

## Urszula Gołaszewska-Kaczan

- ▶ University of Białystok
- ▶ e-mail: u.golaszewska@uwb.edu.pl
- ▶ ORCID: 0000-0003-2084-6268

### SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF UNIVERSITIES ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BIALYSTOK

#### | Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – the purpose of this study was to present selected aspects of the social responsibility of universities and to describe examples of socially responsible activities undertaken by the University of Białystok.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – for the purpose of the article, the analysis of the literature on the subject and the method of document research were used.
- ▶ *Score/results* – the article showed that the concept of social responsibility of universities is developing all the time and there is no single, generally accepted approach to it. Despite this, it is an idea that should be implemented by all universities. The University of Białystok has already taken up this challenge. However, perhaps there is a need for greater structuring of these activities and their wider promotion.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – the article expands the knowledge about the social responsibility of universities. It presents selected socially responsible activities of the University of Białystok.

| **Keywords:** university social responsibility, stakeholders, corporate social responsibility.

#### 1. Introduction

The origins of the idea of corporate social responsibility can be traced back to the 19th century, when entrepreneurs - philanthropists took action to help the poor, the sick, the orphaned. On the other hand, the first definition of social

responsibility can be considered the one proposed at the beginning of the 20th century by A. Carnegie. He presented social responsibility as the need to implement two principles – the principle of mercy and the principle of stewardship. The principle of mercy, also translated as the principle of charity, compelled the richer members of society to help those who were less fortunate (therefore this principle goes back to the roots of the biblical injunction to help one's neighbour). The principle of stewardship, on the other hand, also translated as the principle of trusteeship, demanded that businesses and wealthy people consider themselves solely as stewards, guardians of their property [Gołaszewska-Kaczan, 2009: 42].

Since then, the way of looking at corporate social responsibility has evolved, resulting in a large number of definitions of the concept. These definitions, depending on the current economic and social issues, have dealt with the relationship between business and society in different ways. However, all definitions focused precisely on corporate responsibility and referred to the behavior of businesses. For example, the already classic definition by H. Bowen [Bowen, 1953: 6] said that social responsibility is the commitment of a business to pursue such policies, make such decisions and adopt such a line of conduct that are consistent with the prevailing goals and values of society. In contrast, Kok et al. [Kok, 2001: 288] believe that it is a company's commitment to use its resources in a way that benefits a society, through committed participation as a member of the society, consideration of the society at large, and improvement of society's well-being independent of the company's direct profits.

Nowadays, the concept of corporate social responsibility is well established, which translates into both an increasing number of companies that undertake social responsibility activities and an increasing variety of these activities. At the same time, it turns out that social responsibility can be an idea aimed not only at companies, but also at other entities. An attempt to formally include all organizations in the area of social responsibility was the definition of social responsibility proposed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). It was published in 2010 as part of the ISO 26000 Guidance on social responsibility. The ISO 26000 standard [ISO 26000] assumes that social responsibility is the responsibility of an organization for the impact of its decisions and actions, on society and the environment. It is realized through transparent and ethical behaviour that:

- contributes to sustainable development, including the health and well-being of society;
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders (individuals or groups who have an interest in the organization's decisions or actions);

- is consistent with applicable law and consistent with international standards of conduct;
- is integrated into the organization's operations and practiced in its activities undertaken within its sphere of influence.

As can be seen, the definition does not refer only to businesses, since the creators of the definition use the term "organization." Thus, the definition departs from linking social responsibility to business – it extends it to all entities, including those that do not operate for profit. Indeed, social responsibility has already become a cultural phenomenon that goes beyond business. This approach to the concept makes it possible to analyze the socially responsible activity of a variety of entities, including higher education institutions.

The activities of universities are regulated by a number of legal acts that set their goals and rules of operation. However, with constant and unpredictable changes in the environment, it becomes necessary not to only fulfill legal obligations. Universities should also respond to new challenges arising in their environment and strive to respond to the legitimate claims of their stakeholders.

Although the idea of social responsibility of universities is a very topical issue, and incorporating it into the practice of every higher education institution seems essential, it is an issue not so often addressed in the Polish literature.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to present selected aspects of the social responsibility of universities and to show examples of socially responsible activities undertaken by the University of Białystok. For the purpose of the article, the analysis of the literature on the subject and the method of document research were used.

## 2. Social responsibility of the university

A serious discussion of the role played by the university in the modern world was initiated in the 1960s by C. Kerr, with his book *The uses of the University* [Kerr, 1963]. D.G. Faust (president of Harvard) said of the publication that it is the best explanation of how the American university has evolved and why its commitment and foresight are so important for the present and the future [Electronic document (2)].

In contrast, the term social "responsibility of the university" was popularized in the 1980s by D. Bok, through his book *Beyond the ivory tower. Social*

*Responsibility of the modern universities* [Bok 1982]. In this publication, he drew attention to the core values of academia. Against this background, he analyzed the ethical and social problems faced by modern universities and then proposed specific solutions to these problems. The book was considered the first serious attempt to analyze the role of the university in society [Electronic document (1)].

However, the already relatively long discussion of the social responsibility of a university has not led to a unified position on what the term really means. It seems that the starting point for defining the social responsibility of a university should be to consider to whom and for what a university is actually responsible.

In Poland, the Law on Higher Education and Science states that universities carry out a mission of special importance for the state and the nation: they make a key contribution to the innovation of the economy, contribute to the development of culture, co-shape the moral standards of public life [Act of 20.07.2018]. Meanwhile, the main tasks of universities include [ibidem]:

- conducting college education, postgraduate studies, conducting other forms of education;
- conducting scientific activities, providing research services and transfer of knowledge and technology to the economy;
- conducting education of doctoral students;
- educating and promoting university personnel;
- creating conditions for persons with disabilities to participate fully in: the process of admission to the university for education, education, conducting scientific activities;
- educating students with a sense of responsibility for the Polish state, national tradition, strengthening democratic principles and respect for human rights;
- creating conditions for the development of students' physical culture;
- disseminating and multiplying the achievements of science and culture;
- acting for the benefit of local and regional communities.

Analyzing the tasks of a university, K. Leja says that a modern university “has three missions to fulfill, the first of which is education, the second is scientific and research activities, and the third is to create mutual relations with the environment, the effect of which is to be the dissemination and popularization of research results and their implementation, including commercialization. The third mission is to make academic institutions more involved than before in the processes of social development at various levels: economic, civilizational, moral and ethical” [Leja, 2015].

The tasks and mission of the university, formulated in this way, can be the basis for identifying the university's stakeholders. Unfortunately, it seems impossible to create an exhaustive list of these stakeholders, which is dictated by "the multiplicity of roles played by universities in the socio-economic development of the region and the country, and the high contextuality of the relationships themselves" [Piotrowska-Piątek, 2016: 87]. It should be recognized that universities (including in Poland) have a particularly complex stakeholder environment, with both stakeholder groups specific to private sector organizations [Chapleo, Simm, 2010: 2] and the public sector. This leads to different authors identifying different stakeholder groups. The basic stakeholder groups of universities, according to different authors, were compiled by M. Slaba, as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. The basic stakeholder groups of universities

Author	Stakeholder group
Burrows	Management, employees, government entities, clients (students, parents, employers, employment agencies), government regulators, non-governmental regulators, suppliers, competition, financial intermediaries, donors, communities, alliances and partnerships
Kotler, Fox	Alumni, prospective students, current students, parents of students, local community, general public, mass media, legislature and government agencies, foundations, accreditation organizations, staff and administration, regents, faculty, trustees, competitors, suppliers, business community, grant organizations and donors
Licata, Frankwick	Students, former students, general public, parents, local and business community, donors, teachers and administrative staff, marketing department, government
Rowley	Students, families and parents, local authorities, local communities, government, media, societies
Světlík	Local community, media, general public, students
Weave	Students, families of students, institutional management, teaching staff, government, general society
Lumby, Foscett	State (government), community, parents, customers, students, employers and business
Anderson, Iriggs, Burton	Parents, industry, business, local community, students (customers), staff, government
Zait	Future university candidates (prospective students), present students, university professors, employers, public

Source: author's own work based on: Slaba, 2015: 307.

By comparing different approaches to distinguishing university stakeholders, L. Seres, M. Maric, Tumbas, V. Pavlicevic [Seres, Maric, Tumbas, Pavlicevic 2019: 9057] created a summary of the most important groups of university stakeholders, along with examples of stakeholders belonging to each group. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The most important groups of university stakeholders

Stakeholder category	Constitutive groups
Governing entities	state government; governing board
Administration (management)	director (rector, dean); senior administrators
Employees	teaching and research staff; administrative staff; support staff
Clients	students (former, current, potential); students' parents; family; tuition reimbursement providers; service and industry partners; employers; employment agencies
Suppliers	high schools; alumni; other universities; food providers; insurance companies; utilities; contracted service providers
Competitors	direct (private and public providers of post-secondary education); potential (distance higher education providers; new ventures); substitutes (company training programmes)
Donors	individuals (including directors (trustees), friends, parents, alumni, employees, industry foundations)
Communities	neighbours; school systems; social services; special interest group
Government regulators	ministry of education and research; buffer organisation; state financing agencies; research support bodies; fiscal authorities; social security; patent office
Non-governmental regulators	foundations; accreditation bodies; supervisory institutions; sponsoring religious organizations
Intermediaries	financial intermediaries (banks, funds); professional organizations and associations; business associations (chambers of commerce; business clusters, business incubators, science and technology parks...); networks (Enterprise Europe Network, European Entrepreneurs Network...)
Joint venture partners	alliances and consortia; corporate co-sponsors of research and educational services

Source: Seres et al., 2019: 9057.

According to V. Meseguer-Sánchez, E. Abad-Segura, L.J. Belmonte-Ureña and V. Molina-Moreno [Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020: 2], the social responsibility of a higher education institution is a commitment of the university institution to develop initiatives that promote its relationship with the different social groups of society. Another definition says that the social responsibility of universities is a “policy of ethical quality in the activities of the university community (students, lecturers, administrative staff), through responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impact of the university, in a participative dialogue with society to promote sustainable human development” [Wigmore-Álvarez, Ruiz-Lozano 2012: 477]. For C. Wing-Hung Lo, R. Xue Pang, C.P. Egri and P. Hon-Ying Li, it is a progressive management system for pursuing sustainability [Wing-Hung Lo et al., 2017]. As L. Gomez writes, “the practice of USR encloses specific and unique impacts that concern universities. These impacts are classified as organizational (related to work climate and environment), educational (academic foundation), cognitive (epistemological research), and social (community outreach)” [Gomez, 2014: 243].

In Polish literature it is difficult to find definitions of social responsibility of universities. Rather, authors formulate definitions of a socially responsible university. For example, K. Leja considers that a socially responsible university is a university that serves the environment [Leja, 2008: 61]. According to E. Chmielecka, a socially responsible university is one that cultivates the desired values of the academic ethos and acts in accordance with its guidelines [Chmielecka, 2008: 23].

The definition of social responsibility, on the other hand, is given, for example, by the Working Group on Social Responsibility of Universities under the Ministry of Development, which considered it “a strategic and systemic approach to university management and building cooperation and dialogue with stakeholders that contributes to: sustainable development, the formation of values and attitudes of civil society, the promotion of academic values and the creation of new ideas, and the maintenance and development of scientific and teaching competencies that affect business efficiency and innovation” [Kulczycka, Pędziwiatr, 2019: 9]. The Cracow University of Economics has also formulated its definition of SOU. According to this university, it is the voluntary adoption by the university of social obligations that go beyond the obligations of the law, and greater openness to all internal and external stakeholders, as well as the environment, in order to better shape the civic attitude of students and increase the influence of the university on the shape and nature of social development [Raport Społecznej...].

### 3. Myths about the social responsibility of universities and the benefits of being a socially responsible university

Incorporating the idea of social responsibility into the everyday life of higher education is not easy. L.P. Widianingsih, I. Triyuwono, A. Djamhuri and Rosidi believe that this is due to the existence of certain myths about the concept [Widianingsih et al., 2022].

For example, it is believed that only corporations have a need to realize social responsibility, while universities do not need it because they do not cause harm with their activities. However, universities should also strive to reflect on the effects and risks of their operational activities, on their impact on the environment. It is also believed that universities are neutral and generally accepted, which does not force them to implement the principles of social responsibility. However, the reality shows that in the current competitive environment universities also have to try to win the favour of stakeholders.

Another myth is that it is enough for a university to introduce teaching on social responsibility issues instead of implementing this concept in practice. Of course, the university should impart knowledge of social responsibility to students, but it should also implement the idea itself. One more myth concerns the compromises that are necessary to reconcile the realization of profit with the realization of goals arising from social responsibility. This is particularly difficult in the case of private universities. However, it must be emphasized that it is possible to balance economic, social and environmental goals [Widianingsih et al., 2022: 1689]. Furthermore, according to P. Lukhele-Olorunju and T. Maeykiso, finance-based thinking and social responsibility-based thinking can be reconciled, and such a complementary approach will allow universities to grow and have an appropriate impact on the environment [Lukhele-Olorunju, Maeykiso, 2017: 68].

The fight against these myths is helped by the knowledge of the benefits that universities can gain by becoming involved in the implementation of the concept of social responsibility. The benefits that accrue from the socially responsible actions of universities are similar to those of responsible actions by other entities. These benefits accrue to both stakeholders and the university itself.

Stakeholder benefits are, of course, related to the area in which the university undertakes activity. According to ISO 26000, social responsibility can be implemented in seven areas, i.e. organizational governance, human rights, labour practices, environment, consumer issues, social involvement and commu-



nity development, fair operating practices [ISO 26000]. Activities in each area have a specific audience, characteristics and associated profits. Here, however, the question of the benefits received by the stakeholders will be ignored<sup>1</sup>, while attention will be focused on the benefits that the university itself can realize from such activity.

Social responsibility can be an instrument for building competitive advantage by influencing the reputation of a higher education institution [Nadeem, Kakakhel, 2012: 25]. Indeed, the global trend of marketization of higher education has led to increased competition among universities for students. Hence the importance of a good university image.

To a large extent, the image of a university is related to the satisfaction of students. As it turns out, the satisfaction of these most important university stakeholders increases when they see the socially responsible activities of the university. Their evaluation of the quality of the university's services also increases. This leads to an improvement in the university's standing and reputation, reduces dropouts, and attracts new students [Vázquez, Aza, Lanero, 2017]. This is because prospective students are interested not only in the academic reputation of the university, but also in the character of the institution. The pro-social image of a higher education institution can influence applicants' choice of university.

At the same time, external entities (e.g. the entities cooperating with the university or providing funding) may be more inclined to support universities that implement socially responsible activities. This is because such activities may be an answer to their own problems.

Introducing the concept of social responsibility allows the university to raise the level of human and social capital of the organization [Jimena, 2011]. A.C. Chumaceiro Hernández, R. Ravina Ripoll, J.J. Hernández García de Velazco and I.V. Reyes Hernández even believe that social responsibility can be used by universities as a tool to build organizational happiness (organizational well-being) [Chumaceiro Hernández et. al, 2020]. This can increase the level of employees' attachment to the university and their satisfaction from working in such an organization.

Socially responsible activities also bring economic benefits to universities in the long term [Rachman, 2018: 34]. This is because they contribute to reducing the cost of recruiting new employees, marketing costs for attracting new

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<sup>1</sup> On this subject see for example: Gołaszewska-Kaczan, 2009; 2020.

students, and the cost of potential litigation for damages in various areas. Cost reductions are also possible through environmental measures. Harvard University, for example, has implemented more than 100 energy conservation measures since 2006, reducing its carbon footprint by more than 7,000 metric tons, and reducing administrative costs by more than 1 million dollars [Păunescu, Drăgan, Găucă, 2017: 561].

#### 4. Examples of socially responsible activities of the University of Białystok

The basis for the University of Białystok's socially responsible activities is its mission and strategy. The mission of the University of Białystok is: "An engaged University. Our mission is to work for social good through the creation and dissemination of knowledge". UwB's strategy emphasizes that the University's mission is not limited to the realization of educational and scientific goals alone, but also includes all activities undertaken in relation to its environment [*Strategia Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku*].

In 2019, the University of Białystok became a signatory to the University's Declaration of Social Responsibility. Signing the Declaration represents the University's voluntary commitment to implement activities in the twelve areas indicated by the Declaration<sup>2</sup>. UwB is one of 160 universities that have signed the Declaration to date.

As part of the dissemination of its responsible practices, the University has been submitting selected activities to the University's Catalogues of Good Practices since 2020, which are being developed by the University's Social Responsibility Working Group (operating within the Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility Team of the Minister of Funds and Regional Policy).

In 2020, the Catalogue was dedicated to good practices of universities in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. 171 examples were submitted to this Catalogue by 57 universities [*Katalog... COVID-19*]. UwB submitted two practices to this Catalogue concerning the area of "equipment support and protection measures". The first reported practice concerned the 3D manufacturing of adapters for air-

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<sup>2</sup> Contents of the Declaration on the website of the Ministry of Science and Education: <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka/zaproszenie-do-przystapienia-do-deklaracji-spolecznej-odpowiedzialnosci-uczelni>.

tight half-face and full-face masks. These adapters were made by employees of the Physics Department and were then donated to the local ambulance station and the fire department. The second practice involved the donation of personal protective equipment (gloves, masks, ethyl alcohol) and laboratory equipment (needed for testing) to the Provincial Sanitary and Epidemiological Station in Bialystok. Under the “psychological support” area, UwB reported a practice of arranging psychological support for university employees and students who were struggling with mental problems due to the pandemic. In turn, under the “research” area, the University reported a practice “Modeling to estimate the actual number of COVID-19 infected worldwide”. UwB employees developed models to estimate the number of COVID-19 infected in real time, with the results presented online. A second practice was also reported in this area – the “Pandemic Stories PL” project. It collected so-called “personal documents,” i.e. stories, photos and videos that document the changes taking place in the daily lives of Poles. The individual stories look for social patterns of behaviour, thought constructs or cultural elements.

In 2021, the Catalogue was devoted to the issue of academic values, including the formation of ethical attitudes and social commitment, as well as countering the manifestation of discrimination internally at universities. 140 practices were submitted to the catalogue by 44 universities [*Katalog... etycznym i niedyskryminacyjnym*]. For this Catalogue, the University of Bialystok submitted two projects of environmental activities in the area of “involvement of the academic community”. As part of the “Flower Meadow” project, the University of Bialystok created its own flower meadows in cooperation with the local government of Podlasie and the Meadow Foundation. The second action was called “Feeder”, in which students from the university’s science club trapped birds in order to ring them. In the area of “diversity management and anti-discrimination” the practice of appointing a representative to develop anti-discrimination procedures was reported. In the area of “ethics in scientific research” UwB reported the project “False Information in Science”, as part of which Repository staff developed an information brochure, a set of useful articles, infographics, and conducted three online workshops to help scientists guard against “predatory journals”.

The activities shown are only selected examples of responsible practices of the University of Bialystok. The University, in accordance with the signed Declaration, strives to undertake activities aimed at all its stakeholders.

## 5. Conclusions

The concept of the social responsibility of higher education is developing all the time. New definitions are being proposed, new areas of activity are being identified. This is understandable given how volatile conditions in which higher education institutions operate today. However, regardless of the conditions, the involvement of universities in the implementation of this idea seems essential. This is because the concept of social responsibility allows universities to understand the circumstances under which they operate and the impact they have on the society, much more broadly than the region in which they are located [Brown, Cloke, 2015: 481]. Socially responsible actions on behalf of the environment and the community in which they operate provide universities with a license to operate [Rachman, 2018: 29].

The University of Białystok has already taken up this challenge. However, perhaps there is a need for greater structuring of these activities (other universities create, for example, positions responsible for the proper development of the concept at the university) and wider promotion of these activities (e.g., the creation of a social responsibility report, wider promotion of these practices in the University Directory, or as part of the recruitment of university candidates). With more and more universities in Poland promoting themselves as socially responsible entities, it is important that the University of Białystok is not left behind.

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