



From CSR to Impact; How to Integrate CSR in a University Strategy

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Abstract. Wageningen University & Research (WUR) has a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agenda, which was drawn up in 2020, after the adoption of the Strategic Plan. The topic “Research and education to contribute to societal challenges” is at the top of the CSR agenda, because we assume that WUR will have the greatest societal impact through its education and research activities. CSR is all about impact and impact is a key term in the current strategy. Because CSR, impact and strategy are so closely related, especially in a university, it is important to develop new perspectives on how CSR can best be integrated into the strategy. This fits in well with WUR as an organization with a great social responsibility: at an organization like WUR you would expect CSR to be anchored in the core of the organization, so that no separate CSR strategy is needed. The article explores the various ways to embed the CSR perspective in the new Strategic Plan of the organization, describes the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches and concludes which approach would be the most suitable for a future-proof sustainable university.

Keywords:

CSR, Integration, Strategy, Future-proof, Sustainability, Universities

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the context of a university. It highlights the unique characteristics of non-profit organizations in general and universities in particular, compared to companies. At universities there often is a conceptual overlap between CSR and the values and missions. The perception and pressure from stakeholders play a crucial role in determining CSR performance, as negative performance can erode trust. These characteristics pose challenges for the implementation of CSR, which stress the need for a precise understanding and operationalization of CSR in the context of a university, in particular for universities that want to be a forerunner in the field of CSR.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the operationalization of CSR in the context of a university. The literature points out three main characteristics which distinguish universities from companies: (1) social responsibility is to a large extent interwoven with the mission and strategy, (2) there is a special relation with an important stakeholder group, namely students, and (3) given their mission and social responsibilities, universities are often critically viewed by their stakeholders, demanding a high standard of responsible behaviour ('practice what you preach').

To identify best practices of operationalization of CSR in a university context, we analysed how CSR is integrated in the strategic plans of forerunner universities, including Wageningen University & Research (WUR). Summarized is how these universities express their CSR strategies, including their mission, CSR statements, values, principles, priorities, goals, and metrics. Since continuous improvement is an important element of CSR, we also identified the major trends in CSR which are relevant for universities: a future-proof sustainable university will have to lead the way in new developments in social responsibility.

In section 2 we explore CSR in the context of a non-profit organization. In Section 3 we focus on universities, we identify major trends in CSR and analyse how CSR is embedded in strategic plans of forerunners. Section 4 gives concluding remarks, it sketches paths towards a future-proof sustainable universities, drawing from the lessons learned in section 3 and discusses the options to move forward in WUR's new strategic planning.

2. CSR in non-profit organizations

CSR is a broad concept, which overlaps with various related concepts such as responsible business conduct, human rights, and sustainability. It is dynamic, since responsibility and sustainability issues are constantly evolving and what society demands of companies and other organizations is also changing over time (licence to operate). Carroll (1979) already stated that concepts for CSR had been evolving for decades. To structure the various interpretations, he presented a three-dimensional conceptual model covering three essential aspects of corporate social performance that is still helpful today: (1) What is included in corporate social responsibility (economic, legal, ethical, discretionary)? (2) What are the environmental and social issues the organization must address (nowadays we would add Governance)? (3) What is the organization's philosophy or mode of social responsiveness (e.g., from passive to proactive)? [1]

Plaisance (2021) describes some additional challenges, specific to the concept of CSR in non-profit organizations (NPOs). In addition to the confusion due to the overlap with related concepts like sustainability, there may be confusion on the use of the term "corporate." While NPOs are not typically thought of as corporations in the traditional business sense, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) can still be applied to them. Furthermore, the overlap between CSR and the mission, values and nature of NPOs raises questions [2].

Thus a conceptual problem emerges: NPOs and CSR seem to overlap to a large extent, because the values and missions of these organizations already integrate a social, environmental and governance vision. Since the links maintained by NPOs with CSR and sustainability are so strong, and creation of value for society's well-being are core activities of NPOs, it can be argued that the notion of CSR is obvious, and therefore irrelevant, for NPOs (e.g., Lin-Hi et al., 2015). Plaisance (2021) concludes from a literature survey that this

interpretation is too superficial; the concept is relevant in NPOs, but it needs to be studied, deepened and operationalized with more precision.

One specific reason for NPOs to pay attention to CRS performance follows from stakeholders' pressure and perceptions. Lin-Hi et al. (2015) found that negative CSR performance significantly destroys trustworthiness among stakeholders. The reputational dimension and the image that stakeholders have of CSR initiatives and of the managerial practices of a NPO are important; stakeholders tend to be relatively critical with respect to CSR performance of NPOs [2, 3].

3. CSR in Universities

Concluding remarks: Paths toward a future-proof university CSR in NPOs remains a conceptual challenge that requires further development, also from a sectoral perspective. Many universities are NPOs, and CSR in the context of a university requires even further elaboration. CSR is generally viewed as a multi-stakeholder responsibility as it not only considers individual satisfaction (i.e., employees as well as customers) but also on a wider scale, from local to global through environmental and social impact.

Universities are dealing with a special type of customers: current and future students. This works two ways: graduates go out into the world, and bring the knowledge they picked up during their studies into practice, including the values and ethics they developed during their studies. On the other hand, students are a crucial yet critical stakeholder group, since they are the ones that pay tuition fees, and universities depend on them for their income [4, 5].

According to a THE survey of 2,000 prospective international students in 2021, roughly 80% believe universities have an important role to play in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in enhancing the ethic of sustainable citizenship in their students through the teaching of knowledge, skills, practices and values of sustainability [6].

3.1. Four trends in CSR at universities

The role for a university in current society has expanded beyond the basic function of knowledge production and exchange; 'contributing to societal challenges' can be found in the mission and strategy of many universities (see Table 1). The literature body is expanding as researchers from various disciplines are studying the concept of CSR in a university context (Ali et al., 2020). We observe four trends that can be linked to the three dimensions in the conceptual model of Carroll [1, 4].

1. From local to global (discretionary aspects)

Initially CSR at universities was mainly directed at encouraging community engagement, in particular by students. For example, by offering service learning, which combines community involvement, academic study and practical experience, aiming to connect a university to a local area. Students go out into the community to groups, organizations and schools to learn as part of their degree while providing necessary services to local people. Many universities are still actively involved in community engagement and outreach, but at the same time, the scope is widening from the local to the global scale level. The notion that a university has a role in finding solutions to major global societal challenges, such as climate change and hunger, has become popular and widespread. Many universities nowadays are making statements on how they contribute to the SDGs. This also applies to WUR (see Figure

1).

2. *From qualitative to quantitative (social and environmental impact)*

The European Union (EU) published a Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) in 2022. This directive is mandatory for large companies in the EU, and will probably apply to universities in the near future. It requires detailed reporting on Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria, and a clear framework on who is responsible for what. They can do this by integrating social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations. It is not only a legal requirement, it is also important to inform (critical!) stakeholders, which may help to continuously improve.

| CSR Agenda | Ambition | Contributing to the SDGs |
|--|---|---|
| In our research and education activities  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research and education designed to make a contribution to societal challenges Innovative and challenging research and education |  |
| In how we do our work  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing and disseminating knowledge Ethically responsible research Entrepreneurship and applied research High-impact partnerships Flexible learning paths | |
| Governance  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible collaboration Responsible economic policy Chain responsibility | |
| Students and employees  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vitality Development and training Diversity | |
| Environment  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate-adaptive environment Waste and circularity Sustainable energy Sustainable mobility | |

Figure 1. WUR's CSR Agenda [7]

3. *From “no harm” to “net positive” and regenerative (mode of social responsiveness)*

The trend in CSR has evolved from a focus on minimising the negative impact of an activity, to embracing more ambitious goals of achieving a net positive impact and, more recently, striving for regenerative practices that restore and improve the environment and society (see for example McDonough & Braungart [8] and Polman & Winston [9]).

4. *Revival of activist science (mode of social responsiveness)*

There is increasing pressure from stakeholder groups (mainly students but also staff) at universities to critically review partnerships and collaboration, for example with the fossil fuel sector. With the stakes on the climate and biodiversity crises so high and growing, there is a revival of activism in science. Scientists are reconsidering if and how, they can use their agency as professionals and citizens to bring about change, see for instance Simms (2022) [10].

3.2. CSR in strategic plans of forerunner universities

Many universities attach significant importance to responsibility and sustainability and profile themselves on these themes. We selected forerunners, based on two sustainability rankings for universities: The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings [11] and the UI GreenMetric [12]. We looked at the three highest ranked universities in the latest editions of these rankings. We analysed how they integrate social responsibility in their strategic planning. Questions are:

- How is responsibility included in their mission?
- What is their CSR statement?
- What values do they stand for?
- What are their guiding principles and priorities?
- What are their goals and targets and corresponding metrics?

Table 1. Social responsibility integrated in strategic planning of six forerunner universities*

| University | Mission/purpose | Social responsibility | Values | Principles/priorities | Goals + metrics |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Western Sydney Australia | Impact through commitment to excellence, sustainability, equity, transformation and connectedness. | WS is a values-based and ethical organization, and a leader insustainability | Boldness, Fairness, Integrity, Excellence. | Accountable to values; Guiding principles: Sustainability, Equity, Transformation and Connectedness. | Goals + metrics foreach of the four principles |
| University of Manchester UK | To advance education, knowledge and wisdom for the good of society. | Social responsibility isone of the coregoals | Knowledge, Wisdom, Humanity, Academic freedom, Courage, Pioneering spirit | Priorities Social responsibility: Social inclusion, Prosperous, communities, Better Health, Environmental sustainability, Cultural engagement | Goals for all priorities and two overarching metrics (benchmark positions) |
| Queens University Canada | Push the boundaries of knowledge through research—in service to an inclusive, diverseand sustainable society. | We accept responsibility to build a diverse, equitable, inclusive, anti- racist community for our people, to indigenize/ decolonize the academy, and in all that we do, toobserve the interests of the planet and the life it sustains. | Truth, Responsibility, Respect, Freedom, Wellbeing | “We inspire research and scholarship excellence to advance social impact and sustainability both within and beyond our community”. | Various goals, Narratives, no metrics in the SP |
| Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands | To explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life | We continue to be a forerunner in sustainability and corporate responsibility | Not mentioned explicitly | Excellent research and education with impact | 12 Change Performance Indicators to track progress on ambitions, no goals and metrics |
| Nottingham Trent, UK | University of the future. By addressing the themes in our strategy, we are tackling social injustice, valuing ideas and creating opportunities. | Embracing sustainability is central to our strategy. The UNSDGs play an integral role in guiding and supporting our work, ensuring that a sustainable and environmentally-responsible culture lies at the heart of everything we do. | Not mentioned explicitly | Creating opportunities, Valuing ideas, Enriching Society, Embracing sustainability, Connecting globally, Empowering people | Ambitions and approaches, no goals and metrics |
| University of Nottingham, UK, China, Malaysia | Inspiring campuses energizing us to be a globally engaged university committed to making a difference in our cities and regions ..solving problems and improving lives. | We will make an outstanding contribution to supporting the UN SDGs) through our research and education, our engagement with partners and our behaviour on campus and in our communities. | Inclusivity, Ambition, Openness, Fairness, Respect | Strategic delivery plans (Research, Knowledge exchange, Civic, Global engagement, Environmental, Diversity & Inclusion, Digital, People, Estates) | Goals, targets and metrics in strategic delivery plans |

* See 5. References for documents used.

Social responsibility is expressed in different ways and has a different place in each of the plans of the analysed universities. How these universities are profiling their social responsibility strategy is summarized in Table 1.

- At Western Sydney University, all of the guiding principles are elements of social responsibility; the strategy describes how these are used to make choices in research, education, campus design, and encourage awareness and skills in students and staff.
- At the University of Manchester, social responsibility is one of the core goals and the strategic plan includes a section on social responsibility priorities, which sets goals and defines metrics on how to measure progress
- Queens University has a broad social responsibility statement, its Strategic Plan is clearly aimed to inspire all of its stakeholders to advance social impact and sustainability. Videos, photos and stories are used as inspirational examples, but do not present goals, targets or metrics.
- The Strategic Plan of Wageningen University & Research differs in the sense that it is to a large extent dedicated to the content of the research strategy, which clearly shows a high social responsibility ambition. Sustainability and social responsibility in operations and governance is mentioned, but not elaborated upon and not part of the Change Performance Indicators (CPIs).
- Nottingham Trent University embraces sustainability, it is central to the strategy: “make sure that it is at the heart of what we do”. The Strategic plan sets out ambitions and approaches, but it does not elaborate on specific goals and measures.
- University of Nottingham aims to contribute to the SDGs through “our research and education, our engagement with partners and our behaviour on campus and in our communities.” It has a set of strategic delivery plans covering all these aspects, with goals, targets and measures.

4. Concluding remarks: Paths toward a future-proof university

Because social responsibility and strategy are so closely related, and contexts and stakeholder perspectives are constantly changing, it is important to develop new perspectives on how social responsibility can best be integrated into a strategy of a university. This applies to both the content of the strategy and the stakeholder perspective, which relates to outreach, reputation and branding.

As we have seen in Section 3, there are various ways to embed the Social Responsibility perspective in a Strategic Plan:

1. Social responsibility as a core goal. This approach is appealing from a social responsibility perspective because it is a very clear statement, which is easy to communicate to stakeholders.
2. Social responsibility as a guiding principle for choices in core activities. This approach is powerful, because it truly integrates social responsibility.
3. Social responsibility in an inspirational approach. This approach is attractive because of its potential to engage staff, students and other stakeholders.

Ideally, these three elements are combined in a Strategic Plan that incorporates social responsibility. To comply with (EU) legislation, and to be convincing to (critical) stakeholders, it should be combined with a thorough framework on Environment, Social Responsibility and Governance (ESG), backed up by solid metrics.

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