

SUSTAINABILITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to highlight the relation between sustainability development and social responsibility, at higher education level, in actual context characterized by dept and dynamic changes, incertitudes and economic pressures.

Based on theoretical constructs and practical ideas we develop a model for a sustainable university in accordance with social responsibility. We explore the interferences between the sustainability forms of the university and the ways to reach performance and, in the same time the social responsibility.

Based on a literature review and documentary research, we researched modern trends, models and practices of academic management, supportive of sustainability and responsibility.

Key words: sustainability, University Social Responsibility, strategy, vision

JEL classification codes: Q01, I23, M14

Introduction

Social Responsibility (SR) and sustainable development (SD) are the key elements of the academic field, considering the role of vector that universities play in the development of the society, being the generator of knowledge and the main shaper of our lives in a world consumed by challenges and explosive changes.

Social responsibility can be regarded as a necessity not as a requirement of an organization on the impact of its decisions and activities regarding the society and environment through a transparent and ethical behaviour that contributes to a sustainable and healthy development, and to the welfare of the society. Responsibility also means to take into account the expectations of stakeholders that are in accordance with the current legislation, consistent with the international norms of behaviour and integrated into organizations through the networking system.

Through the practices of sustainable development in the management of higher education institutions, universities can demonstrate their commitment to the specific practices of social responsibility. Therefore, these practices should be a part of the existence philosophy of universities as a way to function, to work and practise in the economic-social context. Social responsibility should be incorporated into the fundamental values of the university and in the manner of holding activities at each level and department.

This paper explores the concept of Socially Responsible University (SRU) and pictures the framework to identify the ethical requirements nowadays, in a modern and complex world. This is because education was perceived as a powerful and fundamental system that inter-correlates the economic, social and environmental concerns in a sustainable development strategy that helps nature and community on their way to a more sustainable future.

The central point of education is to create a sense of responsibility both globally and locally. Education is seen as a vehicle, a driving force, a trigger, a core value and a key factor in human development. UNESCO believes that education is the key to the economic, social and environmental development, but also the determining factor in creating a society that teaches and enables a sustainable future. (UNESCO, 2007)

This is possible by practising responsible management through an interactive dialogue with the society and community in order to promote sustainable human development through education, knowledge change, services delivery, research and teaching. All these underline the need to

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emphasise an ethical collaboration not only with the academic community but also with the business community in what concerns the stakeholders' involvement. (Vallaey's, 2013)

Research methodology

The implemented research is based on documents and reform strategies and is founded on an analysis of numerous studies conducted by higher education institutions in analyzing their sustainable development approach, having as support the social responsibility with an impact on global and local communities.

The method of investigation was the documentary analysis which included: works of literature regarding the relationship between sustainable development and social responsibility in today's universities; articles, studies and reports dedicated to educational policies in the country and the EU. We have also shown, based on observation, analysis of educational effectiveness and comparison, the importance of creating a socially responsible university that favours the development of the whole society towards a more sustainable future.

Conceptual approaches SRU and SD

SRU concept can be approached from several perspectives. Thus, SRU is a policy of ethical quality in the academic community activities through responsible management on education, knowledge, research, in a participatory dialogue with the society to promote sustainable human development and involves the following steps as shown below:

Figure no.1 - Steps in achieving SRU



Source: adaptation (Chen et. al., 2015, p. 165)

SRU can be perceived as a philosophy of the university to use an ethical approach to develop and engage with local and global community in order to support social, ecological, environmental, technological and economic development. SRU acts as a key player in social changes through the policies regarding quality in ethics, which determines the academic performances. (Chen et al, 2015, p. 165)

There are seven requirements in ISO 26000 standards, which are specific for the social responsibility to promote the sustainable development, as follows:

- Organizational governance materialized in: accountability, transparency, providing actions and deeds;
- Human rights - diversity;
- Labour practices, which includes: value and development, employment benefits, healthy working conditions, balance in life;
- Environment - environmental conservation and offering academic programs in respect to the environment;
- Fair operating practices: responsible involvement in relation with the public and the promotion of SR;
- Students' requirements - providing sufficient information to current and prospective students;
- Community involvement: providing grants for projects and also funding and support to preserve the environment.

Based on these requirements, the following key principles were established: accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, respect for the stakeholders' interests, respect for the rule of law, respect for the human rights and respect for international norms of behaviour.

Through developing sustainable development practices by the university management, their commitment to social responsibility practices can be demonstrated. Vallaey's, F. (2013) highlighted the importance of the SR and identified its key features, pointing out the need for the awareness of the following elements:

- ✓SR is a responsibility regarding the actions and practices of universities and their impact on society;

- ✓SR requires a management practice which aims to build a responsible society by eliminating the negative impact and promoting sustainable forms of development;
- ✓SR functions in accordance with the legal provisions;
- ✓SR requires coordination between stakeholders.

The Socially Responsible University meets the economic, social and ecological aspects of the sustainable development. These requirements are found in the development strategies and in the operational plans that are developed by the university and highlight an important aspect of the university's interaction with the internal and external stakeholders and with the society as a whole.

SR is the key support to a sustainable development. The two concepts inter-correlate so that the SD is built on a set of values, practices and ethical conduct that are characteristic to SR. Moreover, SD requires more ethical aspects and values than issues related to science and technology. In this regard, the necessary elements for an SD program are focused on:

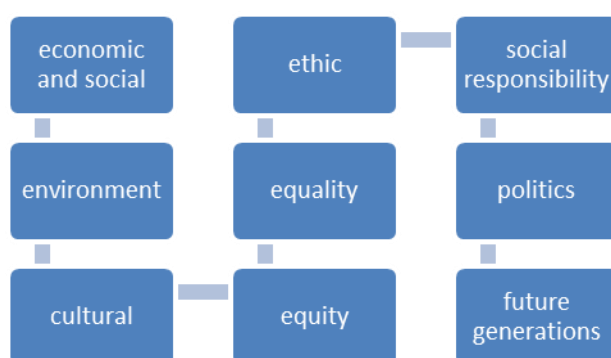
- Ethics and values;
- Leadership skills in SD;
- Defining the SR skills and abilities;
- AN understanding of how a society develops;

An important step in education for SD was the launch of the Decade of Education for SD (DESD), since 2005. Its objective is to integrate the principles, values and SD practices in all forms of education and learning. It is necessary to encourage changes in behaviour, which will create a more sustainable future in regard to the environmental integrity, economic viability and just society for the present and future generations (UNESCO 2005). The education for SD covers all levels of formal and informal education, but the primary role falls on higher education as the graduates of these institutions will be the future leaders of communities and organizations, resulting in overwhelming efforts in SD. Cortese (2003) stated: "Higher education bears a profound and moral responsibility to raise awareness and to transfer and shape knowledge, skills and values that are necessary to create a sustainable and just future."

Higher education institutions prepare professionals, who develop, conduct, manage, teach, research, work and thus, they influence the society. Thus, universities have a critical and tangible role in developing principles, quality and awareness not only to perpetuate the philosophy of the sustainable development, but also to improve what they achieved.

The general framework for SD requires a critical analysis of the following aspects, according to figure no. 3.

Figure 3 - General framework for SD



Source: adaptation (Higher Education for Sustainable Development, 2007)

The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) has taken a visionary approach through an integrating strategy that signifies the importance of incorporating SD in higher education. Based on benchmarks, HEFC provides: higher education sector will be recognized as a major contributor in the society's efforts to achieve sustainability through the skills and knowledge the students have and put them into practice by content and sharing knowledge in business and community, through the commitment of public policies and through its own strategies and operations. (HEFC, 2009)

Analysis of visioning exercise

Many universities have formulated a vision that expresses the objectives at the highest level in the future, in terms of SD based on SR. A comparative analysis of the vision is relevant starting from the following table:

Table 1

Approaches of the universities' visions

University	Vision
University of Copenhagen	The university will contribute to global SD as follows: -maximizing global responsibility and the role of leadership in the less developed countries by facilitating the transfer of knowledge, capacities building and increasing the mobility of staff and students; -integration of environmental, social, economic and ethical aspects in teaching and research activity; -the extension of the disciplines spectrum that contributes to research in SD; -specialization in approaching urgent issues regarding energy through teaching and research in natural and social sciences and through adopting the sustainability of science as a theme of teaching and research;
Hosei University	Hosei University will help to achieve sustainability in Japanese society. We will achieve this by the fact that we act as a social entrepreneur and a community leader. Research and teaching will be applied interdisciplinary and we will develop a partnership with stakeholders from different sectors of activity. The university's graduates will be able to adapt to the changing needs of the Japanese society and to provide sustainable solutions.
University of Veracruz	The university will be a tool for transformation and a driving force in the change towards sustainability. We will be a relevant local institution, responsible to help and provide solutions that are relevant to the community by using the global techniques. The university will lead by its own example to achieve the highest standards of sustainability in teaching, research, management and labour in society. The graduates will be responsible citizens and the staff will be an agent of change towards sustainability. We will achieve this by coordinating teaching, research and communication with the needs in the public, private sector, by building strengths regarding the cultural and social awareness to create a university with wide interdisciplinary objectives for sustainability.

Source: adaptation (Higher Education for Sustainable Development, 2007)

A brief overview of the analysis of the designed objectives at the level of the universities listed above reveals the following:

Table 2

Statements expressing the organizational goals

Goal	Agent of change	Example
-Contributions to the sustainable regional development; -helps the company to achieve a sustainable development	-to be an instrument of change; -to provide the change; -to be a social entrepreneur; -to be a community leader;	-to gain the respect of future generations; -to incorporate sustainable development; -to be responsible to the needs of the society; -to be the key in sustainable development; -to be a model of university with outstanding achievements and excellence in sustainability

Source: adaptation (Higher Education for Sustainable Development, 2007)

SD is an integrated component in each university having ambitious goals. Universities tend to become both models and agents involved in the economically, socially and ecologically balanced development of the society. The documents of strategic planning include clear objectives and modalities of action to fulfil the mission of the higher education organization. Note that both SD and SR should be landmarks in designing the strategic plan of each higher education institution, a process that is complex and characterized by intensity, which allows access to all stakeholders at all levels of higher education.

Conclusions

SR and SD represent the landmarks in analysing how universities make a contribution in increasing the quality of life. The new challenges of the contemporary world put universities at the heart of finding and formulating viable solutions for a more sustainable future. Yes, SD cannot be successfully integrated into what a university means as a whole, but only through a social responsibility based on values such as: ethics, equity, quality, commitment, excellence and social entrepreneurship.

SR is the intangible and profound part of SD, which cannot always be accurately perceived, but which has a major influence and a decisive impact on the development of a society. Universities must rethink their vision and mission and adopt a strategy that is based on true values, so that higher education institutions to be the promoters of a healthy development of society and lead to an improved quality of life.

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