UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: RESPONSIBILITY ASPECT FOR LEARNERS

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Abstract: *Universities are responsible for training learners with professional knowledge and skills, the ability to work independently, the ability to self-study and research to improve their qualifications, so learners play the role of the most important stakeholders for universities. The objective of this study is the social responsibility of universities to learners in Vietnam through survey data from universities and learners through questionnaires related to the social responsibility of universities to learners in Vietnam. By using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, the results of this study show that the 12 attributes of social responsibility of universities to learners in Vietnam are quite high. All attributes of the variables are statistically significant. This article is an academic contribution to understanding the research that has developed and focused on the social responsibility of universities to learners in Vietnam, taking into account data from a number of reference research databases and survey results.*

1. Introduction

Social responsibility is gaining attention from researchers and business leaders, particularly in the context of universities, a unique type of enterprise focused on training and research. This concept, known as University Social Responsibility (USR), highlights the specific responsibilities universities have towards their learners.

One of the key responsibilities in the admission process involves selecting truly qualified candidates. Universities must establish clear goals, training programs, and output standards, which help learners understand what is expected of them. By providing accessible admission information, universities enable prospective students to assess their fit and make informed decisions about attending. This not only streamlines the recruitment process but also ensures that students can pursue their academic aspirations effectively.

During the training process, universities are responsible for guiding students through scientific research and monitoring their progress. Regular support and advisement help learners overcome challenges and enhance their knowledge and skills, promoting lifelong learning. Universities can employ various assessment methods to ensure that evaluations are valid, reliable, and fair, allowing for timely feedback that aids learners in improving their academic performance.

Despite its growing importance, the USR remains a relatively new field. While UNESCO recognizes its value in cultivating and developing educational principles, significant gaps in research persist. There is a lack of a consistent theoretical framework for USR and for analyzing universities' application of its principles. To address these gaps, further exploration into both theoretical and practical aspects of USR is crucial, emphasizing its significance in higher education.

2. Literature review

According to Wigmore-Álvarez et al. (2020), the fundamental difference between CSR and USR is rooted in the university's role in professional training and knowledge development, resulting in distinct impacts compared to businesses. Some researchers argue that USR should not be seen as separate from teaching and research activities (Parsons, 2014). Social responsibility has become integral to universities, influencing both internal organization and external relations, and higher education institutions need to embody principles of social responsibility to establish their identity and reputation (Kotecha, 2010).

Incorporating social responsibility into curriculum design contributes to educating future professionals, emphasizing ethics, social values, and awareness of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of business activities (Aznar Minguet et al., 2011). The teaching of social responsibility in universities is increasingly important within the context of education for sustainable development (ESD) (Setó-Pamies et al., 2011). Research shows that managerial commitment

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to CSR in corporations often relates to qualities developed through higher education rather than physical characteristics (Quazi, 2003). Education and awareness play crucial roles in achieving behavioral change essential for sustainability (Tang et al., 2011). Thus, corporations seeking to integrate social issues into their strategic business plans will require graduates with substantial formal education and professional development in sustainability.

Vallaeys' definition of USR is widely accepted: it is a policy of ethics in university activities, encompassing responsible management of education, research, and the environment, with a focus on promoting sustainable human development (Wigmore-Álvarez & Ruiz-Lozano, 2012).

3. Research methods

3.1. Scale and design of questionnaires

This study uses a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Statements are adapted from previous studies and expert opinions to align with the current context of Vietnamese universities, based on expert interviews and group discussions. University social responsibility to learners is measured by twelve observed variables (see Table 1)

3.2. Samples and data collection

The study sample was selected using a convenient method. After designing the questionnaire, we conducted the survey online through Google Docs and in-person, sharing the link via social networks like Zalo, Facebook, and email. Participants included university board chairs, board members, principals, vice principals, and accounting staff in Vietnam. Of the 650 questionnaires collected, 64 were deemed invalid due to reliability issues, leaving 586 for analysis.

3.3. Data processing

Quantitative research methods supported by SPSS software include descriptive statistics.

4. Results

The survey results on the current status of university social responsibility implementation towards learners are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. University social responsibility to learners

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
USRL1	Learners can easily access admission information, output standards, training programs, etc. to make appropriate choices.	586	2	5	4.34	.657
USRL2	Ensure the student-to-faculty ratio is in accordance with regulations.	586	2	5	3.96	.800
USRL3	Manage student admissions in a transparent and fair manner, using clear, well-defined criteria to inform selection decisions and providing formal feedback to unsuccessful candidates.	586	3	5	4.41	.598

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
USRL4	The school's training program is built on a foundation of knowledge and includes content on professional ethics, communication culture, and charitable responsibility for learners to train them to become citizens with creative thinking and decision-making ability, active and civilized citizens of a sustainable, developing society.	586	2	5	3.93	.819
USRL5	Tuition fees are set appropriately to ensure they meet the learning needs of the majority of learners.	586	2	5	3.99	.796
USRL6	Scholarship policies encourage learning, as well as policies to support students in difficult circumstances during their studies.	586	2	5	3.96	.810
USRL7	There are policies and conditions for students to exchange, study, and research with universities at home and abroad.	586	2	5	3.25	.959
USRL8	Facilities serving learners, such as libraries, information technology platforms, dormitories, medical stations, and other learning support conditions, ensure prescribed standards, with special attention to environmental, health, and safety factors, taking into account the specific needs of people with disabilities, and are constantly improved.	586	2	5	4.02	.780
USRL9	Adopt learner-centered teaching and learning approaches, ensuring assessment and feedback are used to promote learner learning.	586	3	5	3.95	.774
USRL10	Ensure equality and fairness for all learners.	586	2	5	4.10	.805
USRL11	Coordinate with firms and employers in using experts, facilities, and equipment to organize practical training and internships to improve practical and internship skills and increase employment opportunities for students.	586	2	5	4.02	.781
USRL12	Diversify training forms, ensuring to meet the learning needs of all learners according to different geographical areas, capacities, and personal conditions (expand and diversify access to education with a commitment to lifelong learning).	586	3	5	3.78	.800
Valid N (listwise)		586			3.98	.503

Source: Authors compiled and SPSS software SPSS20

Table 1 shows that the mean values corresponding to the university's social responsibility to learners are above average, with the overall mean value being Mean = 3.98 (less than 4).

5. Discussion and implications

The analysis shows that the disclosure of admission information and output standards for learners is rated positively (mean = 4.43), complying with regulations on public disclosure. However, the student-to-lecturer ratio is rated lower (mean = 3.96). The autonomy of public and private institutions in developing teaching staff has not ensured equal competition or encouraged an increase in lecturers relative to training scale. As a result, universities often optimize resources by increasing the student/teacher ratio to meet enrollment targets, leading some schools to face penalties for exceeding their training capacity. This situation reflects ongoing challenges in maintaining quality educational standards while accommodating growth.

Manage student admissions transparently and fairly, using clear criteria to inform selection decisions and provide feedback to unqualified candidates. Schools typically conduct admissions according to an annually

published plan. However, some public and private universities face challenges, such as a large number of virtual candidates and difficulty meeting enrollment targets. As a result, admission management may lack transparency and fairness, leading to practices like calling for admission earlier than regulations and not allowing students to withdraw applications. This creates difficulties for students when choosing a school and major.

The school's training program is based on knowledge and covers professional ethics, communication culture, and charitable responsibilities to develop learners into creative and active citizens of a sustainable society. Implementation levels vary widely; some schools are rated as low as 2 weak, while others score a 5 the best. The overall average rating is only 3.93. Hanoi National University (2023) notes that financial autonomy leads universities to focus on low-cost fields with high demand, resulting in programs that are often "heavy" on theory and "light" on practical application. There is a notable lack of connection with the labor market, as many universities provide only what they have, rather than what society needs (Le Anh Vinh, 2023).

The main source of finance for private universities is tuition fees, while public universities rely on the state budget, tuition, and other revenue sources (such as technology transfer and public-private partnerships). The largest revenue source for both types is tuition fees. Due to financial pressure, determining appropriate tuition fees to meet the majority's learning needs only averages 3.99. Public universities benefit from state funding, resulting in lower tuition fees compared to private institutions. Public university tuition fees are generally appropriate, meeting the needs of most learners (mean = 4.15), whereas private universities average lower (mean = 3.65).

The difference in funding sources gives public universities an advantage in implementing scholarship policies, supporting students in difficult circumstances, and facilitating exchanges with domestic and foreign institutions more effectively than private universities. However, the overall status of student exchange between higher education institutions remains low (mean = 3.25).

The application of learner-centered teaching and learning support methods, ensuring that assessment and feedback are used to promote learning for learners, is also implemented by universities at a rather modest level (with Mean = 3.95).

Facilities serving learners, such as libraries, IT platforms, dormitories, and medical stations, which ensure environmental, health, and safety standards while considering the needs of people with disabilities, are rated only at a fair level (Mean = 4.02). By 2023,

of the 237 universities in Vietnam (excluding military academies), only 09 schools (an increase of 02 since 2022) were assessed by The Impact Rankings for their contributions to social and human development and environmental protection efforts, aligning with the implementation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and aiming for a consensus to create "a world that leaves no one behind".

Coordination with enterprises to utilize experts and facilities for practical training and internships is crucial (mean = 4.02). Some schools effectively implement this, earning good ratings, while many private institutions score below average. The overall average for this social responsibility indicator is only slightly above average. Public universities benefit from state investments in facilities and finances, making them more proactive in collaborating with businesses during training processes compared to private universities (mean = 4.33 vs. 3.35).

According to the Report of the Department of Higher Education - Ministry of Education and Training from June 2021 on cooperation between universities and enterprises in information technology, 40.7% of 135 surveyed higher education institutions have cooperation activities in both IT and other fields (55/135). Additionally, 44.4% collaborate only in other areas (66/135), 8.1% focus solely on IT (11/135), while 6.7% have no cooperation with enterprises (9/135), primarily among institutions specializing in specific majors in the arts.

A total of 6,126 enterprises are cooperating with 135 surveyed higher education institutions, averaging 60 enterprises per institution. Notably, institutions with strong cooperation in both IT and other fields include Thu Dau Mot University (75 in IT, 357 in other fields), Ho Chi Minh City University of Technical Education (31 in IT, 163 in other fields), Eastern International University (30 in IT, 140 in other fields), Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry (45 in IT, 240 in other fields), and Hanoi University of Industry (21 in IT, 161 in other fields). These institutions represent the leading group in cooperation with firms.

From another perspective, cooperation between universities and enterprises in our country remains limited. Most school-enterprise linkages focus on immediate needs and short-term plans rather than long-term strategies (78% versus 22%). The cooperation level is largely at the "initial development understanding" stage (214 out of 493 universities) or "short-term cooperation" (174 out of 493). Only 58 universities are deemed "long-term partners," and 47 are classified as "strategic partners" of enterprises.

Policies to ensure fairness to all learners are implemented in schools rated at mean = 4.10.

The scale of university training has increased at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, providing high-quality human resources for the country's socio-economic development. In the 2021-2022 school year, there were over 2 million students, with 80.56% attending public institutions. Full-time training accounted for 88.21%, part-time for 8.52%, and distance learning for 3.27%. Despite rising enrollment, the gap in access to higher education between income groups in Vietnam is widening, although inequality among ethnic groups has improved over the past decade. Thus, diversifying training forms and meeting the learning needs of all learners across different regions and backgrounds is urgent. However, this responsibility is currently implemented at only a modest assessment level, with a mean rating of 3.78.

According to Hoang Minh Son (2023), developing digital higher education is an effective strategy to expand access. Universities and lecturers can collaborate on a common platform to develop and share courses, focusing on their strengths to reduce costs. Courses can reach students nationwide, including international learners, enhancing educational effectiveness and offering more choices. This approach allows students to select programs from multiple universities, choose courses with the best lecturers, and access top virtual labs. The credit-based training model is thus expanded globally, improving quality and accessibility. Additionally, universities should clarify their social responsibilities to learners, employees, and related parties, including support for training programs and local commitments.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Universities are crucial for societal development as they educate students in knowledge, ethics, and cultural values, enabling them to contribute to economic and cultural sustainability. Our research shows that while the level of social responsibility varies, the average value concerning students is consistently above average, with an overall mean of 3.98. This indicates that Vietnamese universities are increasingly recognizing their social responsibilities, particularly towards students. However, awareness of social responsibility related to sustainable development goals remains incomplete. Implementing social responsibility in universities requires not only internal commitment but also collaboration among all participants to fulfill their respective roles within mutually beneficial relationships.

To enhance the social responsibility activities of universities in alignment with sustainable development goals, we recommend the following solutions:

Firstly, the Vietnamese government should enhance the development of guidelines on social responsibility and synchronize the legal framework regarding the implementation of social responsibility with the relevant parties in universities. This will create a legal corridor, enabling universities to implement social responsibility more clearly and specifically.

Secondly, enhancing awareness within higher education institutions and the broader community. Currently, social responsibility is not only a concern for the private sector (businesses) but also for public service providers, including universities. In light of ongoing economic development and globalization, the social responsibility of universities is garnering increasing attention. Universities must recognize this issue and incorporate it into their strategies and actions. Then, they can be able to allocate budgets and develop specific programs to effectively fulfill the social responsibilities to which they have voluntarily committed.

Thirdly, universities need to innovate in their governance, focusing on autonomy and accountability. This includes proactively leveraging financial resources from the community, thereby actively fulfilling their responsibilities towards students and the community. Universities should also increase accountability and transparency, especially through communication channels with students, the community, and partners.

Fourthly, reforming education and research activities by integrating modules related to sustainable development, changing perceptions of sustainable business practices, increasing applied research, and actively collaborating with local regions in training, researching, and implementing activities.

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