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SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF UNIVERSITIES – FROM DECLARATION TO IMPLEMENTATION

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to present the results of research concerning the implementation process of the concept of social responsibility at Polish universities that, between 2017 and 2022, formally joined the group of signatories of the "Declaration of Social Responsibility of Universities" (USR Declaration, 2022).

Design/methodology/approach: The empirical findings are presented against the background of a literature review. This article is part of a broader research project entitled "Social Responsibility in the University Value Chain" (2024-2026), funded by the Angelus Silesius University of Applied Sciences. The empirical study was conducted in 2024 and involved the analysis and assessment of information on USR practices published on the websites of 39 Polish higher education institutions (HEIs) that had signed the "Declaration of University Social Responsibility".

Findings: Based on literature and empirical studies, the authors demonstrates that the USR aligns with the principles of modern university management, and that its incorporation into the organisational structure may effectively contribute to enhancing institutional resilience to risks, as well as to the development of future-oriented competencies.

Originality/value: The essence of the presented approach lies in the continuous development of cooperation among various groups of external and internal stakeholders (students, university staff, representatives of the socio-economic environment, etc.). This cooperation may result in the creation of interdisciplinary teams, developing strategies and action plans aimed at better aligning academic education with the needs not only of the labour market but also of future generations. The research conducted in 2024 among the universities that are signatories of the "USR Declaration" led to the creation of a list of good practices, which may serve as inspiration for those institutions wishing to develop the idea of USR.

Keywords: social responsibility, university, social responsibility of universities, university management, external stakeholders.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Higher education today faces numerous challenges – social, technological, and economic.

One of these challenges is generational diversity, with the most commonly distinguished groups being: BB (Baby Boomers) – often company executives or retirees over the age of 61; Generation X – aged 45-60; Generation Y (Millennials) – aged 29-44; and Generation Z – currently aged 13-27. Additionally, the mid-2020s are indicated as the final birth years of those belonging to Generation Alpha (Stolarczyk, 2024, pp. 303-304; EY Poland, 2025).

This diversity requires universities to consider the evolving needs of all stakeholder groups in both their development strategies and ongoing activities: students (full-time and part-time), academic teachers, administrative staff, and representatives of the socio-economic environment collaborating with the university. Another major challenge to the teaching and research activities conducted at universities is the rapid development of technologies, including artificial intelligence. Unpredictable needs and risks increasingly underscore the importance of enhancing institutional resilience to dynamic change (Hnatyszak, 2018, p. 336).

Addressing these challenges calls for modern university management, where decisions are not only evidence-based but also justified from the perspective of all stakeholder groups: students, staff, local communities, business representatives, local government units, and others.

In response to these dynamically evolving needs and challenges, the concept of sustainable development and university social responsibility has emerged. These concepts direct the actions of higher education institutions toward socially relevant aspects such as ethics, organisational governance, transparency, integrity, accountability, concern for current and future generations, and environmental stewardship (Detyna, 2023, pp. 208-234; Detyna, 2024a, pp. 65-66). In this context, it is worth noting that the "USR Declaration", signed thus far by 160 Polish universities, comprises 12 principles to which the research results refer in the description of good practices¹.

2. Literature Review

The idea of social responsibility was popularised by H.R. Bowen, who defined Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as an organisation's obligation to pursue policies, make decisions, and follow lines of action that are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of society (Bowen, 1953, p. 6). Since the 1950s, the concept has evolved – from a focus on the decisions

¹ Since 2017, Polish universities have been increasingly joining the group of signatories of the "Declaration of University Social Responsibility". In 2022, this group grew by an additional 77 institutions, bringing the total number of public and private higher education institutions involved to 160.

of individual entrepreneurs or managers to the activities of the entire organisation (Bolibok, 2022; Khoo, Monroe, 2022). Contemporary literature points to the need for comprehensive and multidimensional implementation of CSR across all areas of organisational functioning, emphasising the importance of the environment, customers, employees, and investors (Latif, Bunce, Ahmad, 2021, pp. 815-829). A key manifestation of organisational social responsibility should be its civic stance (Porter, Kramer, 2007, p. 85).

The integrative and comprehensive nature of CSR is emphasised by the European Commission, which states that socially responsible organisations should consider social and environmental issues in their operations in collaboration with stakeholders and on a voluntary basis (Circular Economy Portal in Practice, 2025). In this context, the lasting success of an organisation (university) stems from continuous dialogue with the environment, taking into account aspects such as environmental protection and the building of social capital.

It is also worth noting that, according to ISO 26000, a socially responsible organisation bases its actions on transparent and ethical conduct that contributes to sustainable development, including societal well-being and health, considers stakeholder expectations, complies with applicable law and international standards of behaviour, and is integrated into and practised within the organisation's operations (Luty-Michalak, Kotowska-Wójcik, 2016, pp. 5-12; Buglewicz, 2018, pp. 7-11; Meftah, Kuzey, Uyar, Karaman, 2023, p. 113762; Awad, 2025, pp. 181-192). The key areas of CSR include: organisational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, community involvement, and the development of local communities (ISO 26000; Gerged, 2023; PKN, 2025). The common denominator across various definitions of social responsibility is the principle that organisations, regardless of their field of activity, should act in a socially and environmentally responsible manner (Detyna, 2023, pp. 208-234). Socially responsible practices today include not only adherence to ethical standards in relations with employees, competitors, and clients (e.g., students, staff, research institutions in the case of universities), but also increased investment in human resources, support for local community development, and environmental protection.

University management should therefore constantly consider the social consequences of decisions that affect broad social groups – stakeholders and the natural environment. A socially responsible approach requires analysing not only the strategic, tactical, and operational objectives adopted by the university, but also the methods of their implementation.

In responding to the needs of all stakeholder groups, universities should consider the expectations of their partners, which usually concern three general categories of higher education institution functioning and impact (Duque, 2019, pp. 451-464; Comoli, Gelmini, Minutiello, Tettamanzi, 2021, pp. 1-22; El-Kassar, Makki, Gonzalez-Perez, 2023, pp. 142-165). These categories typically include social and ethical aspects, issues related to environmental protection, and organisational governance, including systemic solutions for organisation and management within the university (Merta-Staszczak, Serafin, Staszczak, 2020, pp. 91-107;

Nguyen, Khanh, 2022, pp. 712-728; Godonoga, Sporn, 2023, pp. 445-459). According to the authors, the potential benefits and opportunities of implementing and practically applying the USR concept can be considered across various dimensions and contexts of university activity, including: ethics, responsiveness to labour market needs, quality of education, social relations, management, sustainable development, scientific research, innovation, entrepreneurship, competitive value, and marketing, including image communication (Detyna, 2024b, pp. 65-72).

It should be emphasised that through sustainable, continuous development, a university can systematically enhance its competitive value (Godonoga, Sporn, 2023, pp. 445-459). This value may be considered in the context of the benefits the university delivers to society: students, academic teachers, administrative staff, local communities, business representatives, the environment, etc. The development of the USR concept should be driven by the genuine need for continuous building and strengthening of the academic community's integrity – including its identity, organisational culture, and inclusivity. However, according to literature studies, ethics codes, social responsibility strategies, and reports on sustainable development and social responsibility are not commonly applied among the universities that signed the "USR Declaration" (Kaźmierczak, Jastrzębska, Khovrak, 2025, pp. 66-79). The literature review clearly indicated a research gap regarding empirical research conducted in the academic environment regarding the social responsibility of universities. Relatively few published research results in Poland and worldwide concern this issue in the context of communicating social responsibility (including through the university website).

3. Research Methodology

The aim of this article is to present the results of a study on the implementation of the concept of social responsibility in Polish universities that joined the group of signatories of the "Declaration of University Social Responsibility" between 2017 and 2022. The empirical findings are presented against the background of a literature review. This article is part of a broader research project entitled "Social Responsibility in the University Value Chain" (2024-2026), funded by the Angelus Silesius University of Applied Sciences. The empirical study was conducted in 2024 and involved the analysis and assessment of information on USR practices published on the websites of 39 Polish higher education institutions (HEIs) that had signed the "Declaration of University Social Responsibility". These institutions accounted for 24.37% of all HEIs that had signed the Declaration as of 10 February 2025. Of these, 84.55% were public universities and 15.45% were non-public. In terms of institutional profile, the largest group comprised universities (12 universities), followed by vocational HEIs (9) and technical universities (7). The study also included economic universities (4), universities of life sciences (4), and medical universities (3). The sample comprised HEIs from 14 voivodeships,

with the largest groups coming from three: Mazowieckie (7), Dolnośląskie (5), and Lubelskie (4), accounting for a total of 41.03%. USR practices were also analysed in institutions from the following voivodeships: Podlaskie (3), Śląskie (3), Pomorskie (3), Wielkopolskie (3), Małopolskie (3), Zachodniopomorskie (2), Kujawsko-Pomorskie (2), Warmińsko-Mazurskie (1), Łódzkie (1), Opolskie (1), and Podkarpackie (1). In order to identify examples of good USR practices, the study examined university websites and strategic documents such as development strategies, USR strategies, action plans, codes of ethics, and USR reports. Identified good practices were categorised into recommendations corresponding to the 12 principles that form the core of the "USR Declaration" signed by the participating institutions.

4. Research Findings

The vast majority of the universities studied (92.31%) refer to the concept of social responsibility in their development strategies. Most also publish the text of the Declaration on their websites (82.05%). A dedicated subpage focusing on activities related to USR is maintained by 41.03% of the institutions. This suggests that for most universities, the topic of social responsibility is not a prominent part of their image communication strategy. One in three institutions (35.90%) provide information about appointed USR coordinators or relevant teams or committees. Only 23.08% of the analysed HEIs publish reports, typically self-assessments of their implementation of the USR concept. One in ten institutions (10.26%) has developed and published a formal USR strategy online. A slightly larger proportion (17.95%) publish their USR-related objectives. Only one out of the 39 institutions refers to a separate USR budget for a given year. It is relatively uncommon to find extensive and detailed content on institutional websites concerning topics such as USR, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), or ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) – only three institutions provide such materials. These include, for example, documents and links to legislation, monographs, reports, case studies, or collections of good practices (e.g. the 2022 USR Good Practices Catalogue).

Achieving the research objective required identifying examples of good USR practices among the analysed institutions. Table 1 presents examples of such practices in relation to the 12 principles of the "USR Declaration".

Table 1. Good practices of universities in relation to the 12 principles of the "USR Declaration"

No.	Principles as Commitments	Good Practices
110.		- Establishment of an Ethics Committee and an Ethics Officer;
1.	Foster academic values written, among others, in the 'Code of Ethics for Academic Staff,' particularly: diligence, objectivity, independence, openness, and transparency.	 Development of the university's Code of Ethics or separate codes such as the Doctoral Student/Student/Staff Code of Ethics; Publishing the 'Code of Ethics for Academic Staff' on the university website.
2.	Shape the social and civic attitudes of future elites, conducive to community building, creativity, openness and communication, as well as social sensitivity and work culture.	 Development and promotion of educational and health-related campaigns; University membership in the international PRME² forum; 'University Social Responsibility Library' on the website of USR with links to studies, documents, strategies, reports, monographs, guides, etc.
3.	Promote equality, diversity, tolerance, and respect for and protection of human rights for the entire academic community and its environment.	 Appointment of a Rector's Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment or Equal Treatment and Anti-Discrimination; Webpages or tabs such as: 'Equality at the University', 'Counteracting Discrimination', 'Anti-Mobbing', 'Support for Persons with Disabilities', 'Accessibility'; Accessibility Declaration on the university homepage; Provision of sign language interpreting services; Adherence to and promotion of the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact; Organization of 'Problem-Solving Meetings' e.g., for older employees nearing retirement or non-academic staff; Co-financing of nursery and kindergarten care for staff's children.
4.	Expand curricula to include topics on ethics and social responsibility of business, sustainable development, and social innovation.	- Introduction of CSR, SDG, ESG-themed subjects into curricula across all fields of study.
5.	Implement projects that support social responsibility principles, particularly in diversity management, employee volunteering, ethics promotion, cross-sector cooperation, and socially responsible marketing.	 Establishment of a USR Office with a dedicated website – organizing and promoting social skills training, charity events, volunteering, etc.; Project 'University Community Volunteering Map (Empathy Map)' – research on community engagement in volunteering; Promotion of educational and health-related campaigns through student and staff volunteering.
6.	Conduct scientific research and implementation work that, through partnerships with other academic institutions worldwide, the business sector, public administration, and non-governmental organizations, can contribute to solving significant social issues.	 Establishment of the Rector's Committee for USR implementing R&D and educational projects; Internal grant competitions for CSR, ESG, USR-related research; Funding and dissemination of academic publications on USR; Development and online publication of USR promotional materials by the USR Team.
7.	Develop inter-university cooperation, both nationally and internationally, enabling the adaptation and strengthening of best practices in the field of university social responsibility.	 Implementation of HR Excellence in Research standards (working conditions, anti-discrimination, transparent recruitment – HR Excellence in Research, 2025); Participation in the PRME international forum, including reporting on its implementation; Membership in Magna Charta Observatory (signing the MCU document); English version of the university website; English version of the USR Declaration available on the website and social media.

² Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) - The program announced at the Global Compact Leaders Summit (2007), aimed at incorporating CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) concepts into the curriculum of higher education institutions (UN Global Compact, 2025).

Cont. table 1.

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8.	Maintain organizational integrity within the university, basing its management on the principles of corporate social responsibility, both in strategic documents and the actions derived from them, aimed at the comprehensive development of the academic community and the effective implementation of the university's mission	 Easy access to development strategy from the homepage; Explicit references to USR in the strategy, including USR goals; A separate USR Strategy including vision, values, principles, diagnosis, stakeholders, strategic goals; Implementation report of USR with self-assessment of all 12 principles included in the USR Declaration; Employee Budget within participatory budgeting – staff decide on annual fund allocation.
9.	Ensure transparency in university operations by measuring outcomes, promoting and disseminating achievements, and identifying a responsible team or person.	 Identification of the USR Team and its tasks on the university website; Annual USR report developed by interdisciplinary teams; 'Socially Responsible University' webpage – tabs like Education, Ecology, Sport, Culture, Equal Opportunities, Volunteering, For Foreigners, Student Actions; Sharing of USR Strategy texts, regulations, reports, and university best practices, including for Faculties, staff, students, U3A, Student Culture Center.
10.	Operate in a manner that minimizes the negative environmental impact of the university community and its stakeholders in all dimensions.	 Establishment of a Team for Environmental Impact; Promotion and organization of environmental education campaigns; Creation of an ecological responsibility and engagement program; Establishment of a Sustainable Development and Climate Center – with a dedicated webpage, updates, and working groups.
11.	Engage in stakeholder dialogue regarding USR policy priorities and communicate outcomes.	 Appointment of an Academic Ombudsperson; Systemic collaboration with external stakeholders to align curricula with labor market needs – regular meetings, program evaluation research, quality assurance teams, input in new program proposals; Active student and staff participation in university improvement via submission systems, 'kaizens', etc.; USR Strategy implementation diagnosis involving stakeholders; Polish and English USR reports published online.
12.	Follow principles of ethics and responsibility in teaching and research to provide stakeholders with optimal access to knowledge, intellectual capital, and university achievements (USR Declaration, 2022).	 Promotion of ethical codes among staff, including the 'Code of Ethics for Academic Staff'; Signing of the 'Magna Charta Universitatum' (MCU) affirming academic freedom, institutional autonomy, research independence, education free from political or economic influence, and rejection of intolerance.

Source: Authors's own elaboration based on Declaration of University Social Responsibility (USR), 2022.

The informational deficits identified during the study may be surprising considering that the vast majority of institutions include USR and sustainable development in their strategic documents. It is worth noting that these strategies often highlight the importance of communication and collaboration with all stakeholder groups of higher education institutions — including students, staff, and representatives of the broader socio-economic environment, particularly at the local level.

5. Summary

The research conducted by the authors indicates that universities that are signatories of the Declaration of University Social Responsibility (USR) do not fully exploit the potential and impact of the concept of social responsibility on their stakeholder groups. Despite notable informational gaps observed on many university websites, the study has made it possible to compile a relatively extensive list of good practices relating to the 12 USR principles. Among the 39 universities analysed, many demonstrate effective image communication via their websites. The websites of the most communicatively active universities contain a logically structured range of information, indicating that the USR concept has become a significant reference point for their educational, scientific, and organizational activities. This is an important observation, as the authors argues that the idea of university social responsibility aligns well with the trend of modern university management, including the holistic concept of Total Quality Management (TQM). In light of current societal, technological, and economic challenges, embedding functions, task forces (teams), or organizational units dedicated to social responsibility into the university structure may significantly enhance institutional resilience to emerging risks. In this context, a key and recommended action is the continuous development of cooperation among various internal and external stakeholder groups (students, university staff, business representatives, local governments, NGOs, etc.). A socially responsible approach thus entails building and strengthening a network of connections among the university's partners, including the establishment of interdisciplinary teams. These teams could, for example, carry out relevant analyses, prepare diagnoses, and develop strategies and action plans aimed at improving the alignment of the university's offer with contemporary challenges—not only of the labour market but also of current and future generations.

To conclude, the authors emphasizes that the findings presented in the article relate solely to the content published on university websites. Therefore, one cannot assume that activities not mentioned on the websites are not actually being implemented. Nevertheless, the noticeable lack of communication regarding USR suggests that for many of the surveyed institutions, social responsibility is not yet associated with a perceived need to promote this concept among the academic community. It is to be hoped that the example set by USR leaders will help improve this situation in the coming years. According to the authors, the issues presented in the article are relatively little explored scientifically and should be the subject of research in the coming years. Important research problems in the social and economic context may include, among others, issues concerning the relationship between the social responsibility of the university and its effectiveness (including the quality of education). The research potential of USR stems primarily from its multidimensionality – which provides virtually unlimited conceptual possibilities for researchers.

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