

UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: CROATIAN PERSPECTIVE

Željka Kadlec (*Virovitica University of Applied Sciences*¹)

Mirna Leko Šimić (*J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia*²)

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to get insight into the university social responsibility (USR) context in Croatia and identify its components and implementation. The study uses content analysis in the revision of universities' websites and its contents related to social responsibility. The analysis relies on ISO 26000 Guide and considers seven components of social responsibility: organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and community involvement and development. Results indicate that Croatian universities still do not sufficiently perceive USR importance – neither in creating, practicing, nor reporting. Croatian universities perceive their social responsibility mostly as related to primary stakeholders (students and institution management and staff), and to their primary roles of education and research. The importance of contribution to the community is still insufficiently recognized.

Keywords: *social responsibility, university, content analysis, Croatia, ISO 26000 guide*

Clasificación JEL: M14

RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL UNIVERSITARIA: LA PERSPECTIVA CROATA

Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es conocer el contexto de la Responsabilidad Social Universitaria (RSU) en Croacia e identificar sus componentes e implementación. El estudio utiliza el análisis de contenido en la revisión de los sitios web de las universidades y sus contenidos relacionados con la responsabilidad social. El análisis se basa en la Guía ISO 26000 y considera siete componentes de la responsabilidad social: gobernanza organizacional, derechos humanos, prácticas laborales, medio ambiente, prácticas justas de operación, asuntos relacionados con el consumidor y participación y desarrollo de la comunidad. Los resultados indican que las universidades croatas aún no perciben suficientemente la importancia de la RSU, ni en la creación, la práctica ni la presentación de informes. Las universidades croatas perciben su responsabilidad social principalmente en relación con las partes interesadas primarias (estudiantes y dirección y personal de la institución) y con sus funciones principales de educación e investigación. La importancia de la contribución a la comunidad aún no se reconoce suficientemente

Palabras clave: *responsabilidad social, Universidad, análisis de contenido, Croacia, guía ISO 26000*

¹ Virovitica University of Applied Sciences, Matije Gupca 78, 33000 Virovitica, Croatia, zeljka.kadlec@vuv.hr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7484-4933>

² Faculty of Economics in Osijek, Trg Ljudevita Gaja 7, 31000, Osijek, Croatia, lekom@efos.hr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6637-3278>

1. Introduction

Social responsibility is a widely accepted concept in the business world. It represents company co-responsibility with its environment, local community, culture and other factors. In EU it is defined as a concept of integration of social issues care, environment protection and business activities. The major principles of social responsibility are: responsibility, transparency, ethics, and respect of stakeholders' interests, laws, international norms and human rights.

Only recently we witness the increasing implementation of social responsibility concept in non-business areas, including universities. This is closely related to the introduction of Triple helix model and increasing focus on university "third mission" - university active engagement in development of local/regional/national community. Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz (1998) argue that, beside the first two university missions - teaching and research, the third mission – contribution to innovation and social change is gaining on importance. In other words, activities of universities are extended beyond education and research and are also focusing on services for the local community, which requires partnership with different interest groups (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008).

A decade old study of Čulum & Ledić (2011) emphasizes lack of studies on university social responsibility in Croatia. Their study, among the first ones in Croatia, concludes that there is not a single university in Croatia that recognizes the importance of social responsibility of educational institutions and there is not a single statutory document at any university that recognizes the relation between education and social responsibility.

The aim of this paper is to get insight into the university social responsibility context in Croatia after a decade of Čulum & Ledić study (2011) and identify the implementation of social responsibility concept and major elements that create it in university context in Croatia. The study uses qualitative methodology (content analysis) in analysis of universities' web sites and its contents related to social responsibility. We use Nejati, Shafaei, Salamzadeh & Darae (2011) approach based on ISO 26000 norm and seven components of social responsibility: organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and community involvement and development, adapted to the university context.

2. Literature overview

Universities, as the most prominent centers of education and the most important hubs of knowledge creation and dissemination play the very important role in linking local needs and specifics and creating networks to influence processes and changes in the society. The above mentioned "third mission" of the university refers to its social impact and contribution to the social development of the community (Čulum & Turk, 2012).

In this context Chen, Nasongkhla & Donaldson (2015) define university social responsibility (USR) as a philosophy that relies on ethical approach to development of local and global community in order to maintain the social, economic, ecological and technical development. Universities can contribute to the society they operate in by creating interactive communication and promoting sustainable development through education, research and different services to the community.

Throughout recent decades the socially responsible university has been interpreted and explained. Efijani, Hussain & Chang (2013) identify that, despite differences, the major university obligations in context of social responsibility are the same. They are focused on curriculum creation and high quality preparation of students for their future jobs, on creation of access to education for different social groups on enabling the high quality of graduates. Moreover, university should actively involve in improvement of local community through research it can provide, and include different models of social learning and teaching.

Barroso (2007) considers a socially responsible university as the one which: a) contributes to life quality of employees, investing on people and promoting a respectful and dignified workplace for everyone; b)

takes care and preserves the environment; c) applies an ethical behavior code on stakeholders treatment; d) has a connection with the community, from the organization's mission statement and beyond philanthropy. Fryzel (2011) states that the settling of social responsibility in a university must be accomplished by internal quality guarantee systems incorporation and the existence of a complete strategic process, including all the different stakeholders. Vallaey (2014) has created a rather simple model of university social responsibility. He identifies four different impacts that university has on a society: organizational, cognitive, educational and social.

Figure 1. University social responsibility model



Source: Vallaey, F. (2014)

In this approach we see the distinction between impacts traditionally related to university (organizational, educational and cognitive) that reflect the internal social responsibility and social impact that corresponds to the "third mission" of the university and represents the external social responsibility.

Integration of social responsibility in university policies makes these institutions active in creating a positive impact on political, economic and social processes in the society. In contemporary society, promotion of university social responsibility is a key aspect of European and national recommendations in the context of desirable university policies and university well-being (Vázquez, Lanero & López Aza, 2015). Wigmore-Alvarez & Ruiz-Lozano study (2012) concludes that the key barrier to social responsibility implementation in universities is transparency. According to them, it can be efficiently overcome by reporting on sustainability and social responsibility practices. The major purpose of such reporting is to motivate and advocate such behaviour.

A study by Oliveira, Leitao and Alves (2020) on EU-15 public higher education institutions' web sites shows that the principles of social responsibility are highly adopted and that institutional commitment to sustainability is recognized. Universities that adopt practices of social responsibility and formalize their policies and strategies in such manner result in good positions in performance ranking. Youness (2012) used the Balanced Scorecard methodology to identify the position of Lebanese private universities, in relation to social responsibility. A recent Brazilian study on university social responsibility (Cunha Bastos, Barbosa de Souza & Hoffmann, 2019) applies Carroll's pyramid of social responsibility to the university context. The authors compare public and private university in relation to social responsibility and from the viewpoints of different stakeholders. They also did content analysis of Institutional Development Plans, management reports, statutes, regulations, notices, and other data available on internet in relation to Carroll's dimensions of social responsibility.

In Croatian companies, i.e. business sector, although the concept of CSR is well known, CSR practices are faced with the major problems of not being focused and of inconsistency in CSR implementation (Leko Šimić & Čarapić, 2009). Wasserbauer, Novaković & Vučetić (2011) also agree that the implementation of social responsibility in the business sector is rather slow, so academia serves as a leader and a benchmark in adoption, development and dissemination of knowledge and experience.

One of the most comprehensive studies on university social responsibility in Croatia was conducted by Čulum & Ledić (2011). This study states that none of Croatian universities recognizes the importance of social responsibility in relation to academic staff and teaching as well as to university governance. This conclusion is based on non-existent documents or statutory provisions identifying relation between education and social responsibility. Only one university relates research and social responsibility and three universities identify relation of university and local community. Afrić Rakitovac & Žužić (2014) study confirm it and state that Croatian higher education system provides only basic knowledge about social responsibility concept, its implementation and benefits.

The aim of this study is to get insight into the university social responsibility context in Croatia and identify the implementation of social responsibility and major elements that create it.

3. Research

This study focuses on qualitative research of Croatian universities' official web sites and their contents related to social responsibility. As it is found in several studies (Poock & Lefond, 2001; Wilson & Meyer, 2009; Ostojić, 2020), university official web sites are one of the major sources of information for many stakeholders and therefore should contain all important facts and issues. It is significant for university reputation and competitiveness in the higher education market, which becomes increasingly competitive. A corporation (or any kind of organization) cannot earn a good reputation without first obtaining approval from its stakeholders through corporate communication or reports submissions (King & Whetten, 2008). In case of social responsibility, it is particularly true.

3.1. Croatian higher education area

According to the latest public data (www.azvo.hr), there are 130 higher education institutions in Croatia – 104 of them are public institutions and 26 are private. They are of different kinds (faculties, departments, academies, colleges and polytechnics). Faculties, departments and academies are organized in universities, while colleges and polytechnics are independent institutions of higher education.

The focus of this study is on universities – there are 8 public universities and 2 private ones. Universities are roof institutions in higher education and if the social responsibility concept is built in their policies, all the members (faculties, departments and academies) of the university are obliged to follow these policies.

All strategic documents of the university are, by law, created and decided upon by University Senate, which is made of faculty, department and academy deans.

3.2. Methodology

The content analysis of universities' web sites is used with the aim of providing insight into the concept, implementation and identify the most important components as perceived by Croatian universities. The analysis relies on the study conducted by Nejati et al. (2011) who have used the ISO 26000 norm and analyzed seven components of social responsibility: organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and finally community involvement and development. They were adapted to fit the university context. The adapted components are briefly explained in Table 1.

3.3. Findings and discussion

University social responsibility, especially organizational governance, should be visible through the university mission and vision as their basic commitments. All but two Croatian universities do mention social responsibility and sustainability as important issues in their activities within their mission statements. One public and one private university miss to mention it in their mission and vision, while, on the other hand, three public universities define themselves as socially responsible institutions in their mission statements.

Table 1. ISO 26000 components of social responsibility applied to university

| COMPONENT | DESCRIPTION |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Organizational Governance | Accountability, transparency, providing fact and figures |
| Human Rights | Diversity, i.i. making no discrimination among students, applicants, staff, etc. |
| Labor Practices | Ensuring human resource practices favorable to academic and non-academic staff in order to create best possible environment for teaching and research |
| The Environment | Impelementation of working policies and practices that are envirmment friendly and teaching about envirmment protection within the curriculum |
| Fair Operating Practices | Creating programs for staff and students that involve them in local community activities and teaching about social responsibility |
| Students' Issues | Providing necessary and sufficient information for existing and potential students |
| Community involvement and development | Providing active involvement in community projects through classroom projects, competitions cooperation with local business and institutions |

Source: adapted from Nejati et al. (2011)

The issue of human rights at the universities is usually regulated through Code of Ethics as one of the major university documents. Only one Croatian university, the youngest public one, has no Code of Ethics published on the web site. In case of all the others, different issues within university Code of Ethics are covered. In Croatia, the most important seems to be regulation of relations and rights of all stakeholders and they are defined in following areas: stakeholders, values, strategies, indicators and social revision.

Labour practices are fully covered in less than half of Croatian universities online available documents, although they are essential for creation of best possible teaching and research environment. However, all but one Croatian university have published the major documents that regulate work relations and career development procedures, but not much beyond that.

Environment related policies seem not to be of particular importance to Croatian universities, which is in contradiction with findings of Nejati et al. (2011) who find this aspect of university social responsibility very frequently present in the world top 10 universities online available documents. Although seven universities (six public and one private) in Croatia provide some kind of educational programs related to environment protection and/or sustainability, only one public university had developed relevant policies related to environment protection activities and their implementation. It seems that Croatian universities are much more involved in teaching "about" environment and related issues than actually acting in this area.

Fair operating practices show the possibilities provided by university for implementation of environment friendly and sustainable policies by university stakeholders. These practices are usually revealed through university cooperation with the local community and different external stakeholders and include mobility, different projects and programs as well as related information dissemination. Having in mind that university official web sites are one of the major sources of information about university, it is difficult to understand the fact that none of Croatian universities has any notice of fair practices on their websites.

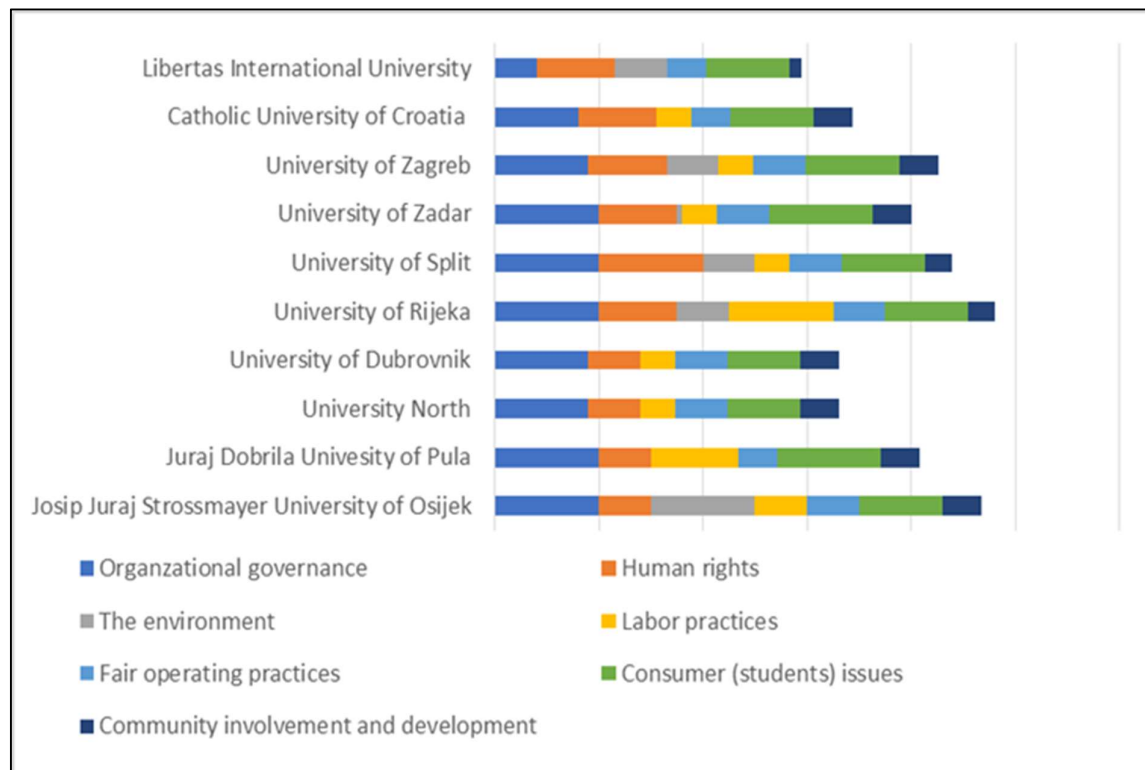
Students' issues are very important since students are university major stakeholders. Their importance has been recognized in all Croatian universities since all information regarding admission, study programs and studying regulations, students' rights, alongside with different information regarding study support are clearly visible on the websites.

Community involvement and development, the last but not least issue in Nejati et al. (2011) model, are becoming increasingly recognized as important issues of social responsibility by Croatian universities.

All but two universities have published information on their participation in community development. However, there are not many of such activities. Most frequent university activities in this context are financial support of different scientific and professional projects that contribute to community development.

The overall results on the appearance of these issues are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Coverage of USR components at Croatian universities



Source: own elaboration

The figure identifies the relation between different USR components at each university, based on the frequencies found in different university documents. It is visible that most of the documents cover two areas: organizational governance and students' issues, while community involvement and development are the least frequent. All of the universities have managed to show accountability and transparency in the documents available of their official web sites by providing facts and figure related to those two issues, which is similar to the findings of Nejati et al. (2011). However, these key terms are not necessarily related to social responsibility and therefore the specific term "social responsibility" was looked upon. Unlike number of Croatian companies that include a special category of CSR on their web sites, looking at the frequency of the specific term "social responsibility" mentioning within university websites, it was possible to identify only two public universities (Zagreb & Zadar) as significantly more active in reporting publicly their socially responsible activities than others.

The least important dimension of USR, according to content analysis, is by far community involvement and development. It seems that Croatian universities are not fully aware of the highest level of social responsibility, or at least about reporting on it. Unlike Nejati et al. (2011), this study included only web sites and their links analysis and not press and media nor department web sites, which might be one of the limitations of the study. However, it is still the fact that universities themselves only rarely report on this dimension. University of Rijeka is an only and interesting example where the official website contains a category named "university and society" with subcategories "university and community" and "university and economy". Such approach represents it as an open, social responsible and caring institution. This is probably related to the recognition of the significance of such practices for university image. This relation

was confirmed by study from Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern & Speece (2016). Other universities, both public and private, have very limited or no practice of sharing information about their socially responsible activities, especially with the external stakeholders or public. Table 2 shows the percentages of coverage by university and dimension.

Table 2. USR coverage by university and area

| Universities / Areas of USR | OS | PU | SJ | DU | RI | ST | ZD | ZG | HKS | LIB | Average % |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|-----------|
| Organizational Governance | 100 | 100 | 90 | 90 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 90 | 80 | 40 | 89 |
| Human Rights | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 75 | 100 | 75 | 75 | 75 | 75 | 67,5 |
| Labor Practices | 50 | 83 | 33 | 33 | 100 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 43,3 |
| The Environment | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 50 | 50 | 5 | 50 | 0 | 50 | 30,5 |
| Fair Operating Practices | 50 | 37,5 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 37,5 | 37,5 | 46,2 |
| Students' Issues | 80 | 100 | 70 | 70 | 80 | 80 | 100 | 90 | 80 | 80 | 83 |
| Community involvement and development | 37,5 | 37,5 | 37,5 | 37,5 | 25 | 25 | 37,5 | 37,5 | 37,5 | 12,5 | 32,5 |

Source: own elaboration

It is clear that organizational governance and students' issues are mostly covered, but they are not 100% as in top universities identified in Nejati et al. (2011) Human rights are at the next level of coverage by Croatian universities' online documents with 67,5%. Third level of coverage are held by fair operation practices and labour practices covered within 46.3% and 43.3% documents respectively. The lowest level of coverage belongs to community involvement and development (32.5%) and environment (30.5%). These data show the clear distinction between well-developed internal USR and underdeveloped external university social responsibility in Croatia, at least according to the web sites' analysis.

Presence of key words related to social responsibility on Croatian universities' websites demonstrates that they still so not sufficiently perceive its importance – neither in creating, practicing, nor reporting. This leads to the conclusion that universities perceive their social responsibility mostly as related to primary stakeholders (students and institution management) and to their primary roles of education and research, which also seems to be most important in, for example, banking sector in Croatia (Leko Šimić & Štimac, 2011).

Despite the emphasized importance of social responsibility reporting practices, the review of online available documents of Croatian universities showed no trace of such regular reporting.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyse the university social responsibility in Croatian context. University social responsibility is a globally increasing issue. Universities should be representatives of and best examples of organizations that care about the environment, employees, students and other stakeholders, transparency and local community development. By implementing best practices and creating new human resources they should proactively contribute to innovative solutions to economic, social and ecological challenges both in their community and globally.

As university official web sites are one of the most important sources of information for different stakeholders, we have applied web sites content analysis related to social responsibility. All available documents were analysed and the results show that social responsibility is becoming increasingly important issues at Croatian universities, at least not far behind declarative statements. Most of the documentation related to social responsibility is addressing students and university management issues, i.e. something that we can call internal social responsibility. However, it is concentrated on the two

primary roles of university: education and research, while the third mission – responsibility toward community and society is still not recognized and communicated.

5. Limitations and further research

We recognize several limitations of this study. First of all, it is only of qualitative nature. As such it could be identified only as preliminary, but at the same time we consider it to be an excellent basis for a new quantitative research that should include the major internal (students, university management, employees) and external stakeholders (business sector and general public). Such a study should provide a general and more specific insights into different dimensions of university social responsibility and identify the areas universities should improve, not only in form of documentation, but, more important, in implementation. Secondly, the study was based on university official websites. Probably extended analysis of press and media publications about university CSR activities, like it was made by Nejati et al. (2011) would give a more detailed insight. Although several studies have emphasized importance of university web sites as important sources of information and evaluation, we are not sure if their importance is perceived the same way by Croatian universities. In this sense we agree with Wigmore-Alvarez & Ruiz-Lozano study (2012) and their identification of transparency problem related to university social responsibility. As a consequence, it might be possible that the documentation available on web sites is incomplete, and therefore doesn't present the real situation. Another issue that is open for further research is the correlation between university social responsibility and its reputation.

Altogether, more research needs to be undertaken in this domain for a better understanding of how different stakeholders perceive, evaluate, and reward or “punish” universities that implement social responsibility in all three of their missions.

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