

CSR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SZCZECIN

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Purpose: This paper aims to examine how the University of Szczecin addresses Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within its institutional framework. Employing a case study approach, the research investigates the university's strategies and initiatives that reflect its commitment to ethical practices, sustainability, and community engagement. By analyzing these efforts, the study seeks to understand the role of CSR in shaping the university's operations and its impact on stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on the University of Szczecin. Data were collected through content analysis of publicly available materials, including strategic documents, CSR reports, and information published on the university's official websites. This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in thematic coding.

Findings: The University of Szczecin has undertaken various Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, including the incorporation of CSR topics into academic programs, the establishment of ethical practice and others. However, the study identifies that the university's communication of these CSR activities is limited, with insufficient visibility on official platforms. Additionally, the absence of formal CSR reporting mechanisms further obscures the extent and impact of these initiatives, making it challenging to assess their effectiveness and areas for improvement.

Research limitations/implications: The research is limited to a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Practical implications: The findings offer practical insights for university policymakers aiming to integrate CSR into higher education institutions. By highlighting effective strategies and identifying areas needing attention, the study provides a roadmap for enhancing CSR practices.

Social implications: The integration of CSR in higher education has the potential to foster a culture of social responsibility among students and staff, leading to positive societal impacts. The University of Szczecin's initiatives serve as a model for how academic institutions can contribute to sustainable development and community well-being.

Originality/value: This study offers valuable insights into the practical application of Corporate Social Responsibility principles within a Polish higher education institution. By focusing on the University of Szczecin, it provides a detailed examination of how CSR initiatives are implemented in the academic context, highlighting both achievements and areas needing improvement.

Keywords: university, higher education, CSR.

Category of the paper: Case study.

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a concept primarily associated with the business sector to a multifaceted framework embraced by higher education institutions. University Social Responsibility (USR) represents a strategic commitment by higher education institutions to engage in ethical practices and actively consider the interests of a broad range of stakeholders, including students, staff, local communities, and the environment. USR focuses on the university's role in promoting social equity, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. By integrating these principles into their core missions of education, research, and public service, universities act as catalysts for positive societal change, shaping not only academic outcomes but also contributing to the holistic development of the communities they serve. The main objective of the article is to explore how the University of Szczecin addresses CSR within its institutional framework, focusing on strategies and initiatives that promote ethics, sustainability, and community engagement.

A case study of the University of Szczecin will provide a better understanding of the mechanisms of implementing Corporate Social Responsibility in academic institutions and its potential in supporting sustainable development and stakeholder engagement. The research topic was implemented using the critical evaluation method, including literature analysis, reports, strategic documents, and information published on the university's official websites.

It is important to clarify that this study employed a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in thematic coding. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, relevant CSR-related initiatives were identified through a systematic review of official university documents, including strategic plans, policy statements, reports. Next, initiatives were categorized according to two core CSR dimensions: activities directed towards external stakeholders and activities directed towards internal stakeholders. Coding was performed manually using predefined thematic categories derived from both the literature and institutional priorities. To ensure data reliability and minimize researcher bias, a triangulation strategy was applied by cross-referencing data from multiple independent sources.

2. CSR in the Academic Context

Corporate social responsibility constitutes a complex and multidimensional construct, a characteristic that largely stems from its inherently interdisciplinary nature. As a result, CSR is defined and interpreted in diverse ways across academic literature, international policy documents, and institutional frameworks. The multitude of definitions and thematic approaches to CSR not only reflects the richness of the discourse but also underscores the growing significance and popularity of the concept within the field of management studies. In a broad academic context, CSR encompasses a wide array of interrelated concepts such as corporate responsibility, corporate accountability, business ethics, corporate citizenship, responsible entrepreneurship, and sustainable development, including environmental stewardship (Lu et al., 2019).

The concept of the "social responsibility of the university" gained broader recognition in the 1980s, largely due to the influential work of D. Bok in his book *Beyond the Ivory Tower. Social Responsibility of the Modern Universities* (Bok, 1982). In this publication, Bok emphasized the fundamental values that underpin academic institutions, and he critically examined the ethical and social challenges confronting modern universities. Importantly, he went beyond diagnosis and proposed practical solutions, thus offering one of the first comprehensive analyses of the university's role and obligations toward society. His work laid the foundation for further discussions on how higher education institutions should engage with societal issues in an ethically responsible manner.

As social responsibility of organizations is concerned with economic, legal, altruistic, and moral responsibilities, in the same sense institutions of higher education are required to exceed their fundamental responsibility of developing students, creating research and community outreach, and adjust these activities to the concept of USR (Ali et al., 2020).

In the evolving discourse on the role of higher education institutions in modern society, it becomes increasingly evident that their mission extends far beyond traditional teaching and research activities. Universities are expected to serve as active agents of societal progress, contributing to sustainable development and social well-being through their core functions and institutional behavior. This broader perspective is reflected in the following definition from the Oxford Research Encyclopedia (Vargas, 2023) "University social responsibility is an approach that goes beyond understanding the university as a transmitter of content and the training of future professionals. As an institution, it has a social mission: to positively transform and promote the social, economic and environmental development. It draws on the morality, ethics and responsibility of the entire university community to promote a culture and awareness of evaluation and self-assessment". This conceptualization underscores the comprehensive and integrative nature of USR, positioning it as a shared responsibility that mobilizes all stakeholders within the university. It also highlights the importance of ethical commitment and reflective practices as foundations for institutional accountability and long-term societal impact.

According to Reiser (2007), the concept of University Social Responsibility refers to the ethical commitment of the entire academic community—including students, academic staff, and administrative personnel—to managing the educational, research-related, labor, and environmental impacts generated by the institution. This responsibility is exercised through active and reciprocal engagement with society, with the overarching aim of fostering sustainable human development.

USR is regarded as an innovative and strategic management approach within the context of higher education institutions (Valencia-Arias et al., 2024). K. Leja (2008) defines a socially responsible university as one that actively responds to societal needs by fostering close cooperation with the business sector and local government, while also ensuring that graduates are equipped to serve as knowledge workers who contribute to the development of the socio-economic environment.

The social responsibility of a higher education institution is a commitment of the university institution to develop initiatives that promote its relationship with the different social groups of society (Mesequer-Sánchez et al., 2020). Moreover, a socially responsible university is a higher education institution serving its environment whose responsibility towards the society is related to preparing graduates to perform the function of employees of knowledge and to building close relations with the economic practice and local authorities (Szelągowska-Rudzka et al., 2018, p. 88). Social responsibility enables universities to comprehensively understand the context in which they operate and to recognize the broader societal impact of their activities, extending beyond the immediate region in which they are situated (Brown et al., 2015).

The concept of University Social Responsibility encompasses ethical, political, environmental, social, and educational dimensions—domains in which universities exert a measurable impact, thereby fostering human development processes within their respective regions (Espinoza Santeli et al., 2018). In this way, USR positions universities as key agents of regional sustainable development.

The strategy of social responsibility should be closely aligned with the university's overall strategic framework and serve as a response to external challenges, including social, economic, and environmental changes. From this perspective, social responsibility becomes an inherent element of the university's identity — embedded in its vision, mission, and core values, and further reflected in strategic objectives, institutional policies, dedicated programs, and operational procedures (Bukowska-Piestrzyńska et al., 2025). This comprehensive integration of social responsibility into the university's strategic and operational structure highlights its long-term commitment to societal engagement. It suggests that social responsibility is not an isolated initiative, but rather a guiding principle that permeates institutional culture and decision-making processes.

It is worth emphasizing that the concept of University Social Responsibility is not merely a set of operational actions, but above all a philosophy that should be embraced by every higher education institution as an ethical framework for its development and for active engagement

with both regional and global communities (Kieźel et al., 2021). USR assumes that the university does not operate in isolation but plays a vital role in shaping the quality of its surrounding environment, contributing to responsible, sustainable, and inclusive social development.

The Ministry of Education and Science in Poland encourages higher education institutions to join the Declaration of Social Responsibility of Universities, which represents a voluntary commitment to promoting sustainable development and social responsibility in academic curricula, as well as in university management and organizational practices. By signing the Declaration, universities demonstrate their proactive stance on integrating these values into both education and governance (The Ministry of Education and Science, 2025). Among the signatories is the University of Szczecin, along with 76 other institutions from across Poland. In total, 160 universities have signed the Declaration of Social Responsibility of Universities across three rounds of endorsement in 2017, 2019, and 2022.

3. Selected CSR initiatives at the University

The University of Szczecin, established in 1984, is the largest public higher education institution in the West Pomeranian region of Poland. It plays a vital role in the academic, cultural, and social life of the city and region. The mission of the University of Szczecin is to educate and shape young people in the spirit of humanistic, democratic, and pro-social values. The values that guide the University's activities are integrity, openness, commitment, and responsibility. The institution emphasizes values such as academic freedom, sustainable development, and social engagement, which are reflected in its strategic documents and various initiatives. As a public university, it is committed not only to education and research, but also to contributing to the well-being of its stakeholders through socially responsible practices.

Socially responsible practices are directed toward both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders of a university include academic and research staff, administrative employees, students, and the university's leadership, such as the rector, deans, directors, and department heads. External stakeholders, on the other hand, encompass graduates, employers and other businesses, the media, the local community, and various organizations with which the university cooperates. These groups play a significant role in shaping and evaluating the university's social responsibility efforts.

The University of Szczecin's development strategy for 2019-2028 articulates a comprehensive approach to integrating CSR into its institutional framework. The strategy emphasizes the university's commitment to sustainable development, ethical governance, and active engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. Key objectives include fostering social inclusion, promoting environmental sustainability, and enhancing economic

responsibility through education, research, and community outreach. These strategic directions align with global standards and reflect the university's dedication to embedding CSR principles across all facets of its operations (University of Szczecin, 2025a).

Among the noteworthy examples of good CSR practices at the University of Szczecin is the establishment of dedicated institutional roles and committees specifically focused on the promotion and coordination of corporate social responsibility. At the University of Szczecin, there is a position of the Rector's Plenipotentiary for Corporate Social Responsibility. The Rector's Plenipotentiary for Corporate Social Responsibility at the University of Szczecin is responsible for promoting CSR principles, sustainable development, and green economy among all university stakeholders. This includes raising awareness of the university's ecological, cultural, and social responsibilities, organizing educational and environmental initiatives, and monitoring compliance with CSR standards.

In 2024, the University of Szczecin established the Rector's Committee for University Social Responsibility, providing further evidence of the institution's commitment to integrating social responsibility into its strategic and operational framework. The Committee is responsible for promoting and overseeing university social responsibility, integrating sustainability and ethics into academic activities, engaging stakeholders, and supporting the university's social and environmental transformation.

In order to strengthen its commitment to equality and non-discrimination, the University of Szczecin has introduced dedicated roles of Equality Officers for both employees and for students and doctoral candidates. Appointed by the Rector for the duration of their term, these officers are responsible for promoting equal treatment and addressing issues related to discrimination and harassment within the academic community. Their duties include conducting proceedings, organizing awareness-raising initiatives, supporting the implementation of anti-discrimination policies, and acting as confidential contacts for those affected. Additionally, they analyze structural challenges, mediate conflicts, and provide recommendations aimed at improving institutional practices in the area of equal opportunity and fairness.

As part of a broader institutional commitment to social responsibility, equality, and inclusion, the University of Szczecin has also established the Support Office for Persons with Disabilities. Its activities were initiated in 2007 by the Rector of the University. The creation of this unit reflects the university's strategic approach to ensuring equal opportunities in education and fostering an inclusive academic environment.

The primary mission of the office is to provide tailored support to students with disabilities, enabling them to fully participate in the educational process. At the same time, it offers practical and substantive assistance to academic and administrative staff working with students who hold disability certificates.

The establishment of these positions reflects the University of Szczecin's strategic commitment to corporate social responsibility, sustainable development, and the principles of equality and inclusion. The initiatives undertaken by the appointed officers aim to integrate these values into the university's mission and daily operations, while also fostering constructive relationships with both internal and external stakeholders.

Another important instrument of socially responsible policy at the university is the implementation of various codes of conduct addressed to both staff and students. The norms and principles outlined in these documents serve as practical guidelines for appropriate behavior in specific situations, helping individuals distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable actions. At the University of Szczecin, such documents include the Code of Ethics for Academic Teachers, the Student Code of Ethics, and the Good Practices at the University of Szczecin, which is specifically addressed to students. These codes reflect the university's commitment to fostering a culture of integrity, responsibility, and mutual respect within the academic community.

In accordance with this Code, academic teachers are expected to carry out their research, teaching, and public engagement with integrity, honesty, and responsibility. They are required to uphold ethical principles related to respect for life, human and animal welfare, environmental protection, personal autonomy, intellectual honesty, and the fulfillment of professional commitments. These standards encompass both general moral conduct and professional academic ethics. It also clearly prohibits any form of discrimination based on gender, skin color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, belief system, disability, age, or sexual orientation, underscoring the University's commitment to equality, inclusivity, and respect within the academic community (University of Szczecin, 2025b).

Based on the ethical principles set out in the Student Code of Ethics at the University of Szczecin, a number of values align closely with the principles of corporate social responsibility, particularly in the domains of ethics, equality, and respect for human dignity. According to the Code, students are expected to seek truth through the acquisition of knowledge and self-improvement, and to exercise freedom of speech with due regard for facts and standards of fair argumentation. Importantly, they are required to respect differing viewpoints and individuals expressing them, while avoiding all forms of discrimination. This provision directly reinforces CSR principles related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (University of Szczecin, 2025c).

What is more, students are encouraged to uphold integrity in their academic work by respecting intellectual property and adhering to ethical standards when using artificial intelligence. These aspects resonate with the broader CSR agenda of responsible use of technology and knowledge sharing.

Additionally, students are expected to care for the well-being of the academic community, foster interpersonal relations with respect and courtesy, and avoid conduct that violates social norms.

Another socially responsible initiative undertaken by the University of Szczecin, targeting a broad spectrum of stakeholders—including businesses, the media, local authorities, and the wider academic community—is the annual “Równa Firma” (Equal Company) competition. The primary objective of this initiative is to recognize socially responsible organizations within the region that demonstrate voluntary and proactive engagement in practices that go beyond legal requirements, particularly in their commitment to employees, contractors, local communities, and environmental sustainability.

It is important to emphasize that the exemplary practices highlighted through this competition have served as the foundation for the development of CSR good practice guides. These guides offer valuable insights for other organizations, showcasing which types of socially responsible activities are appreciated by the surrounding community and should be rewarded not only through public recognition, but also by consumers’ purchasing decisions. In this sense, the initiative serves as a mechanism for shaping consumer awareness and encouraging ethical market behavior.

Moreover, the “Równa Firma” competition exemplifies effective university engagement with the socio-economic environment. It facilitates collaborative projects involving academic staff and students, integrating CSR-related case studies into educational processes and providing a basis for bachelor’s and master’s theses. In this context, corporate social responsibility becomes a strategic tool for building an organization’s image—not only in the marketplace but also in the labor market and academic environment—through internships, student placements, recruitment of future employees, and joint research activities.

The University of Szczecin engages in multifaceted cooperation with its socio-economic environment. One of the key initiatives in this regard is the establishment of Employer Councils, whose primary objective is to align educational programs with the needs and expectations of the regional labor market. The University organizes open meetings between students, academic staff, and invited entrepreneurs, as well as representatives of local business support institutions. Encounters with practitioners on campus constitute a crucial component of the educational process, as they facilitate the exchange of practical knowledge and professional experiences. Such interactions also contribute significantly to the development of students’ interpersonal skills. Moreover, academic staff members actively participate in various initiatives carried out in collaboration with the socio-economic environment. These include participation in conferences, delivery of training sessions, and the organization of cyclical meetings with industry professionals.

An integral part of the University’s commitment to maintaining high educational standards is its Internal Quality Assurance System. This system encompasses activities such as regular review and verification of study programs, monitoring of educational delivery, tracking of alumni career trajectories to enhance teaching practices, incorporation of employer feedback into curriculum development, and analysis of internship outcomes. These mechanisms ensure

that the education provided remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the evolving demands of the job market.

At the University of Szczecin, various charitable and socially oriented initiatives are organized on a regular basis. These include numerous donation drives—for example, for children living in orphanages, animals in shelters, or individuals residing in long-term care facilities. Another notable example of socially responsible engagement undertaken by the University of Szczecin is the organization of holiday blood donation campaigns. These initiatives are typically held in the weeks preceding Christmas and are aimed at mobilizing the academic community—students, faculty, and staff alike—to respond to the pressing needs of the healthcare system during a season traditionally associated with solidarity and care for others.

Other socially responsible initiatives at the University include, for instance: the installation of pink boxes in women's restrooms (providing free personal hygiene products such as pads and tampons for those in need), social rooms where employees can prepare meals, and a range of facilities for individuals with disabilities, such as architectural accessibility and psychological support.

An exemplary good practice in the area of university-level corporate social responsibility is the University of Szczecin's Equality Plan for 2022–2024, which provides a strategic framework for promoting inclusive hiring practices. This document explicitly addresses the need to ensure equal access to employment opportunities by eliminating structural barriers and unconscious biases in recruitment and selection procedures. The plan introduces measures such as gender-balanced recruitment committees, the standardization of candidate evaluation criteria, and the systematic collection of data on hiring patterns to monitor equity outcomes. It also emphasizes support for individuals from underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities and those returning to work after caregiving responsibilities. The plan constitutes a concrete and transferable model of inclusive recruitment policy within the broader context of socially responsible governance in higher education.

The examples presented above represent only a selection of the wide range of initiatives undertaken by the University of Szczecin in the field of social responsibility. The University continuously develops and implements new actions, responding to the needs of the socio-economic environment while fulfilling its mission as a modern and engaged academic institution.

The University conducts its socially responsible activities across three main dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. This includes initiatives aimed at environmental sustainability, actions fostering social inclusion and well-being, and dynamic cooperation with the business sector to support regional economic development.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the analysis of CSR at the University of Szczecin reveals several noteworthy strengths and areas of good practice. These findings may serve as a foundation for further development of responsible management practices within the academic environment.

One of the most prominent strengths of the University of Szczecin in the area of CSR is the strong and visible commitment of the university's leadership to the principles of social responsibility. This is evidenced by the establishment of dedicated positions, committees, and working groups focused specifically on CSR-related matters. Such institutional structures reflect a strategic approach to embedding social responsibility within the organizational framework of the university.

Another important asset is the incorporation of socially responsible actions into key university documents, including the overarching strategic plan as well as the strategies of individual faculties and institutes. This alignment demonstrates that CSR is not treated as an isolated initiative but rather as an integral component of the university's long-term vision and mission.

Additionally, the university has implemented a number of internal regulations and codes addressed to its internal stakeholders, including staff and students. These documents outline a set of principles, rules, and procedures designed to guide the behavior of members of the academic community. Importantly, they serve an educational and supportive function by promoting appropriate standards of conduct. They also provide practical guidance to employees and students in making ethical and socially responsible decisions in various situations encountered within the university context.

The University of Szczecin also demonstrates a strong connection with its socio-economic environment. Initiatives such as the “Równa Firma” competition exemplify how academic teaching and research are interwoven with CSR values. Through collaborative projects involving both staff and students, CSR-related themes are embedded into educational processes, often forming the basis for theses and case studies. These initiatives enhance the University's contribution to building responsible organizational cultures within the broader community.

Another important strength of the University's CSR policy is its proactive and sustained collaboration with external stakeholders. This is exemplified by the establishment of Employer Councils, the organization of public competitions and rankings such as the “Równa Firma” initiative, and numerous charitable actions undertaken in partnership with local communities. By fostering long-term relationships with employers, NGOs, and civic institutions, the University reinforces its role not only as an educational institution but also as a socially responsive and community-embedded organization.

Despite the diversity and broad scope of the initiatives presented, it should be noted that the University of Szczecin has not yet implemented a comprehensive evaluation framework enabling the systematic measurement of the effectiveness and impact of its CSR-related activities. The absence of clearly defined assessment criteria and performance indicators limits the ability to compare individual initiatives, identify areas requiring further intervention, and monitor progress over time. The development and implementation of a coherent evaluation system—based on measurable outcomes and results—would contribute to greater transparency of undertaken activities and strengthen the strategic planning process in this domain.

The University of Szczecin has made considerable progress in implementing CSR practices. However, certain areas still present opportunities for improvement. One such area is the systematic reporting of socially responsible activities. The University has not published annual social responsibility reports addressed to its stakeholders. The introduction of such reports would significantly enhance transparency, facilitate the evaluation of ongoing initiatives, and strengthen stakeholder trust. Social reporting serves as a key instrument for communicating the institution's values, achievements, and commitments, and aligns the University with global standards of responsible governance. The systematic publication of an annual sustainability report, potentially aligned with international standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), would enhance both internal accountability and external credibility.

Another area requiring attention is the communication of CSR-related activities through social media platforms, particularly newer channels such as YouTube and TikTok. These platforms represent powerful tools for outreach, especially among younger audiences. By leveraging social media more effectively, the University could broaden public awareness of its socially responsible initiatives, foster greater engagement within the academic community, and position itself as a forward-looking and accessible institution.

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