poland showed that the majority of students admitted that SR is a concept they define intuitively only (Pabian, 2019).

The detailed data are presented in Figure 1. The obtained results for CSR terms (23.6% awareness) are similar to reported in other studies i.e., 26.5% found among adult Japanese students and employees in 2018 (Tribeck Brand Strategies, 2019).

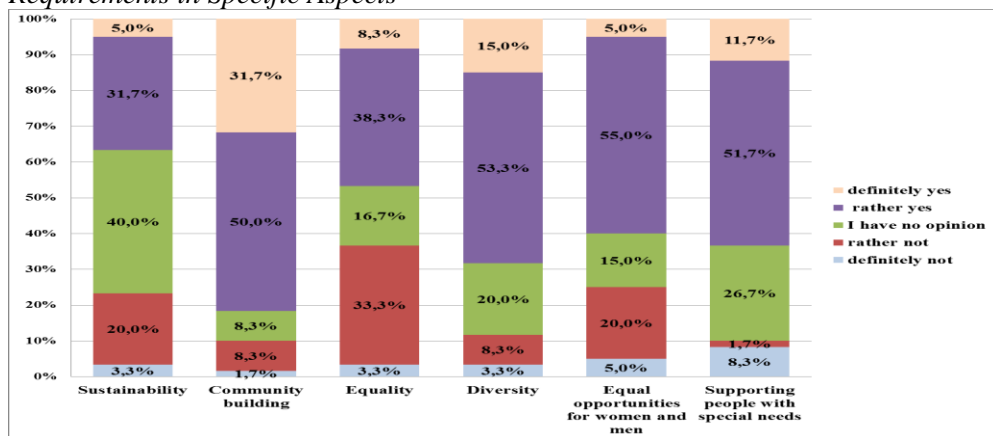
**Different aspects of University Social Responsibility:** When analyzing the respondents' answers regarding the university's fulfillment of the University Social Responsibility requirements (Figure 2), it is important to note the lack of awareness of how individual aspects are implemented. The distribution of the "I have no opinion" answers is presented in Figure 3. An extreme example is the value of 40% of these answers for "Sustainability". The values for "Supporting people with special needs" (26.7%) and "Diversity" (20.0%) also seem to be significant.

**Figure 1. Knowledge of Basic Concepts Related to USR**



Source: Authors' calculations.

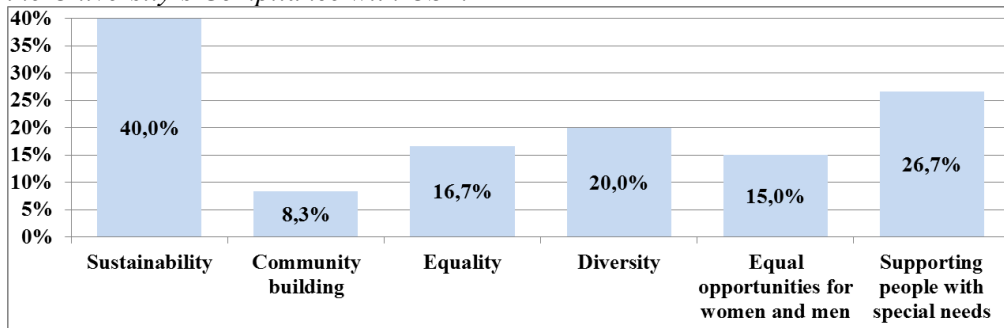
**Figure 2. Responses Regarding the University's Compliance with USR Requirements in Specific Aspects**



Source: Authors' calculations.

In addition, among the remaining answers, the positive ones dominate over the negative ones in every aspect, which can be seen in Figure 2. However, when analyzing only positive answers, it should be noted that less decisive assessments significantly dominate.

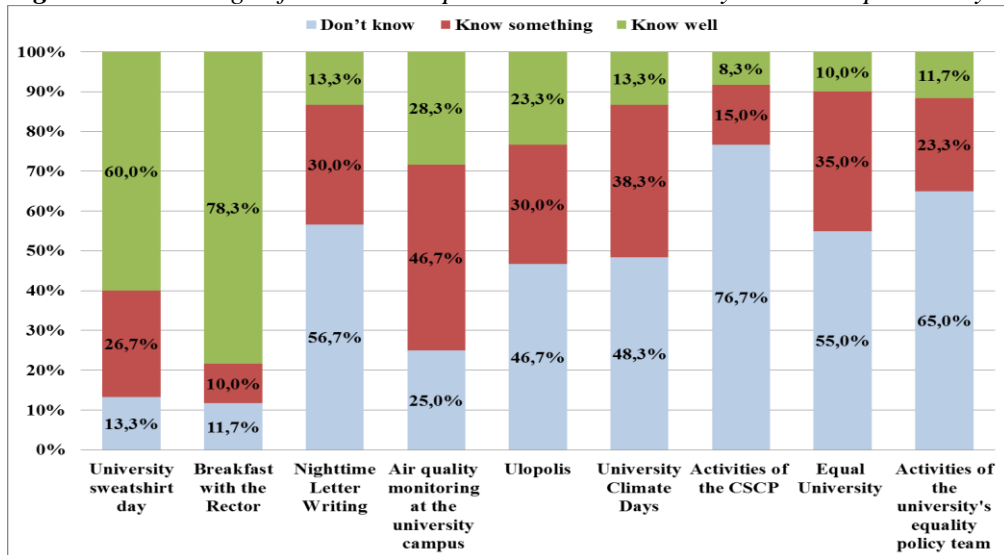
**Figure 3.** Distribution of "I have no opinion" Responses for the Analyzed Aspects of the University's Compliance with USR.



Source: Authors' calculations.

**Recognition of identified good practices in the USR area:** The level of recognition of chosen activities related to University Social Responsibility is presented in Figure 4. The best-recognized USR practices were mainly focused on community building. Those practices in which students are participating strongly and visibly (university sweatshirt day, breakfast with the Rector) are better recognized.

**Figure 4.** Knowledge of Basic Concepts Related to University Social Responsibility



Source: Authors' calculations.

However, most of the students' respondents were able to recognize very few among selected university good practices. The independent identification of good practices was impossible by over 96% of respondents, and those few recognized by respondents were connected with their faculty life. The students' focus on academia life in the context of USR is visible in older research. For example, in 2014 Spanish students expressed greater satisfaction with the university's internal USR

performances, whereas they perceived external USR performances, including those related to external projection and education, as less important (Vázquez *et al.*, 2014).

Summarizing the presented research, it is visible in the results, that respondents support the idea of a socially responsible university unequivocally, despite not being uniformly familiar neither with the term nor with the university's good practices in the social responsibility area. Moreover, they rather confirm university's compliance with USR requirements in specific aspects, however low confidence, especially in sustainability development area, is strongly noticeable.

## **6. Limitation of the Study**

As the presented research is a pilot study, it was conducted on a relatively small, non-randomly selected sample (Moore *at al.*, 2011). Next studies such take into account a larger sample and adjust basic demographic factors to the tested group. It would allow for apply statistical methods like factor analysis. It was not used for presented research among others due to insufficient sample size. Comrey and Lee (1992) suggest 500 sample size and assess 100 sample size as poor for factor analysis.

Additionally, other key assumptions for factor analysis like normal data distribution or linear relationships between variables or normal were not met. Moreover, in the presented study not all USR aspects were evaluated. For example, the very important issue of SR education was omitted, as the investigated university just started some curricula in this area.

## **7. Conclusions**

As Ali *et al.* (2021) recommended, USR should be visible in the university's mission and cannot be separated from core university activities. Moreover, USR should be understood widely as building a socially responsible campus. It promotes transparency, governance, democracy, individual rights, and environmental sustainability.

This includes creating a supportive environment for staff and students, managing human resources fairly, and addressing environmental concerns through clean technologies and alternative energy sources. Universities must integrate social responsibility into their curricula, connecting education with real-world social, economic, and environmental issues.

Moreover, universities should build partnerships with neighboring organizations to create common learning communities involving students, educators, and local residents in social projects. This prepares students to make informed, sustainable decisions as future professionals (Ali *et al.*, 2021). The research showed that responsible education following principles of CSR and ethics positively influence



SR skills among students (Rodríguez-Gómez *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, USR implementation positively influences CSR self-consciousness of graduates (Agustina *et al.*, 2023).

The most recognizable aspect of USR at the investigated university was the active policy of community building. Additionally, the respondents were able to recognize the best practices in this area, like University sweatshirt day and Breakfast with the Rector. Although this aspect of USR is undoubtedly important, the university strategy should take into account practices of community building with alumni and the local community.

The step beyond promoting different USR practices in order to support their recognition is to build a document presenting the USR strategy. As there is no specific guidelines for academic institutions, those who implement SR strategy follow general guidelines recommended for organizations (Pactwa *et al.*, 2024) such as: ISO 26000 (ISO, 2010), AA 1000 series standards (AccountAbility, 2018), SA 8000 standard (Social Accountability International, 2014) or Global Reporting Initiative guidelines on non-financial data (GRI, 2024).

Finally, based on the conducted research, it should be stated that the respondents unequivocally accept the features that determine the university as a socially responsible university, despite the fact that sometimes they are not clearly familiar with the exact meaning of this term. The dominance of the opinions "rather yes", "I don't know" and "rather no" in many of the studied aspects, especially in sustainability aspect of USR, indicates, on the one hand, insufficient recognition of individual actions of the University's Social Responsibility, and on the other, insufficient dissemination of these issues.

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