

Quality of Life in Asia

Volume 8

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Editors

University Social Responsibility and Quality of Life

A Global Survey of Concepts and Experiences

 Springer

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Preface

The contemporary world is facing many problems such as global warming, poverty, income disparities, refugees, aging populations, and new diseases. Obviously, how to solve these problems is a challenging task for leaders in the national, regional, and global contexts. As universities are commonly regarded as incubators for knowledge and solutions to promote quality of life, it is important to ask how universities can help to build a better world. In fact, it is the public expectation that universities should generate knowledge which can solve real-life problems which can eventually promote quality of life.

In the business sector, the notion of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) has received growing attention in the past few decades. Fundamentally, the spirit of CSR maintains that besides maximizing profits, business enterprises should also look at how they can fulfill their social responsibilities such as promotion corporate governance, reduction of corruption and collusion, limiting negative and maximizing positive environmental and other impacts of their operations, and provision of voluntary service to the underprivileged and needy groups. Major corporations throughout the world regard CSR as a desired attribute of a company which would eventually promote corporate image and reputation.

As universities are corporations, the notion of CSR is applicable to universities to some extent. Nevertheless, as maximization of profit is not a common goal of universities and educational service is different from commercial activities, there is a need to explore the notion of “university social responsibility” (USR) as an emergent field of academic inquiry and practice. When we look at the experiences of different universities, different ways of promoting USR are evident. Some examples of USR missions include the following: establishment of communities within and outside the University which promotes social responsibilities in different stakeholders; promotion of activities which are ethical, inclusive, and beneficial to the public; emphasis on environmental conservation, sustainability, and balanced social development; promotion of welfare and quality of life of people, especially the needy and vulnerable populations; and commitment to building a better world. Typically, these missions are accomplished via teaching, research, and services within the university community and in collaboration with other bodies. There

clearly is a growing movement among institutions of higher education to expand and strengthen these functions.

To promote USR in universities, several universities from different parts of the world have established the University Social Responsibility Network (USR Network). At this stage, in the USR movement it is especially timely to document and disseminate the work-in-progress of universities. Documenting and sharing institutional experiences of different types of universities and across borders can be particularly productive at this time of innovation, ferment, and growing activity. This book documents and reflects upon diverse USR experiences in different universities. We are publishing this volume to mark the beginning of the USR Network.

There are several unique features of this book. First, the role of universities in social responsibilities in different contexts is explored. Second, the background of the establishment of the pioneer USR Network and its possible future directions are described. Third, an innovative project on the possible assessment of USR is reported, which provides a first step in the exploration of the possible assessment of USR. Fourth, USR experiences in different parts of the world, including universities in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Middle East, Australia, and Asia are presented and analyzed.

From the experiences revealed in these chapters, several observations can be highlighted. First, different universities have different goals and strategies with respect to their USR initiatives. Second, different USR programs with different levels of sophistication, resources, and commitment have been designed, which can provide excellent reference points for the development of the USR policies and programs of other institutions. Third, stakeholders including teachers, non-teaching staffs, and students can be (and are) involved in USR activities. Fourth, there is a need to step up work on the assessment of USR initiatives, a need to conduct more evaluation work of USR efforts, particularly with reference to the impact of USR on different stakeholders. Obviously, having good intentions to promote well-being is not enough. We need rigorous evaluation to demonstrate the impact. Fifth, as USR initiatives are mostly done within the context of a single university, there is a need to further promote inter-institutional USR initiatives. As such, the USR Network is an excellent vehicle to promote inter-institutional USR initiatives. Finally, as USR theory and research are still in their infancy, there is a need to strengthen the theoretical framework and basic research on USR. For example, it is important to know what basic qualities should be nurtured in students so that they can participate competently in USR activities such as service-learning, and in order to maximize what they learn in the process. In the recent decades, different ranking systems have been designed to rank universities and these regimes powerfully influence university strategic planning and decision-making. For example, in the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, performance indicators in five areas are used. These include teaching (reputation survey, staff to student ratio, doctorate to bachelor ratio, doctorate awards to academic staff ratio), research (volume, income and reputation), citations per paper, international outlook (ratio of international to domestic staff, ratio of international to domestic students, and

international collaboration), and industry income. Unfortunately, no indicator of USR performance is included. Similarly, USR criteria are not included in the *QS World University Rankings* in which indicators related to academic peer review, faculty–student ratio, citations for faculty, employer reputation, international student ratio, and international staff ratio are employed. Again, USR activities are not included in the assessment. Of course, some criteria employed such as citations per faculty staff are an important indicator for assessing academic impact of a university. However, having strong academic impact does not necessarily mean that the university is excelling in improving the well-being of the society. Alternatively, we can argue that the percentage of students who have taken service-learning subjects may give a better indication of a university’s service to the community. As such, we earnestly hope that the university rankings will start to incorporate USR activities in future. By doing this, universities would be reminded about the important responsibility that they have to promote quality of life of the society and the world, and their efforts to do so will be reinforced. At present, the complete lack of attention to USR in the rankings seriously undercuts their social responsibility obligations and opportunities, and skews their work toward other functions.

This book would not exist without the enthusiastic support of colleagues from different member institutions in the USR Network. Therefore, we must express our deep gratitude to them. In the Chinese culture, there is the saying of “throwing a brick to attract a jade” (pao zhuan yin yu). Hence, we treat this book as a “brick” which can attract “jades” in future and it is our modest wish that this book is a kickoff step in the book series on university social responsibility. We hope very much that colleagues in the field of USR will devote more effort in the future to documenting and assessing USR experiences.

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Robert M. Hollister is founding executive director emeritus and co-founder of the Talloires Network, a global coalition of over 350 universities in 76 countries committed to strengthening civic engagement and social responsibility in higher education. He was founding dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University (2000–2011), where he is currently a professor at the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. A pioneer in the engaged university movement, Prof. Hollister led the creation and development of the Tisch College Civic Life, a uniquely comprehensive university-wide program to prepare students in all fields for lifetimes of active citizenship—and to produce citizen engineers and citizen physicians, citizen humanists, and citizen business people. A specialist in citizen participation in public affairs and in the leadership and management of nonprofit organizations, Prof. Hollister is a co-author of *The Engaged University: International Perspectives on Civic Engagement and Development Politics*.