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Developing university social responsibility:
A model for the challenges of the new civil society

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Abstract

The World Declaration on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century drawn up at the World Conference of Higher Education organized by UNESCO in Paris in 1998, the Communication of the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, Paris, 2009 held in compliance with the guidelines of the 1998 Declaration and the list of objectives of the Bologna Process highlight that social responsibility is increasingly considered an intrinsic aspect of the higher education system, particularly of the universities. This paper aims to explain the shifting from Corporate Social University to University Social Responsibility, by presenting the conceptual framework of Social Responsibility and the university as a special type of organization which needs to adopt a social responsibility strategy just like the other organizations, in order to meet the expectations of the stakeholders (present students, future students, supporters etc). The paper presents, on the other hand, a general University Social Responsibility model in the context of globalization and develops a University Social Responsibility model considering the realities and challenges of the Romanian higher education system.
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Keywords: University; higher education; social responsibility; university social responsibility; social relevance; Bologna Process.

1. Introduction

Today social responsibility goes far beyond the "philanthropy" of the past, it is about the business contribution to sustainable development and about proactive solutions to societal and environmental challenges. Considering that the university is an important pillar of our society, its social dimension transcending space barriers and highlighting European unity should be properly acknowledged. It has always been and still is fostered by the Bologna Process and assumed by the signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum in the attempt of creating a European model of information transfer and knowledge exploration within the European Higher Education Area (to be achieved by 2010). Nowadays university's function is rather to train for various vocations in order to have social relevance than simply issuing diplomas, to help students find their sense of direction and think beyond individual interest to societal interest.

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2. Social Responsibility conceptual framework. From Corporate Social Responsibility to University Social Responsibility

Social Responsibility has become an increasingly important concept both within the European Union and globally, and it has become part of the debate about competitiveness and sustainability in the globalization context. In the European Union, the promotion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) also reflects the need to defend common values and increase the sense of solidarity and cohesion. On the other hand, CSR means that European companies should behave responsibly wherever they operate, in accordance with the European values and internationally agreed norms and standards. Enterprises of all sizes, in cooperation with their stakeholders, can help by means of CSR to reconcile economic, social and environmental ambitions.

CSR must be understood as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. (Commission Green Paper 2001: "Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility", COM (2001) 366 Final). Other terms used for CSR in specialty literature are *corporate responsibility*, *corporate citizenship*, *corporate sustainability* or *corporate sustainable development*. This definition helps to emphasize that: CSR covers social and environmental issues; CSR is not or should not be separated from business strategy and operations: it is about integrating social and environmental concerns into business strategy and operations; CSR is a voluntary concept and a very important aspect of CSR is how enterprises interact with their internal and external stakeholders (employees, customers, neighbours, non-governmental organizations, public authorities, etc.)

Another widely used definition of CSR is that of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, stating that "*Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large.*" (CSR: Meeting Changing Expectations, 1999).

The ISO Strategic Advisory Group on Social Responsibility (2004) notes that most definitions focus on the inter-relationship between economic, environmental and social aspects and impacts of an organization's activities and that social responsibility means "*a balanced approach for organizations to address economic, social and environmental issues in a way that aims to benefit people, communities and society*".

Trying to explain the concept of CSR, we can simply say: more than ever before, stakeholders require that business should function in a responsible way. While pressures to make profits are higher, stakeholders expect ever-increasing standards of accountability and transparency. Business responsibility – and its relationship to the community in which it operates and seeks to serve – is more important than ever. CSR is about the ways an entrepreneur can add value to his business by taking a closer look at some of the social and environmental aspects of the operations. In this sense the Business Dictionary (2009) provides a very simple and concise definition of social responsibility: "*obligation of an organization's management towards the welfare and interests of the society which provides it, the environment and resources to survive and flourish, and which is affected by the organization's actions and policies*".

CSR seeks to create and exploit win – win situations for enterprises and for society at large and, therefore, can help to make Europe and its enterprises and organizations more competitive. CSR is increasingly recognized as being about having good business practices and its impacts are seen as contributing to an organization's reputation and performance. The latter is becoming more and more important as the value of business becomes more and more reliant on intangible elements. Qualitative information about a company (such as the risks and opportunities relating to the impacts of its activities on key stakeholders) is becoming recognized as a key determinant and, therefore, an important commercial issue for any business.

Considering the above said, it is difficult to define Corporate Social Responsibility, but it is more difficult to agree on a definition of the University Social Responsibility (USR) concept. It is about the need to strengthen civic commitment and active citizenship; it is about volunteering, about an ethical approach, developing a sense of civil citizenship by encouraging the students, the academic staff to provide social services to their local community or to promote ecological, environmental commitment for local and global sustainable development. Reiser (2008) defines the USR concept as "*a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development.*" The importance of this concept is demonstrated by the fact that it is also included in the

International Association of Universities Policy Statements, together with other current challenges facing higher education – academic freedom and university autonomy, and also by the establishment of international organizations for this field, such as the University Social Responsibility Alliance (set up in 2008, in San Francisco, USA).

3. Universities as organizations and the changing framework in Europe

The economic, political and social changes that took place over the last decades have had an impact also on the European higher education institutions, which have undergone an ample reform process meant to meet the new challenges they are facing. Globalisation, the knowledge society, innovation, the development of technologies, a growing emphasis on the market forces are among the key-factors which influence the universities' mission, organisation and profile, the mode of operation and delivery of higher education.

A lot of observers of higher education have noted lately the changing forces, trends and challenges in the European higher education. For example, Gibbons (2005) argues that nowadays universities are affected by the new context they operate in: "*a rightward shift in political thinking, globalisation, innovation and the knowledge economy*" (p. 124). Under these circumstances, higher education is more competitive.

The changing environment in which universities operate and the challenges that higher education has been facing are also mentioned by Barblan, Daxner, and Ivosevic (2007) and Eckstein (2003) (cited by Vukasovic, 2008): mass expansion of higher education; decrease of public expenditure for higher education; diversification of higher education provision; internationalisation of higher education; commercialisation of higher education; changes brought by ICT development.

These views are largely similar to those of Felt (2003) who pointed out that despite the historical, social, political differences between countries, there are at present some commonalities in the higher education system: „*These range from the partial retreat of the State as main supporter of the university (science) system, to an increase in the entrepreneurial character of research and higher education institutions, the growing flexibility of personnel structures, the diversification of financial resources, the adaptation of curricula to labour market requirements and above all the call for new forms of quality assessment. At the heart of the debate are the notions of* **autonomy** *and* **academic freedom***, i.e.,* **the new forms of responsibility** *(*our highlight*) towards society and of accountability towards stakeholders*" (p. 14).

Several observers of higher education cited by Sanderson and Watters (2006) argue that a recent change in the higher education system refers to the „*corporatisation*" of higher education.

Felt (2005) groups the changing forces in higher education in two categories: „external" to the university and „internal". The former includes: „*the relative decrease of public expenditure for higher education institutions; a growing emphasis on economic rationality in the understanding and contextualisation of public institutions and services, universities included; the increase of stakeholder intervention in issues perceived until recently as internal to the institutions of higher education and research; and a perceivable shift in students' expectations and demands vis-à-vis university education*" (pp. 17-18). The internal forces to the universities „*are often rooted in the apparent tensions between research and teaching structures*" (p. 18).

Jónasson (2008) notes that there are some visible **trends in the university sector**. Some of these trends are universal, even if there are differences between countries due to culture and demography:

1. The most important development is *the growth of the world student number*. In other terms, higher education is becoming universal. Another visible trend noticeable especially in several European countries refers to age access in the university, namely to *the growing age range of students in universities*. This means that more and more people enter higher education institutions at different times of their adult life.

2. The second trend in the university sector underlined by the above-mentioned study was named „*institutional drift*". This term refers to the fact that in many countries higher education system expanded for a number of institutions offering vocational or professional programmes have recently joined the university community. As a result within the system the relative weight of these programmes have been growing: „*...the system of higher education is growing massively, worldwide, and more and more professional and vocational fields are entering the higher education arena; as a consequence, the tension between the academic and practical approaches becomes perhaps more noticeable*" (p. 128).

3. Another obvious trend which manifests both within Europe and beyond, around the globe refers to the fact that „*higher education becomes to certain extent a business activity"* (p. 129).

   In this context, universities as organizations, are supposed to respond to change and adapt in order to meet the challenges of today's and tomorrow's world.

## 4. Spiru Haret University – A model of University Social responsibility

Spiru Haret University (USH) is a duly accredited higher education institution, certified as a legal person of private law and public utility, a part of the national education system. USH bears the name of an important Romanian scholar, mathematician, astronomer and politician, three times Minister of Education, full member of the Romanian Academy in 1892, who implemented deep reforms, building the modern Romanian system of education.

The founding members of USH took over the Haretian reforming and vanguardist spirit and set up a higher education institution (in 1991) which assumed its role of a catalyst of the dynamics of change. Cherishing Spiru Haret heritage, USH adapted traditional Romanian education to its own purpose, set it in a new perspective and changed its strategic priorities in line with the new European education standards and social requirements. Always in the van of history, USH has made its own choices, in the name of academic autonomy and of social progress, fostered by the Bologna Process. The university is among the signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum (in 2005) and in this position it has committed to support European integration by placing higher education on the new European coordinates, where university social responsibility plays a major role and the student is our partner, in a large family imbued by the 'neo-Haretian' spirit. This reforming shift from traditional to modern education, as defined by the Bologna Process, materialized in the following objectives:

1. University's social involvement – our university committed to provide access for all the social categories, irrespective of their material resources, to higher education by: low tuition fees, (text)books subsidies, student grants, special tuition fee discounts for students whose parents are retired or disabled. This objective responds to the mass expansion of higher education, as a trend, and our current number of students (around 250,000 fulltime and part-time students) shows that the objective is validated by the society.

2. Delocalisation of the education process by Distance Learning centres (44 in Romania and 9 abroad) ensures the main access to educational resources delivered online, printed or broadcast through special supplies (e.g. 10,000 computers for direct free of charge access of all the students). A network of 10,000 computers connected inside Romania and abroad and the free-of-charge access enables the appropriate connection between students and teachers no matter where they are located. Distance learning supported by modern IT&C technologies ensures the constant growth of the age range of students in universities and for the employed this means that they can engage themselves in various forms of life long learning programs without leaving their homes and jobs. The university comes to their home towns.

3. Supporting access to education in the student's mother tongue – of the persons affected by economic issues or for the immigrants. Opening distance-learning centres abroad, especially in countries like Italy, Spain, France, enable for the Romanians the access to HE in their mother tongue. A large number of young Romanians are working and living in Italy and Spain because they chose to leave Romania driven by the hope of a better life for them and their family. Sometimes, too young to understand the importance of education, looking for a better paid job abroad, after adjusting and adapting to the new society and gain economic stability, they start to explore the possibility of coming back to school in order to improve their qualification and competency through higher education. Our university is oriented to cover these needs developing new learning facilities directly in the most important cities having large Romanian communities (e.g. Madrid or Rome).

4. The *Spiru Haret* National Society – a non-profit organization aiming at the promotion of knowledge and culture in the rural area, rising the level of involvement in the knowledge process, for the knowledge-based society. Fully aware of its social responsibility, our university has taken actions and has become the founding member of the SH national society, an NGO having as main objective to promote and sustain culture, supporting the talented people from rural areas to get recognition at the national level, to facilitate the knowledge transfer to less fortunate communities and even to give local people a chance to be socially involved in the community life supporting them with access to media, organising social events, etc.

5. Supporting and promoting writers, painters etc. with low (if any) resources – this is an additional goal of the *Spiru Haret* National Society, and giving the access to a publishing house and/or to a modern printing house sponsoring the publishing costs could be considered an action to the general benefit of society.

The figure below is a relevant example of how *Spiru Haret* University operates as a major player in the society:

Fig. 1 Spiru Haret University Model of Social Responsibility
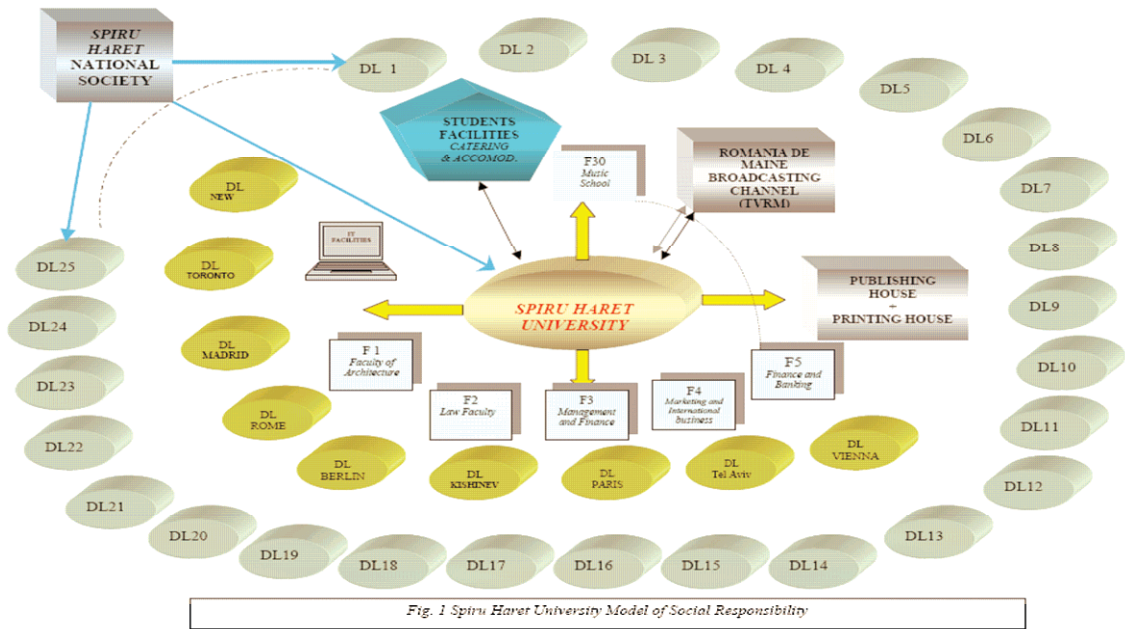
5. Conclusions

The Bologna Process has revolutionized higher education so as to meet the requirements of the 21st century society. Some are still reluctant to the benefits of this change, but most universities are signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum, the document of the Bologna Process, and have successfully implemented its major concepts, those of academic autonomy and freedom, as the new forms of social responsibility. 'Mass higher education' is a fact and life long learning is a must in the new society. The European universities are committed to raise the students' awareness to the needs of the society, as fully involved and dedicated individuals, not as individual personalities but as social personalities. This accountability to the whole society involves personal improvement to the benefit of the society and to its main concerns: climate change, global inequities, environment protection, recycling.

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