

Universities' Social Responsibility (USR) and Sustainable Development: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

The concept of social responsibility is no longer confined to charitable and voluntary activity, but it is in fact a broader and more comprehensive concept that comprises solutions for societies economic, social and environmental problems. Moreover, sustainable development cannot be achieved in isolation from the close relationship between higher education and its institutions -namely universities- and society. Universities are considered an essential pillar of society, because they play a pivotal role in elevating awareness regarding social responsibility among its students, staff members and other employees, in a manner that makes them behave as societal personalities professing collective views and not opting to adopt individual thinking. Accordingly, this research paper aims to present a conceptual framework clarifying the role of social responsibility of universities in sustainable development. It addresses the concept of social responsibility and its various aspects; the close relationship between it and sustainable development and the role of universities in strengthening this relationship. At the end, the paper provides number of recommendations that guarantee the enhancement of the role of universities in the social responsibility that is anticipated to achieve and support sustainable development effort

Keywords - Social responsibility, universities, higher education Institutions, sustainable development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has imposed itself on the economic arena as a concept through which organizations take into account the affairs and issues of their respective communities, as well as shoulder the responsibility for the impact of their activities on customers, partners, employees, environment and society. Given the fact that business organizations target profitability in the first place, we find that their social responsibility (SR) is founded on the amount of profits they achieved. Today, companies are no longer evaluated solely on the basis of their profitability, but many modern concepts have emerged, aiming to create a conducive working environment that addresses the rapid developments in

all their managerial, economic and technological aspects. Additionally, it drives far beyond 'philanthropy' -as it used to be- giving more contribution of businesses in sustainable development (SD), through their efforts in solving the society challenges (Vasilescu, *et al.*, 2010).

As declared by Balabanis Phillips and Lyall, "in the modern commercial era, companies and their managers are subjected to well publicized pressure to play an increasingly active role in society-so called "Corporate social responsibility" (Balabanis *et al.*, 1998: 25). CSR is no longer confined to profitable companies and organizations, but rather to the responsibility of non-profit organizations and educational institutions, especially higher education institutions (HEI), whether they belong to either private or public sector. Therefore some substitute CSR term by 'Organizational Social Responsibility' OSR (Vallaes, 2013).

Moreover, the global economic, social, political and technological changes witnessed over the past decades have had their clear impact on the educational sector, especially higher education and its institutions. HEI have been subjected to a number of undergone many reforms processes that aimed at confronting new challenges: globalization, sustainability, knowledge society, innovation, development of technologies and software, in addition to increasing emphasis on market forces as part of the important factors that influence the very identity of the universities and their organization (Vasilescu, *et al.*, 2010).

We must take into account that the universities' role in provision of education and the qualification of their outputs for the labour market, as well as conduct and publishing of academic research have been changed. Universities almost fulfil their responsibility of educating youth and developing research (Martí-Noguera, *et al.* (2017). Yet, to the above two missions of universities is added a "Third Mission", in which the universities engage with society (Howard and Sharma, 2006). Regarding this, universities play a broader social role and perform a moral obligation which are represented in giving due attention to social, ethical, economic, political and environmental issues as well as problems of society.

Based on the above, it becomes urgent to reflect upon the role of HEI in the contemporary society. Therefore, this study aims to present a conceptual framework of the universities' social responsibility (USR), and its effective role in achieving sustainable development. A theoretical and conceptual framework is considered dealing with the SR definition and its principles, levels and forms, as well as the concept of SD and its basic elements. The significance of SR as a pivotal role for universities and their relationship to SD is clarified. Finally, the study concludes the most important results and recommendations that are expected to enhance the role of USR in promoting SD.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The concept Social Responsibility (SR) currently occupies an increasingly important part, and it has become part of the global discussion about competitiveness and sustainability in the circumstance of globalization (Vasilescu, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, managerial thought did not provide a clear concept of SR. According to Berman (1990), achieving an integrated diagnosis of social responsibility is not easy, given the gap between what the local community expects from these companies and what these companies themselves are ready to give.

Literature comprises several other terms for SR such as social responsiveness, social performance, responsible business, corporate responsibility, corporate citizenship, ethical leadership, or SD of companies (Crowther, et al., 2008; D'Amato, et al., 2009; and Sananse, 2016). Although all concepts or definitions agree that SR is not confined only to social aspects, but it extends to comprise economic as well as environmental aspects and issues that concern community. Similarly, with multitude and diversity of proposed definitions, the concept of sustainability or SD has emerged.

Both of the above concepts may be used in many studies in some sort of ambiguity or in an exchangeable manner, such as calling SR as SD of companies. This requires the clarification of the concepts pertaining to SR and its components as well as SD and its basic parts.

A. Defining Corporate Social Responsibility

Academic and practitioners have been endeavouring to agree upon a proper definition of SR for long. It first came up in 1953 as an academic subject in HR Bowen's "Social Responsibilities of Business". Bowen puts the scene of this field, proposing that the CSR point out that the businesses behaviour and operation should fall within the society's guidelines set, and they must act as moral

agents (Balabanis, et al., 1998). He defines CSR as "an obligation to pursue policies to make decisions and to follow lines of action which are compatible with the objectives and values of society" (Ebner & Baumgartner, 2006: 2).

In 2001, the Green Paper of the Commission of European Communities (2001: 5) defined CSR 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". After ten years, they present a simpler definition, saying that CSR is "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society and outlines what an enterprise should do to meet that responsibility" (Kumar & Roy, 2015: 19).

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development CSR definition is a widely use one. It states that CSR 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" (WBCSD, 2000: 8).

Wood (1991) encapsulates businesses CSR into three driving principles: they are social institutions, so they are obliged to use their power responsibly; they are responsible for the outcomes associating with their involvement in society; and individual managers considered as moral agents who are required to carry out discretion while making decisions (Balabanis, et al., 1998).

Despite the difference over the concept of SR, Carroll (1991) has earlier solved the problem of interference and confusion between the different SR concepts through what is called Carroll Pyramid of Social Responsibilities, which includes four elements (levels): economic, legal, Ethical, and philanthropic Responsibilities. These elements start from the base of the pyramid and end on the top, as it is represented by the following figure.

- 1) **Economic Responsibilities:** These include the responsibilities that are concerned with profit-generating performance, which maintains and enhances the competitive advantage of the organization, achieves a high level of operational efficiency, and secures success for the economic units through fruitful investment.
- 2) **Legal Responsibilities:** This include the responsibilities that concern compliance with laws and the state, including responsiveness to local, regional and international regulations, and obedience to the laws of society. Success of economic units cannot be achieved in isolation from compliance with laws.



Fig. 1: The Pyramid of Social Responsibility

- 3) **Ethical Responsibilities:** These mean the work of the organization or the unit within the framework of good citizenship that complies with laws and regulations and is consistent with the positive habits of society and its ethical standards.
- 4) **Philanthropic Responsibilities:** These include integration of units' performance with the performance with the humanitarian or philanthropic aspects of society by contributing to volunteering activities, provision of assistance and support of fine arts as well as projects enhancing quality of life in society.

B. University Social Responsibility (USR)

Francois Vallaeys asked: "In the academic context, is social responsibility a new model for administrative and academic management or just a new label for the kind of solidarity outreach projects many universities have pursued for years?" (Vallaeys, 2013). He pointed out the lack of theoretical definition that clear the scope of CSR. The meaning is still ambiguity and have not been explored in-depth. Considering university as one of the society's organizations, the USR definition can be informed from CSR conceptualization. Therefore, USR definitions vary mainly in the literature, depending on the clarification of responsibility and whether the university ought to be responsible towards its students and staff, or towards stakeholders, partners, and its community (Parsons, 2014). This variety of conceptualization, as mentioned by Lo, *et al.* (2017: 40) is because "USR is a living concept still in an exploratory stage".

In defining USR, Reiser (2008) concentrates on the university management's impacts, saying that it is "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, labor and environmental impacts produced by the University, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development" (Lo, *et al.*, 2017: 40). This While Vasilescu, *et al.* (2010: 4178) defines USR from the citizenship perspective, as "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".

According to Giuffrè & Ratto (2014: 234), USR is "the ability of the University to disseminate and implement a set of general principles and specific values, using 4 key processes: Management, Teaching, Research and Extension, through the provision of educational services and transfer knowledge following ethical principles, good governance, respect for the environment, social engagement and the promotion of values". Social engagement of HEI has become one of the fundamental pillars of universities. Hence, social service is considered as a core mission, that equal to teaching and research (Shek, *et al.*, 2017).

Berman presents a diagram -figure 2-that explain the dimensions of 'educating for social responsibility', and how to educate young people for the development of social consciousness, understanding social/ecological interdependence, to become an important part of their society. There social basic skills and participatory understanding need to be developed; opportunities for social contribution need to be given; and exploring the real-

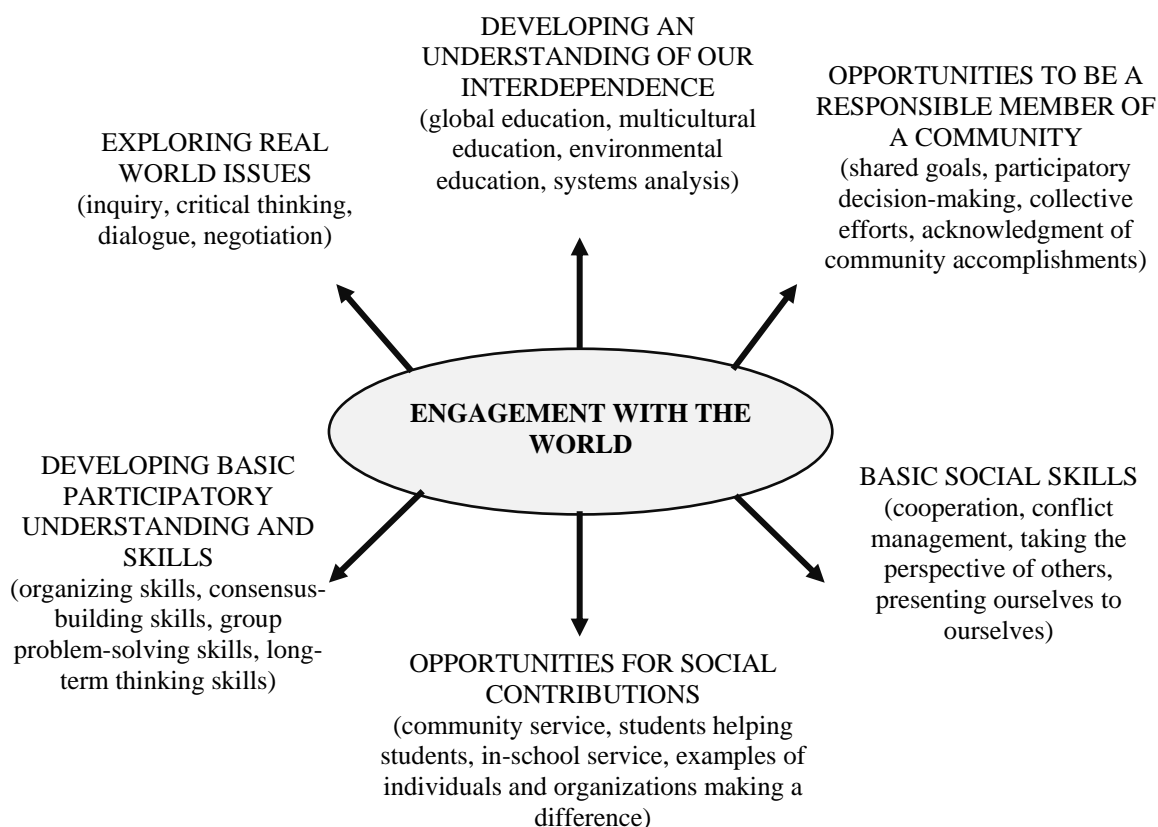


Fig. 2: The Development of Social Consciousness

world issues that concert students need to be encourage (Berman, 1990: 77).

C. Sustainable Development

In 1986, the General Assembly of the UN-at the preamble of its Declaration entitled "Right in Development"-declared that that "development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom" (United Nations, 1986: 1).

SD appeared as an ethical concept in 1987, when the World Commission on Environment and Development defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Ebner & Baumgartner, 2006: 2). The Swiss Monitoring of Sustainable Development Project (MONET) proposed a boarder definition, in which SD means "ensuring dignified living conditions with regard to human rights by creating and maintaining the widest possible range of options for freely

defining life plans. The principle of fairness among and between present and future generations should be taken into account in the use of environmental, economic and social resources" (Keiner, 2004: 380).

It becomes conspicuous from the above definitions that SD requires the determination of the eco-social developmental objectives with which sustainability is achieved. Additionally, the concepts of SD rely on three basic dimensions (pillars): social (equity), economic (growth) and environmental (conservation). This so called three-pillars model is indicated in Figure (3) below (Keiner, 2004: 381).

Spangenberg & Bonniot added the institutional dimension as a fourth dimension to sustainability, forming what is known as a Pyramid Sustainable Development Model (Figure 4). In this Model, the economic dimension is expressed as material capital, social dimension as human capital and natural capital as environmental dimension, whereas the social capital is expressed as institutional dimension (Spangenberg & Bonniot, 1998: 9).

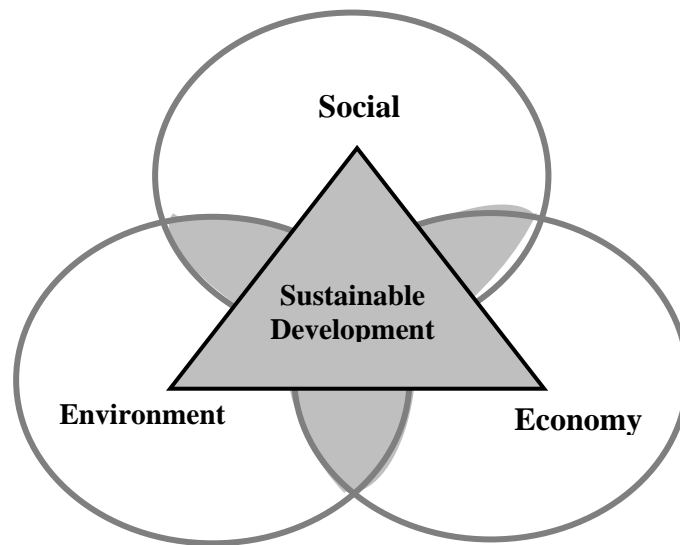


Fig. 3: Three -Pillar Sustainable Development Model

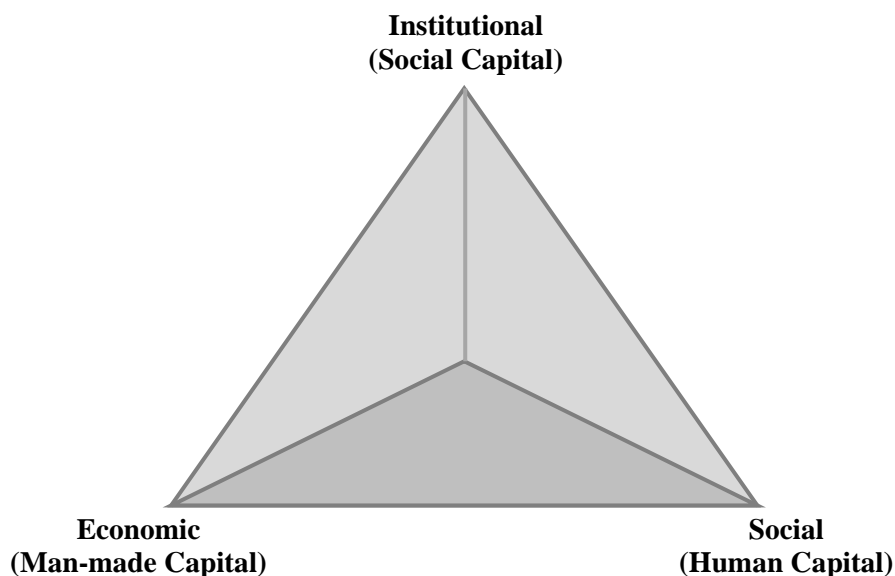


Fig. 4: Pyramid Model for Sustainable Development

The United Nations (2015) has developed its five-component intermingled SD paradigm, as in Figure 5 (5Ps: **P**eople, **P**artnership, **P**eace, **P**lanet and **P**rosperity), from which the goals of SD emerge. In early 2016, the implementation of SD goals of Plan 2030 has commenced. This was based on the outcomes of both the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), followed by those of the Summit on Millennium Development Objectives (2010).

D. Universities Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development

CSR is often accused of contradicting SD, if either firm is often unable to adhere to the principles of CSR or that the sustainability of the planet and the safety of human and material resources conflict with economic development and sometimes with social development (Moon, 2007). However, the correct awareness of the concept of CSR shows its close

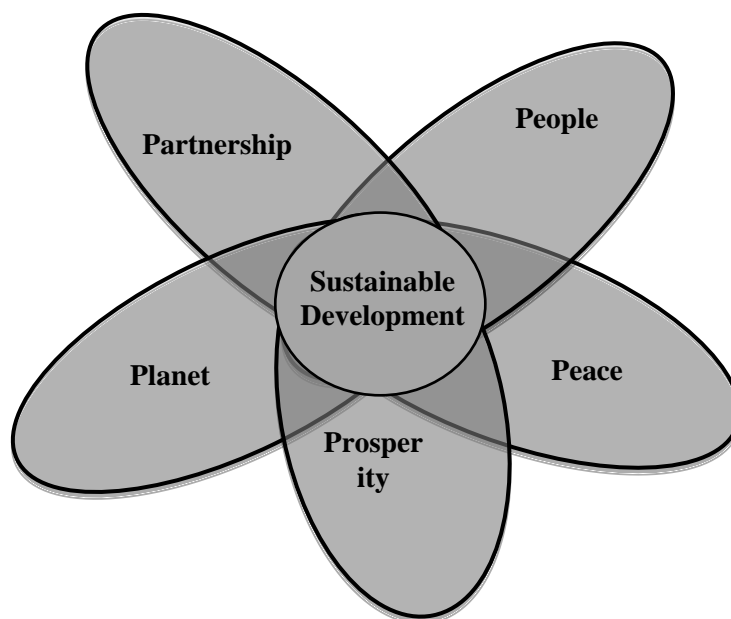


Figure 5. Model Five Elements of Sustainable Development

association with SD and its reference to it in its definitions. The two concepts are complementary and serve each other. Global experience has indicated that the role of universities in SD is influential, particularly through the performance of the USR, because SD accounts for approximately 24% of the SR programs for European business education. This is followed by work ethics which constitute 22%, then environmental management, work and society constituting 16%. It is also noted that the main themes of SR (social, environmental and economic) are in fact the same three dimensions of SD (according to the previous three-dimension model). Therefore, the only way for achieving SD comprised the awareness of each individual institution and sector, and the commitment of such entities to their responsibility towards the rights of society, conservation of the environment and growth of the economy.

III. UNIVERSITIES SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

CSR is often accused of contradicting SD, if either firm is often unable to adhere to the principles of CSR or that the sustainability of the planet and the safety of human and material resources conflict with economic development and sometimes with social development (Moon, 2007). However, the correct awareness of the concept of CSR shows its close association with SD and its reference to it in its definitions. The two concepts are complementary and serve each other. Global experience has indicated that the role of universities in SD is influential, particularly through the performance of the USR,

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According to university's impacts, Vallaeys (2014) distinguish between four types: organizational impacts that affects the university's environment and community including students, staff and academics; educational impact that concerns with educating people and shaping ethics and values; cognitive impacts that concerns with building and producing knowledge, consolidating the relationship between technological and social context of science and the society; and social impact that concerns with affecting society through fostering progress, building social capital, and preparing students for real world. These four impacts enabled Vallaeys to outline four areas of university's socially responsible management, as shown in figure 6 below (Vallaeys, 2014: 95).

Obviously while committing to their social responsibility, universities are uniquely stationed to play a leading part in the attainment of sustainable SD. Even though those which have committed to SD are striving to profoundly contribute to it (Tilbury,

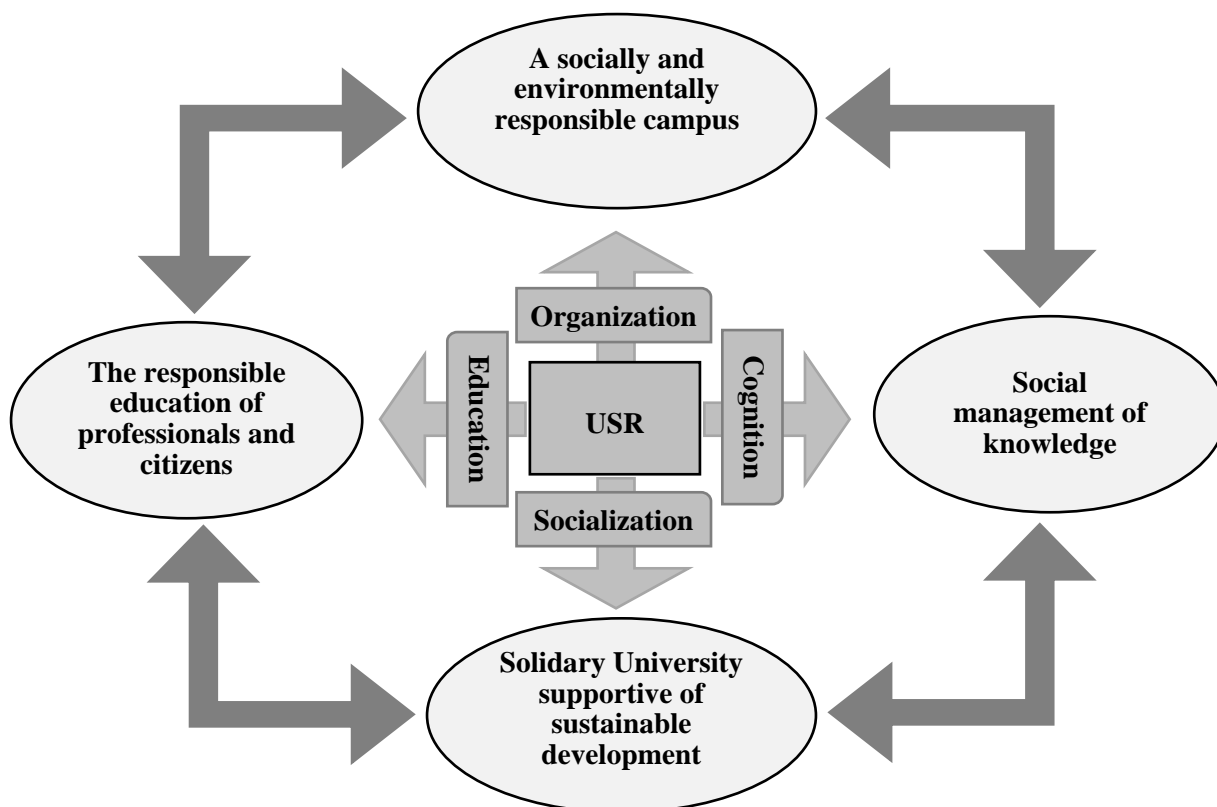


Fig. 6: Universities' Areas of Social Responsibility

2011). Through their primary functions (research, teaching and the community service), HEI must upsurge their interdisciplinary focus and encourage critical thinking and effective citizenship. This without a doubt will contribute to SD and wellbeing. As declared by Abdul Razak, *et al.* (2017: 105), “Universities -arguably the most important societal institution- have a role in developing citizens who are able to contribute politically, socially, culturally and economically to a just and progressive society. Furthermore, universities are also entrusted to mould global citizens who can play a greater part in ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be met”.

In any educational system, the university is considered the center of the strategic rotation of the system and the cornerstone of SD, especially in the present globalized era, because of the multiple tasks it performs. This is, because the university has continued to occupy great importance in any educational system, especially in relation to the formation of qualified human capital. Likewise, the university serves as an essential tool in developing SD plans with their various dimensions which the university can achieve through its three main functions.

By promoting SD practices, universities can become the model that can be followed. This can take the shape-for instance- of academic efforts represented in the procedures adopted by universities for saving energy and promoting the use of renewable energy sources inside their respective on campuses. The universities can also reduce disposal waste material and practice material recycling. Thus, these HEI can create an attractive, healthy and safe university environment for both the faculty and students. Furthermore, the university administration, that considers environmental sustainability, is also closely compatible with other policies of responsible administration. Therefore, universities should management that is characterized with consultation with others, justice, transparency and accountability, in addition to, which is considered the most important, the full participation of students in these processes through which the university can teach its students significant aspects of SR.

To help universities play their required role in confronting global challenges and trends towards knowledge-based economies and the promotion of SD, they – after due match of their educational and research functions with the requirements of the knowledge-based economy and SD must focus on their third function in regard to the community

service, committing to SR. Furthermore, the universities' that play their new role must cope in one hand with the characteristics of competent SR and with the objectives of SD, and according to its approved indicators on the other.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although evidence suggests that there are serious movements toward sustainable development practicing in HEI, universities confront several reasons that impede their performance of social role. These comprise the weakness of the culture of SR and its confined to charity works, lack of internal organization of SR in the organizations, the weakness of the culture of giving and the commitment to ethics for development and the absence of specific measures of SR. Today, universities should have shouldered its societal responsibility, in addition to its disseminating due awareness, and inculcate in the individuals' minds the values that make SR an automatic conduct and moral obligation of all. Furthermore, SD agenda and SD goals will help focus the efforts of governments and academic institutions on bringing about momentous development outcomes. The success of those efforts will rely on the strong willingness and fully involvement of university with real society. Any ideas, perceptions and recommendations submitted for the activation of the role of the USR in SD become mere theoretical propositions, unless they are linked to strong implementation mechanism. To help universities achieve SR in a highly professional manner, it is essential that such educational institutions should discharge their responsibility on the base that ensures permanency, generality, comprehensiveness and continuity.

Perhaps the most important matter that we can indicate here regarding the association between USR and SD, is that the adequate comprehension and awareness about the comprehensive the holistic concept of SR is the path that leads to achieving SD. Therefore, the role of universities in promoting SD through their commitment to SR requires firstly the faith and conviction of the university and its leadership, faculty, employees and students, and deep belief and conviction in the issue of SR.

When we commence with the student, his qualification and training must be performed in the way he becomes an effective individual and a responsible citizen. For this, it is recommended that universities should disseminate the culture and awareness of SR among their students by organizing large-scale campaigns, taking intermittent and continuous manner; create positive attitudes among students' public opinion through the dissemination of successful efforts and models of SR and their positive impacts; allocate compulsory and optional courses of SR through which the student recognizes the correct

concept of SR and its dimensions and future effects on the individual and society, together with linking them to practical field application; incorporate SR in most curricula with due emphasis on the values of altruism, giving social interests preference over personal interests and observe the rights of future generations; and deepen SR practices through extracurricular activities, student programs and competitions, together with providing students with incentives to participate.

Academics acquire a particular significance in their ability to influence the intellectual level of students, and in carrying out their duties and responsibilities in the best manner in education, academic research and community service. The universities should focus on this aspect through attracting staff members, who are outstanding in the field of new disciplines (green); Enhancing moral values, work ethics, commitment, sense of belonging and sense of responsibility among faculty through meetings, workshops, etc., with the provision of different incentives for societal response and contributions of their staff members in community service and societal initiatives, whether through academic evaluation or promotions; Encourage academics to cultivate the values of conserving the different resources (water, energy, paper ...) in the students' minds inside and outside the university, by getting them accustomed to observing cultural and civilized behavior and moral commitment during lectures; and directing academics to conduct research and studies in the fields of SD and SR, and provide them with the required moral, financial and logistical support.

Finely, the university's commitment to its societal role necessitates the incorporation of SR in the university's vision or mission. University should secure institutional support of the SR at the internal level of the university, via including SR with its social, economic and environmental dimensions within its objectives and strategic plan. Creating the internal atmosphere of the university environment to suit the implementation of green activities, programs and initiatives is also essential. In addition, university must commit to the development of educational curricula and extracurricular activities in the manner that achieves continuous improvement in the educational and skill level for the university outputs to suit the needs of the community; support specialized research studies and programs on SR and economic sustainability, as well as publish their findings and recommendations with high degree of transparency; develop minute and flexible indicators of SR on which the university depends on regarding the measurement of its achievements and development of its efforts in this area according to the objectives and strategic plans and according to specific and declared timetables.

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