Towards Building an European Common Reference Framework for University Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

EU-USR project (http://www.eu-usr.eu) was conceived as a response to the policy priority of the European Commission about the need for a common social responsibility strategy for all European universities. In this context, the EU-USR project creates a European model to enhance social responsibility of universities in a long-term perspective. To this end, the project uses a bottom-up approach by collecting examples of good practice from across Europe and using these to help inform the development, piloting and validation of a set of completely new benchmark standards. These standards are providing a Common Reference Framework for University Social Responsibility across the European Higher Education Area that is consistent with USR being a Core Competence of European universities by covering the following four areas: Research, Teaching, Support for Learning and Public Engagement.

Keywords: University Social Responsibility, Benchmark Standards.

INTRODUCTION

Though not a strong feature of the original Bologna Joint Ministerial Declaration of the European Ministers of Education (1999) that created the European Higher Education Area (www.ehea.info), (EHEA) the social dimension of higher education became a central issue in subsequent Declarations, which recognized the important influence higher education institutions (HEIs) exert on developing European society and defining and transmitting the values on which this is built.

UNESCO underlines the current importance of such a contribution: “At no time in human history was the welfare of nations so closely linked to the quality and outreach of their higher education systems and institutions” (World Conference on Higher Education Partners, June 2003). The Council of Europe emphasizes public responsibility for higher education and the importance of higher education governance in developing and promoting the social dimension of higher education and its distinctive contribution to the values of modern, complex society. In short, in their different ways the relevant supra-national bodies all emphasize the social responsibilities of higher education.

Currently, most European universities seem sensitive to and aware of the importance of their “social dimension” to some degree or other and many are developing actions to make this a priority, not only in policy terms but also in daily practice. However, there is no effective framework that can support this process within the EHEA.

The EU-USR Project, funded under the ERASMUS Programme of the European Commission was thus conceived from the outset as making a major contribution to the development and promotion of the social dimension of the European higher education.
EU-USR BENCHMARK STANDARDS

The main purpose of the project was to create a European framework that allows the development of networking between European universities in terms of social responsibility, to enhance university social action and impact by exchanging experience on policy and practices in areas such as:

- Organisational governance
- Labour practices
- The environment
- Fair operating practices
- Consumer issues
- Community involvement and development
- Human rights and democratic citizenship.

In order to develop the benchmark standards, a bottom-up approach has been used, which started from an examination of the practice and experience in the field of USR across the EU member states. In addition to that, relevant policy documents have been reviewed and used, including ISO26000 (The International Standards Organisation’s “Guidelines on Social Responsibility”); the UNESCO 1998 “World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century” reinforced in the UNESCO 2009 “Communique from the World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development”; the Council of Europe’s 2006 “Declaration on the Responsibility of Higher Education for a Democratic Culture - Citizenship, Human Rights and Sustainability”; and the European Commission’s 2011 “Renewed EU Strategy 2011-14 for Corporate Social Responsibility”.

The EU-USR Benchmark Standards cover the generic range of social responsibility concerns set out in ISO26000 but through a set of criteria developed to align with that the nature of the European higher education sector, its distinctive values and mission and the public expectations associated with it. There are four standards, each of which is specified in its own set of criteria.

S1. Research, Teaching, Support for Learning and Public Engagement

The institution's core academic activities are underpinned by the values and principles of social responsibility. In order to ensure this, the institution:

1. Guarantees academic freedom for its staff and students.
2. Widens and diversifies access to education within a commitment to lifelong learning.
3. Manages student admissions in a transparent and equitable way, using explicit criteria to inform selection decisions, providing formative feedback to unsuccessful candidates.
4. Ensures that public funds provided to support teaching and student fees are used for the purpose for which they are provided.
5. Requires that its curricula are informed by socially responsible, ethical research and that its graduate attributes incorporate evidence-based thinking and decision-making, active citizenship and employability.
6. Adopts a learner-centred approach to teaching and student support, ensuring assessment and feedback is used to promote learning.
7. Facilitates collaborative and independent learning that goes beyond the classroom and into the community.
8. Enables international collaboration and supports student and staff cross-national mobility.
9. Enforces ethical protocols for research, teaching and related activities.
10. Facilitates dialogue between the research community, the public and policymakers to link research to 'real world' issues.
11. Improves its contribution to society through open access to research outcomes and its public engagement activities.
S2. Governance

The principles of social responsibility are respected throughout institutional policy, strategy, procedures and processes. They permeate all levels, as an integral element of management accountability and stakeholder engagement. The institution

2.1 Encourages a culture of social responsibility with high ethical and professional standards and clear protocols to avoid conflict of interest.

2.2 Formally recognises staff and student unions and involves them as partners in governance and decision-making, providing for their representation on the Board (or equivalent) and on its advisory committees.

2.3 Ensures that social responsibility is treated as a core commitment by the Board and senior management and that the institution's social responsibility performance is the focus for annual evaluative reporting.

2.4 Exercises due diligence by assessing the risk and impact of all activities, ensuring compliance with the law, relevant standards and norms.

2.5 Conducts ethical and socially responsible investment and procurement, with comprehensive public reporting of criteria and decisions.

2.6 Is a responsible neighbour, facilitating dialogue and working in partnership with and investing in the local community.

2.7 Recognises its staff and student social responsibility initiatives through an internal reward scheme.

2.8 Actively participates in relevant social responsibility networks.

2.9 Reports on its progress towards clear and independently verified social responsibility and sustainability goals.

2.10 Publishes the outcomes of internal and external reviews, complaints, academic appeals and the source and use of all funding.

S3. Environmental and Societal Sustainability

The institution is committed to environmental sustainability and biodiversity in all aspects of its operations, including in its use of goods, services and works and in its evaluation of decisions. It takes appropriate action to ensure that its commitments are realised and

3.1 Ensures its policies and practices minimise any negative impact on the environment caused by its activities or supply chain.

3.2 Promotes sustainable development.

3.3 Delivers a continuous improvement programme that works towards cleaner, sustainable, eco-efficient, resource efficient, zero waste and ethical operations including procurement.

3.4 Publishes regular environmental sustainability reports, incorporating risk and action assessments covering environmental, societal and supply chain risks.

3.5 Encourages the use of environmentally friendly technologies, and of energy efficient, reusable and biodegradable materials.

3.6 Practices socially responsible and sustainable procurement, publishes a code of ethical behaviour for procurement decision-making that includes workers' rights and fair trade principles and promotes social responsibility and sustainability wherever it has influence over the supply chain.

3.7 Ensures respect for and compliance with internationally proclaimed human rights, the rule of law and national and International anti-corruption requirements.

3.8 Ensures that all its International activities promote human and societal development and, where possible, help address the issues of poverty, quality of life, advance peace and promote conflict resolution.

S4. Fair Practices
The institution ensures equality and fairness for its staff, students, and others as appropriate and its policies and procedures are intended to avoid discrimination or inequity. The institution

4.1 Promotes and celebrates pluralism and diversity, and ensures equality regardless of age, culture, ethnicity, gender or sexuality.
4.2 Practices open, transparent, fair and equitable recruitment and promotion of staff, using affirmative action where appropriate, providing comprehensive staff development that incorporates social responsibility.
4.3 Establishes through negotiation with staff unions comprehensive employee communication, consultation and negotiation protocols and implements these.
4.4 Promotes the health, safety, physical social and mental wellbeing of staff and students beyond minimum legal requirements.
4.5 Promotes equality of opportunity, guarantees equal, fair and just pay and equitable conditions, and proactively works to avoid inequality through flexible working and career development and progression opportunities.
4.6 Ensures that working conditions at least comply with relevant national laws, collective agreements and applicable International Labour Organisation standards and makes every effort to avoid casualisation of the workforce.
4.7 Guarantees freedom of association and respects collective bargaining.
4.8 Has transparent, fair and equitable complaints and disciplinary procedures and ensures that complaints and disciplinary matters are addressed swiftly and fairly.
4.9 Publishes the possible sanctions for a proven breach of ethical or related requirements and protects whistleblowers.
4.10 Provides professional support services to meet specific additional needs of students and staff as arising from a disability, for example.
4.11 Communicates with suppliers about its procurement policy and uses research to inform its procurement decisions.

SELF-ASSESSMENT APPROACH

A self-assessment approach built around the set of the four Benchmark Standards has been developed and validated through benchmarking visits within 5 pilot HEIs and, in a later stage of the project implementation, through interviews and focus groups run within more than 20 HEIs.

The proposed self-evaluation approach consisted in 3 stages:

1. Current view
2. Self-assessment
3. Action planning for improvement

Within the first stage, questions like “What is important for you in USR?”, “What is your “balance of aims” when you think of USR?”, “How is it related to your national, professional and generational culture?” and “How does it match with the organizational culture of your University?” should be addressed in order to explain the motivation of the institution to undertake a USR Action Plan for improvement and what is essential in it to match existing conditions and the institutional purpose.

Within the second stage, the institution is invited to carry out a gap analysis in order to identify gaps between their current policies and practices versus the benchmark standards identifying:

- what criteria is already in place stating the current phase of achievement tagged as: future development, planned, in an early implementation phase, fully implemented or implemented in the past and then interrupted;
- which is the relevance of each criteria to the institutional context / local context, as well as its feasibility or urgency of action.
The last stage consists in drawing-up an Action Plan for improvement based on the assessment of the outcomes of Stage 2 with the following proposed structure: Actions, Expected Results, Success Indicators, Responsibilities, Timing, Resources, Monitoring and Reporting.

Stakeholders involved in the consultation and testing process have valued and recognized the significance of the proposed EU-USR Benchmark Standards, and its usefulness as a self-assessment tool that Universities can use as the basis for drawing-up action plans for improvement and enhancement of their social responsibility efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

EU-USR Benchmark Standards for University Social Responsibility across the EHEA have been designed for measurement, assessment and evidencing progress and attainment at institutional level in a way that is compatible with the essentially autonomous nature of higher education institutions whilst at the same time being mindful of the considerable amount of public funding and other support that these institutions benefit from. The Common Reference Framework represented by the Benchmark Standards is thus one primarily focused on self-assessment and continuous (self-) improvement.

At the same time, it provides opportunity for the further development of evidence-based policy and practice in the specific sphere of University Social Responsibility (USR as distinct from CSR), recognising the distinctive nature of the European University and the distinctive contribution it can make to the wider social responsibility agenda by exemplifying and modelling the sort of values, principles and behaviours that will be required in the search for new and socially responsible solutions to the many pressing challenges currently faced by humanity.

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