# THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS: THE CASE OF A POLISH FACULTY

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**Abstract**

As complex organizations, higher education institutions have proved to be effective structures at creating, developing and implementing the concept of responsibility. The goals of our paper are to briefly present the theoretical approaches regarding the concept of social responsibility of organizations, and to analyze the results of a sociological survey relating to the students' perceptions and opinions on the social responsibility of a Polish faculty. A set of two hypotheses was tested during our research by using primary data obtained from a survey based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The results of our research show that students are taken up with the topic of social responsibility and reflect the increasing alignment between the actions of higher education institutions and the social expectations of their stakeholders. Also, a binomial logistic regression analysis demonstrates that perceptions and awareness of SR actions and rules of behavior are good predictors for positive expectations in relation with future performances of the faculty in this field. If universities and faculties are to be successful in a highly competitive environment then they must satisfy the needs of their main customers, the students.

## Introduction

In a state of hypercompetition, satisfying the interests and needs of consumers constitutes both a moral and an economic imperative for any organization. That's why only adaptive and responsible organizations survive and prosper in the actual turbulent context.

Why do organizations embrace the concept of responsibility? Firstly, over the past decades, responsibility, especially social responsibility (SR), has become a highly fashionable topic in both the academic and business worlds. That is not to say that responsibility did not exist before, but its importance to the continued success of an organization had yet to be recognised. The concept of responsibility has always attracted scholars from various academic disciplines. Thus, it has been approached by philosophers, economists, sociologists, theologians, psychologists, and estheticians. Secondly, the organizations' interactions with a wide range of societal groups and individuals have led them to increasingly adhere and demonstrate their commitment to the concept of responsibility. For

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example, "without relationships with the internal and external constituents, companies will find it difficult to grasp the fluctuating nature of the values, attitudes, and behavior of their stakeholders and respond accordingly" (Pedersen, 2006, p. 140).

As complex organizations, higher education institutions have proved to be effective structures at creating, developing and implementing the concept of responsibility. Higher education is one of the few public spaces left where students can recover the ideal of engaged citizenship and understand the importance of the public good. Although there are numerous studies analysing the concept of SR, relatively few researches investigate the responsibility of organizations in higher education (Burcea and Marinescu, 2011; Geryk, 2011). From our standpoint students' perceptions and opinions regarding the responsibility of universities constitute an important research field. Arising from the above discussion emerge two questions for which we do not have enough adequate evidence in a Polish faculty. These are:

- How do the students appreciate the relationships between the faculty and its main

  stakeholders?

- How do the students appreciate the socially responsible actions initiated by the faculty?

In order to obtain data for these questions the methodological approach was based on an exploratory research (Cătoiu, et al., 2002; Rotariu and Iluț, 1997).

The goals of our paper are to present the theoretical approaches regarding the concept of SR of organizations, and to analyze the results of a sociological survey relating to the students' perceptions and opinions on the social responsibility of a Polish faculty. To such ends, a set of two hypotheses was tested during our research by using primary data obtained from a survey based on a questionnaire.

## 1. Review of the scientific literature

Since the 1930s, a steady stream of research has developed concerning the concept of responsibility of organizations, especially business organizations. A review of the literature reveals numerous definitions and interpretations of this notion. There is not a universally acceptable definition of this concept in the literature. SR of organizations can be defined as the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behavior (ISO 26000, 2010). In other words, SR is taken to mean "a balanced approach for organizations to address economic, social and environmental issues in a way that aims to benefit people, communities and society" (IISD, 2004, pp. 1-2).

In the business literature, corporate social responsibility (CSR) represents a concept "whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 2) or "a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources" (Kotler and Lee, 2005, p. 3). It comprises four components: ethical, economic, legal, and discretionary/philanthropic.

In essence, any organization should take into account two fundamental aspects of responsibility: recognizing its SR within its sphere of influence, and identifying and

engaging with its stakeholders (ISO 26000, 2010). Especially in the past decades "the growing emphasis on social responsibility has affected the relationship between companies and their various stakeholders (e.g., investors, customers, employees, and governments)" (Walker and Kent, 2009, p. 745). The 21st century organizations are coping with pressures for greater social responsibility which come from different sources such as primary stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, owners), secondary stakeholders (e.g., governments, non-governmental organizations, groups of activists) and institutional sources (e.g., global principles and standards). Stakeholder management has become therefore a fundamental issue for socially oriented organizations. As a result, the concept of responsibility has moved from theory to practice, from ideology to socio-economic reality.

In sum, the SR of organizations relates to the organizations that address social, economic and environmental issues in a responsible manner. A responsible company is interested to simultaneously: "a) create economic income, the primary condition for survival (economic results); b) limit the environmental impact of company decisions, in particular those related to manufacturing processes, the use of materials, and product design (environmental results); c) meet the expectations of critical stakeholders (social results)" (Arrigo, 2005, p. 40).

In higher education, the content of the SR of universities may vary 'from providing society with educated elites, via exploiting efficiently the human capital of a country or actively using higher education in order to reduce social inequality by offering support to youngsters from disadvantaged groups, supporting the spread and development of democratic institutions, to providing the opportunity for the entire population to get higher education as a welfare right regardless of academic qualifications' (Bleiklie, 2004, p. 13). Higher education institutions should be encouraged to have a prosocial organizational behavior and to influence their stakeholders in this direction. They have always been preoccupied with the identification and satisfaction the needs of their consumers, the students. "Driven by a sense of environmental and economic responsibility and their link to developing viable social communities" (McTighe Musil, 2009, p. 56), universities educate their students to behave as socially responsible citizens. The Council of the European Union has reaffirmed "the need for universities to have sufficient autonomy, better governance and accountability in their structures to face new societal needs" (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 2). Also, it has acknowledged that "in addition to their two traditional missions of teaching and research, a third mission linking institutions and the business sector, including at regional level, and encompassing social responsibility is of growing importance" (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 5).

## 2. Research methodology

The present study aims to provide an overview of the social responsibility actions of a Polish faculty. In this respect, a key factor was the propagation of the CSR principles in the Polish higher education system (Ministry of Economy, 2008). Perceptions, opinions and attitudes of students are very important as they represent the main consumers of the educational products and services. Our statistical analysis was built on the following two hypotheses:

1. The higher the perceived diversity of clear and correct information provided by the faculty for the stakeholders, the higher the probability of students' positive expectations on future SR strategy of the faculty.

2. The higher the satisfaction of the students with respect to faculty performances in social responsibility field, the higher the probability of students' positive expectations on future SR strategy of the faculty.

In order to validate/invalidate the research hypotheses the authors carried out a sociological survey based on a questionnaire. The total population consisted of 300 undergraduate students enrolled in the third year of study, day courses, from the three academic specializations (each specialization- Administration, Logistics and Management- has 100 students) of the Faculty of Management within the Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities, Poland. In order to obtain a higher relevance of data, a sample of 212 students (71 % of total population) was interviewed: 65 men and 147 women (Table no. 1). Both male and female students, as well as urban and rural residential areas were well represented within the sample structure. The sample met the case of the proportion of male and female students within the Polish faculty: approximately 30 % men and 70 % women.

**Table no. 1 Structure of the sample**

| Characteristics | | Number of students | Proportion (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Specialization | Administration | 68 | 32,1 |
| | Logistics | 76 | 35,8 |
| | Management | 68 | 32,1 |
| | *Total* | *212* | *100* |
| Gender | Male | 65 | 30,7 |
| | Female | 147 | 69,3 |
| | *Total* | *212* | *100* |
| Area of residence | Urban | 161 | 75,9 |
| | Rural | 51 | 24,1 |
| | *Total* | *212* | *100* |

Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire including questions regarding the quality of information offered by the faculty to students, suppliers and local community, the existing procedures for faculty's relationships with various stakeholders, organisational values of the faculty and socio-educational characteristics of the respondents. Students filled in the questionnaires through self-administration in a specially arranged place at the faculty headquarter, using a standardized questionnaire, in the period 01-19.10.2014. The questionnaire was elaborated by the authors and tested on a number of 30 students from the three specializations (10 students from each specialization). During the pre-test period, the average duration of an interview was of 7 minutes. The final form of the questionnaire was established after the progress of the pilot study. After their completion the questionnaires were introduced in a database. Data collection procedures ensured the confidentiality of information provided by the respondents.

### 3. Results and discussion

In order to statistically process the data, the SPSS software was utilized. The results of our research are presented hereinafter:

The nature and the way in which information is provided for various stakeholders represent one of the most important actions of higher education institutions in the SR sphere. From this point of view, the analysed Polish faculty acts in the spirit of SR towards its students. Thus, 44.3% of the respondents declare that they receive clear and correct information from the faculty for all its products and services, while 45.8% receive such information for part of the products and services (Fig. no. 1). The share of those considering that the faculty doesn't provide clear and correct information for students is very low, of only 5.7%. Students who display the highest satisfaction with the information received from the faculty belong to the Management specialization, are female students and come from rural areas.
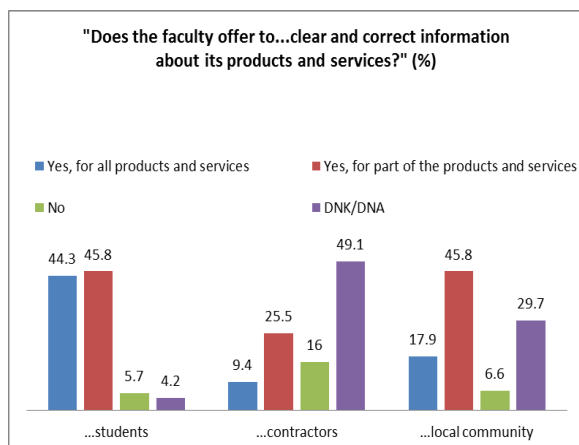


**Fig. no. 1 Students'opinions regarding the way in which the faculty provides information for its stakeholders (DNK= do not know; DNA= do not answer)**

In order to analyse the SR of the faculty in respect to information offered to others, we compute the index of perceived diversity of clear and correct information provided for various stakeholders. The index counts the number of stakeholders for which students perceive that the faculty provides clear and correct information for all its products and services. Therefore, the index can vary between the values 0 (no stakeholder) and 3 (all the investigated stakeholders: students, suppliers and local community). The index takes the value 0 for 52.4% of the students, 1 for 28.8%, 2 for 13.7% and the maximum value for 5.2% of the respondents. Highest diversity is perceived by students from Management specialization, by female students and by those from rural areas.

Most of the investigated students confirm that the faculty is a responsible organization towards its stakeholders, especially its students which are satisfied with the faculty's performances in the field of SR. 50% of the respondents consider that the performances are good and 3% very good, while 29% characterise the performances as satisfactory (Fig. no. 2). Most satisfied respondents are students from Administration, female students and those coming from rural areas. Finally, 43.9% of the investigated students are aware by the fact the faculty elaborates annual reports on SR, while 34.4% declare that the reporting period is longer, meaning that the social responsible activities initiated by the faculty are visible among its students.
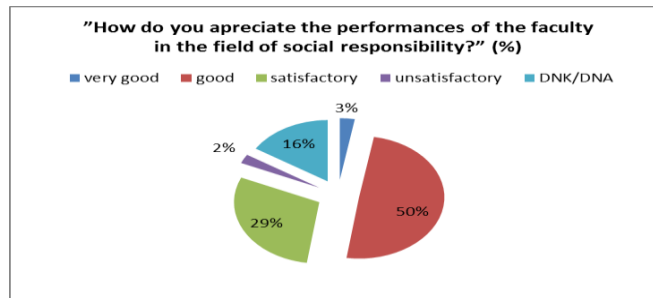
**Fig. no. 2 Students' opinions regarding the performances of the faculty in the SR field**

In order to better understand students' expectations about the future socially responsible actions of the faculty, we performed a binomial logistic regression analysis where the dependent variable refers to the anticipation of future development activities in this domain (Table no. 2). The dependent variable takes the value 1 if the student believes that the faculty has a coherent SR strategy for the future and the value 0 for those who do not share this opinion. Regression analysis includes two categories of independent variables: perceptions of actions of the faculty in this field and variables related to socio-educational profile of students.

**Table 2. Results of the binomial logistic regression (Method: Enter) – dependent variable: perceived future developments of faculty's social responsibility actions (1 = yes and 0 = no)**

| | Exp (B) | Sig. |
|---|---|---|
| *Perception of social responsibility activities* | | |
| Index of perceived diversity of clear and correct information provided for various stakeholders | 1.442 | 0.052 |
| Index of perceived diversity of the procedures for guaranteeing the quality and honesty of the faculty actions | 1.387 | 0.033 |
| Satisfaction with the faculty's performances in social responsibility matter | 6.812 | 0.000 |
| *Socio-educational profile* | | |
| Gender (reference = male) | | |
| *Female* | 0.606 | 0.197 |
| Area of residence (reference = urban) | | |
| *Rural* | 1.020 | 0.960 |
| Specialization (reference = administration) | | |
| *Logistics* | 0.466 | 0.070 |
| *Management* | 0.309 | 0.007 |
| Constanta | 0.344 | 0.036 |
| % corect | 70.8% | |
| Nagelkerke R2 | 0.343 | |

The results show that the main predictors of the dependent variable are the perceptions of students about faculty's actions in the field of SR. Thus, both indexes designed to capture students' perceptions constitute statistically significant independent variables. In this respect, the higher the perceived diversity of clear and correct information provided by the faculty for the stakeholders, the more likely is that students expect a positive future development in the area of SR. Also, the higher the perceived diversity of the procedures for guaranteeing the quality and honesty of the faculty actions, the more likely is that students to have positive expectations on its future strategy in the SR field. The strongest predictor for students' positive expectations is their satisfaction with the faculty's performances in SR matter. In this case, students who are satisfied have 6.8 times higher chance to anticipate a favorable evolution of socially responsible actions. In other words, students who are more informed and aware of SR principles and specific actions are more likely to internalize these messages and have future expectations in this direction. On the other hand, the statistical results show that socio-educational profile of the students (e.g., gender, area of residence, specialization) has no explanation power for the expected future development of faculty's SR actions. In sum, perceptions and awareness of SR actions and rules of behavior are good predictors for positive expectations in relation with future performances of the faculty in this field.

## Conclusions

Our research clearly demonstrates that the topic of responsibility has become prominent in the past decades both in theory and practice. The essence of the new approach on the SR of organizations is best conveyed by reference to ISO 26000 SR standard. As more and more organizations are encouraged to actively contribute to societal wellbeing, they have increasingly implemented the concept of responsibility in their processes and activities. All sorts of organizations, including higher education institutions, have numerous responsibilities towards their various stakeholders. That is why the number of responsible organizations has continuously increased all over the world.

Today, universities in general, and faculties in particular, are fulfilling their role in society far more coherently and professionally. The SR of a faculty doesn't constitute an extracurricular activity; it is rather part of its essence and of its way of being. If universities and faculties are to be successful in a highly competitive environment then they must satisfy the needs of their main customers, the students.

The results of our study show that students are taken up with the topic of social responsibility and reflect the increasing alignment between the actions of higher education institutions and the social expectations of their stakeholders. Most of the investigated students are aware of the importance of the responsibility concept in higher education and appreciate the socially responsible actions of their faculty. The research has validated the two initial hypotheses. Our study confirms the results of other researches carried out in the Polish universities on the same subject (Geryk, 2011).

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