

Abstract

In an era of globalisation, digital transformation, and increasing societal expectations, universities are progressively recognised as key agents of social responsibility. Beyond their conventional roles in teaching and research, higher education institutions are expected to contribute to social equity, environmental sustainability, and ethical governance. This shift has led to the emergence of University Social Responsibility (USR) as a crucial factor in shaping institutional identity and competitive positioning. While the private sector has long utilised Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a strategic tool for reputation management, branding, and stakeholder engagement, universities are now integrating similar principles to strengthen their public standing, attract students and faculty, and ensure long-term sustainability.

This dissertation critically examines the intersection of social responsibility and university image and stakeholder engagement, focusing on how socially responsible initiatives influence institutional reputation, stakeholder perceptions, and competitive advantage. Grounded in organisational image theory, stakeholder theory, and CSR frameworks, the study explores how universities leverage CSR-driven strategies to enhance their public image and align with evolving societal demands. The research is particularly significant in Polish higher education institutions experiencing heightened competition, internationalisation, and policy reforms to improve transparency and institutional governance.

The study seeks to define the role of social responsibility in shaping university image and examine how CSR principles are applied in higher education. Additionally, it analyses the impact of CSR initiatives on stakeholder trust, institutional branding, and competitive positioning while investigating the challenges and opportunities associated with CSR implementation in universities, particularly in Poland. The research employs a mixed methods design to achieve these objectives, integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and comparative case studies of selected Polish universities. The quantitative component consists of surveys distributed to students, faculty, alumni, and industry partners to assess their perceptions of university CSR practices and their influence on institutional image. The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews with university administrators and policy experts, offering more profound insights into strategic CSR implementation. Moreover, comparative case studies of universities with varying levels of CSR engagement illustrate best practices and highlight the challenges associated with embedding social responsibility into institutional identity.

The findings of this research reveal a strong positive correlation between CSR adoption and university image. Universities that actively engage in ethical governance, environmental sustainability, community outreach, and social equity programs are perceived as more credible, trustworthy, and attractive by stakeholders. Regression analyses indicate that institutions with well-integrated CSR initiatives experience higher student satisfaction rates, increased alumni engagement, and stronger industry partnerships, ultimately enhancing their competitive market position. The study further demonstrates that CSR serves as a crucial branding tool, as universities that embed social responsibility into their core mission and public communication strategies develop stronger institutional identities, distinguishing themselves in an increasingly saturated higher education market. CSR initiatives significantly influence stakeholder trust and engagement, particularly those focused on diversity and inclusion programs, green campus policies, ethical governance reforms, and community service projects.

These initiatives contribute to greater student loyalty, higher faculty retention, and increased employer confidence in graduates. Despite these benefits, universities face significant challenges in adopting CSR, including budget constraints, resistance to change, regulatory hurdles, and difficulties in measuring CSR impact. This research contributes to the academic discourse by bridging the gap between CSR theory and higher education practice, offering an original University Social Responsibility (USR) Model that outlines the mechanisms through which CSR influences university image and competitive positioning. By synthesising insights from stakeholder theory, CSR literature, and higher education management, the study provides a comprehensive framework for integrating social responsibility into university governance, branding, and student engagement strategies.

From a practical perspective, the study emphasises the need for leadership commitment to CSR, as institutional leaders play a crucial role in championing social responsibility initiatives and incorporating them into strategic planning. Transparent and consistent CSR communication is essential for enhancing visibility and credibility, requiring universities to actively promote their CSR efforts through annual sustainability reports, digital campaigns, and public engagement initiatives. Aligning university policies with global sustainability goals, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can enhance international collaborations and funding opportunities. Furthermore, establishing CSR performance metrics and evaluation frameworks is necessary for tracking progress, ensuring accountability, and refining strategies for long-term sustainability.

As universities navigate an increasingly competitive and socially conscious academic environment, CSR emerges as a powerful strategic tool for enhancing institutional image, fostering stakeholder trust, and securing long-term sustainability. This study underscores universities' need to transition from corporate philanthropy to strategic social responsibility, ensuring that ethical governance, environmental sustainability, and community engagement become fundamental pillars of university identity rather than peripheral initiatives. By embedding CSR principles into their core strategies, universities can differentiate themselves, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and position themselves as leaders in social responsibility within the global academic landscape.