



University Social Responsibility through the Lens of Students: Does it really Matter?

Márcia Coelho¹, Rachel Drayson², Isabel Menezes³

CIIE- Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Portugal¹

NUS - National Union of Students, United Kingdom²

CIIE- Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Portugal³

Abstract

In times of intense social change that pose a new set of demands to education, higher education institutions are called to face their inner values of social responsibility in the development of "public-minded alumni"[1], in the promotion of equal opportunities for all, despite their different cultural and social backgrounds, in terms of access, progression and completion [2] and in the provision of opportunities for students to become involved in intervention projects and activities that promote active citizenship and democratic participation, beyond academic knowledge [3]. University Social Responsibility (USR) is pointed out as central by several international organizations such as UNESCO [4] or ISO26000 [5] but despite the increase of research in this area [6] [7] the potential impacts of students' participation in USR training and projects are not yet sufficiently studied. Therefore, this research aims to consider how students from three European universities (Edinburgh, Porto and Kaunas) perceive USR and the impact of their participation in the Erasmus + project ESSA – experiential training with involvement in a university social responsibility audit process –, through focus-group discussions, along with the analysis of students' diaries.

Keywords: *University Social Responsibility; Higher education; Students; Experiential learning; Social Audit.*

1. University Social Responsibility: Beyond the Ivory Tower

USR linked to the classic role of public universities has now, in the post-Bologna European context, a renewed interest that increased the reflection on the 'third mission' of HEIs and its 'social dimension' [8]. Nevertheless, the concept of USR is elusive, ranging from a continuum between a conservative and a critical-transformative pole [9]. The conservative pole favours a definition based on a perspective of organizational governance, keeping intervention in the field of research and teaching unalterable, and seeing USR as a result of the marketization of HE [10]. At the other pole, the notion of USR crosses the mission of universities as a whole, conceiving a profound transformation at all levels of the institutional endeavour [11] [12]. In spite of this diversity, an ecological-situated reading of USR implies recognizing the university links with 'the ground beneath her feet'.

2. The Ecological University: A commitment to the world

An ecological-situated vision of USR [9] underlies the significance of the interaction between the university and its contexts – thus fostering a complex vision of the role of universities, with a commitment to the common good, "critical and enquiring, acting to put [their] resources to good effect in promoting world well-being" (pp.252) [13], but never forgetting the different shackles that hold them to their ground. With diverse backgrounds and cultural contexts, there is no "one size fits all" model for universities to follow. However, common objectives and principles regarding USR can be observed [14] and USR projects can generate positive impacts both for the institution and the community [15].

Authors like Ye [15] suggest that "universities need to actively participate in various "projects" and "programs" in order to promote economic development and social stability, and also improve the livelihood of citizens" (pp.218). The university must "develop pro-active human minds for the full exercise of citizenship through creative actions capable of building socially responsible and economically sustainable societies" (pp.135) [16]. It's assumed that the involvement of students in training and USR projects can be a good opportunity for them as critical citizens, promoting the development of other skills that, ultimately, foster a better employability and a more complex, and judicious exercise of citizenship.

The university is responsible for promoting multiple learning spaces that allows students to learn in context and develop essential skills. Thus, USR activities and projects can promote the development of "decision-making capacities, participation and personal involvement and responsibility on the part of students, which are usually translated into autonomy behaviours" (pp.62) [17]. The

students should be able to develop skills that allows them to become aware and improve the socio-environmental impacts of their actions and ultimately become collaborative and creative future professionals and, maybe more importantly, citizens of today's world [18].

3. Research context and methodology

This research is carried out in relation to ESSA Project - European Students, Sustainability Auditing (funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+) which comprises a consortium of European universities: University of Edinburgh, Kaunas University of Technology and University of Porto, together with their student associations, the European Student Union and the National Union of Students of the United Kingdom. Based on a multidimensional approach, the main objectives of ESSA are to develop a certificate programme for students in USR auditing.

Although, this study is related to ESSA, his tasks are carried out autonomously using a mixed research methodology [19] and will focus on the perceived impact of ESSA amongst 45 students, who participated in practical audit exercises, through focus-group discussions, along with students' diaries about their learning process.

4. Findings

Deepening the preliminary results that suggested ESSA could "empower students as critical agents of social responsibility" (pp. 1173) [20] and that students valued "the opportunities to work outside their disciplinary areas" (p.1174), the content analysis was based on three categories of perceived impact in: academic life; civic/political life and professional life.

a) Perceptions of impact in academic life

Through the analysis, it was possible to understand that the students have different approaches concerning the impact on their academic life: some of them identify the acquisition of skills like leadership, team work, time management, public-speaking, reporting and analytical capacities; and others consider that the project influenced the perspective of their studies and has led to a greater involvement in their university.

b) Perceptions of impact in civic/political life

The students' opinions regarding this category were fairly homogeneous. They repeatedly highlighted the impact in the growth of their active civic participation and mostly in the knowledge and conscience they developed about social responsibility, their capacity to identify social responsible companies and their acknowledgement that everything has impact and that they can make the difference.

c) Perceptions of impact in (future) professional life

Concerning the impact in their professional life and employability, the students mentioned different sets of effects. A group of these effects are related to themselves: the content and the development of extra skills, empowered capacities, hands-on training and field experience in the area of their studies. The other impact is more external and related to future employers, with the perception that participation in the project will differentiate them both on their CVs and in interviews, not just for the subject but also for being an international project.

5. Conclusions

According to Barnett [13], the university is connected and interpenetrated by seven vital ecosystems: "knowledge, social institutions (including the political sphere), economy, natural environment, culture, learning, and human subjectivity" (p.46). Although all these ecosystems influence students, he focuses on the latter two to say that the university should support its students to become "ecological students". This vision allows students a "liquid learning", in the sense that learning itself is in constant movement and people are exposed to different forms, sizes, and intensities of learning spaces. In the university, we find plural learning spaces, not only linked to the official program's content, but also to extracurricular activities and USR projects that can "offer students, (...) a distinct opportunity for improving their practical and communication skills, enhancing their sense of social responsibility and developing a better understanding of the connection between theory and practice" (pp.423) [21].

The "ecological student" is immersed in different ecosystems that challenge and potentiate learning situations, which are not only focused in the understanding and participation inside the walls of universities, but in its transferability to their understanding and action in society in general. To understand this process is considering HEIs as a "support to students in developing (...) the ability to combine subject matter knowledge and a set of complementary skills in ways that go beyond

traditional classroom classic assignments and objective examinations” (pp.422-423) [22]. Our data seems to suggest that ESSA has such a learning potential, and that experimenting USR in practice can be a valuable experience for ecological students in these diverse universities.

References

- [1] Chase, W. “The social responsibility of the state university”, *Journal of Social Forces*, 1 (5), 1923, pp.517-521.
- [2] London Communiqué “Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world”, 2007, Available at: <http://www.ehea.info/articledetails.aspx?ArticleId=43>.
- [3] Simons, M. & Masschelein, J. “The Public and Its University: beyond learning for civic employability?”, *European Educational Research Journal*, 8 (2), 2009, pp.204-217.
- [4] Unesco “World Conference on Higher Education. Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action” Volume I, Final Report, Paris, UNESCO, 1998, Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001163/116345e.pdf>
- [5] ABNT NBR ISO 26000 (2010), Diretrizes sobre responsabilidade social (1a ed.) 2010.
- [6] Larrán, JM; López, H. & Márquez Moreno, C. “La comunidad universitaria andaluza ante la responsabilidad social: un estudio de opinión”, *Foro de los Consejos Sociales de las Universidades Públicas de Andalucía*, 2011.
- [7] Martin, B. “University Social Responsibility: A common European Reference Frame work”, 2016, Available at: www.eu.usr.eu;
- [8] Zomer, A. & Benneworth, P. “The Rise of the University’s Third Mission”, *Reform of Higher Education in Europe*, Sense Publishers, 2011, pp.81-101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-555-0>.
- [9] Menezes, I.; Coelho, M.; Amorim, JP.; Gomes, IP.; Pais, S. & Coimbra, J. “Inovação e compromisso social universitário: a universidade “e o chão que ela pisa””, Villa Sánchez, A. (Eds.), *Tendencias actuales de las transformaciones de las universidades en una nueva sociedad digital*, Vigo, Foro Internacional de Innovación Universitaria, 2018, pp.395-407.
- [10] Velazquez, L.; Munguia, N.; Platt, A., & Tadei, J. “Sustainable University: What can be the matter?”, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 14(9), 2006, pp.810–819.
- [11] Amorim, J., Arenas, B., Daniel, B., Alina F., Carrasco, A., Carvalho, X., Coimbra, J., Dima, G. (Coord.), Don, R., Freires, T., Loja, E., Martin, B., Menezes, I., Negaides, A., Osuna M., Rodrigues, F. “University social responsibility: A common European reference framework.”, 2015, [Final Public Report of the EU-USR Project, 52709-LLP-2012-1-RO-ERASMUS-ESIN, February 2015] doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.1457.8084.
- [12] Villa Sánchez, A. “La innovación social en el ámbito universitario: una propuesta para su diagnóstico y desarrollo”, *Revista Argentina de Educación Superior* 6, 2014, pp.188-218.
- [13] Barnett, R. “The coming of the ecological university”, *Oxford Review of Education*. 37(4), 2011, pp. 439–455. DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2011.595550.
- [14] Tong, T.; Yuen-Tsang, A. & Shek, D. “University Social Responsibility: The PolyU Way”, Shek, D. & Hollister, R. (Eds) *University Social Responsibility and Quality of Life- A global Survey of Concepts and Experiences*. 8, Singapore: Springer, 2017, pp. 255-270.
- [15] Ye, J. “Reflections on and Practices of Peking University Fulfilling Social Responsibility”, Shek, D. & Hollister, R. (Eds) *University Social Responsibility and Quality of Life- A global Survey of Concepts and Experiences*, 8, Singapore, Springer, 2017, pp. 205-221.
- [16] Ribeiro, R. & Magalhães, A. “Política de responsabilidade social na universidade: conceitos e desafios”, *Educação, Sociedade e Culturas*, 42, 2014, pp. 133-156.
- [17] Lopes, H. “Atividades Académicas (Co)Curriculares e o (D)Envolvimento dos Estudantes: O curso e as margens na travessia da implementação do Processo de Bolonha no Ensino Superior”, Porto, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of University of Porto, 2015.
- [18] Vallaeys, F.; De La Cruz, C. & Sasia, P. “Responsabilidad social universitaria: manual de primeros pasos”, México, McGraw Hill, 2009.
- [19] Johnson, B. & Onwuegbuzie, J. “Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come”, *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 2004, 14-26.
- [20] Coelho, M.; Rodrigues, F.; Evans, P., Menezes, I. & Martin, B. “Student Auditing of University Social Responsibility - Reform through Reflective, Experiential Learning?” HEAD’17 3rd international conference on higher Education Advances. Valencia, 2017, pp.1165-1175.



International Conference The Future of Education

- [21] Cheng, S. "The practice of professional skills and civic engagement through service learning: A Taiwanese perspective", Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, Vol. 8 Issue: 4, 2018, pp.422-437, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-10-2017-0079>
- [22] Rutti, R.; LaBonte, J.; Helms, M.; Hervani, A. and Sarkarat, S. "The service learning projects: stakeholder benefits and potential class topics", Education + Training, Vol. 58 Issue: 2016, pp.422-438, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-06-2015-0>