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## Stakeholders' Perception of University Social Responsibility Initiatives: A Qualitative Approach

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### Abstract

University social responsibility (USR) has emerged as a prominent research area to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Today, universities need to be ethical in their operations to retain as well as attract potential stakeholders. However, the study of USR remains understudied as it is a newly emerging concept which differentiated from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This research aims to explore the understanding of university stakeholders' perception of USR and its initiatives. This study utilized a qualitative and interpretive design and obtains data from 8 participants through purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview was conducted to explore the perceptions of students and lecturers at a private university. Two themes have emerged which are understanding (student & lecturer perspective) and initiatives (society, environment, and personal development). The results showed that the participants have some awareness toward the USR initiatives made by the university through education, social, and philanthropy, however, it is found that the term USR is not well-known by the students as they were more acquainted with the term CSR. In addition, the efforts of implementing personal growth to students provide positive results. Students at the university further state that USR has improved their mindsets to be more socially responsible in their daily lives. Conclusion, implications, and suggestions for future study were also discussed.

**Keywords:** University Social Responsibility, University Stakeholders, Perception, Sustainable Development, Higher Education Institution

## Introduction

Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) has been recognized as an important aspect of the public relations strategies of the business (Lee, 2016). CSR is used to maintain a good relationship with stakeholders for building a favorable image and reputation of the organization (Zhang et al., 2020). Through this, CSR is divided into numerous dimensions such as environmental, stakeholders, economic, social, and voluntary (Sousa et al., 2020).

However, as time progresses, it is found that social responsibility can also be applied in the higher education institution (HEI) and called university social responsibility (USR). USR is a new category of social responsibility to differentiate itself from CSR and has been continuously studied by researchers throughout the years (Kouatli, 2018; Chan & Huam, 2019; Chan et al., 2021). Unlike the well-known CSR, USR defers itself by categorizing its specialty of having the institution's students play the roles as their customers as well as the internal stakeholder (employees) which plays the part being the representatives of the university's community (Kouatli, 2019).

Compared to CSR which further leans its marketing strategy towards the economic gain of the organization to achieve sustainability for growth, USR acts as a development that emphasizes expanding the social rights of the social responsibility dimension and its sustainable development goals from the educational point of view (Vázquez et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, USR is still considered a new concept even though it has been a decade since it was first introduced (Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019). This has garnered the interest of many reputable universities in their strategic goals to improve the educational institutions, but it is not widely known amongst their stakeholders (Kouatli, 2019). Like CSR being used for crisis management in the business field as mentioned by Coombs and Holladay (2015), social responsibility initiatives made by the universities can act as a tool to create a positive image towards the institutions especially in times of crisis as it can influence the perceptions of their stakeholders to build a favorable reputation.

According to Malaysia's 2020 National Higher Education Strategic Plan, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has provided initiatives for HEIs to use USR as a part of their sustainability goals. This includes improving several aspects of higher education in Malaysia such as teaching and learning, engagement and internationalism, research, and development (Ahmad & Farley, 2014).

According to Rafidi (2019), Malaysia's performance was ranked 68<sup>th</sup> out of 162 countries with an index score of 69.6 through the 2019 Sustainability Development Goals (SDG). Rafidi (2019) further adds that universities must implement these goals and shape the youths of Malaysia as they make up 45.4 percent of the country's population. Currently, Malaysia has adopted the new SDG for 2030 along with 192 countries to provide more sustainability, resilience, and inclusive development through its 17 SDGs and 169 targets (EPU, 2021). According to its fourth SDG, Malaysia targets to provide quality education while ensuring equality through gender and culture as well as promoting peace and appreciation of cultural diversity (UN, 2021).

Although, several studies have been done by previous researchers regarding USR throughout the globe, however, most of the research on USR was based on the dimensions of CSR (Ahmad, 2012; Jorge & Peña, 2017; Wigmore-Álvarez et al., 2020). Despite the studies made by past researchers, this area of study requires further investigation as it remains unclear as studies were limited in several aspects though it has been suggested in 1998 during the Worldwide Convention in Paris (Tauginiene & Urbanovic, 2018).

According to Coelho and Menezes (2020), aspects such as the stakeholder's perceptions and students' involvement in the USR initiatives have yet to be studied sufficiently. Their research amongst the European universities found that USR acts as an opportunity for students in improving their academic and professional careers in achieve new skills for their future. Nonetheless, the research had its limitation as it did not study the student's understanding and participation of USR towards the image of the educational institutions, however, it was generally studied towards their understanding and development of their academic and career life.

The models of USR, as well as its perceptions, have yet to be identified, however, it has been researched in several studies for its development amongst the top universities around the world as indicated by (Sousa et al., 2020). On the other hand, Plungpongpan et al (2016) have actively demonstrated that the stakeholders such as students and parents, do not recognize the efforts of USR if it is not publicized widely through the media and perceive it to be a 'silent' university. Despite the research made, it has its limitations as the students' participants were known to be inactive in their participation in the private university Based on the above issues, hence, this study needs to be carried out with the aims to explore the stakeholders (student's & employee's) understanding of the USR concept and its initiatives in a private HEI.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Corporate Social Responsibility in Universities***

Universities must create strategic initiatives in solving their crisis whilst developing to improve their reputation in society. As such, it has achieved the interest of researchers to investigate the field of study of CSR initiatives made by the HEIs. The term CSR was often used to define the social responsibility of universities although USR is said to be independent in its field rather than being a part of CSR (Kouatli, 2018).

The concept and dimensions of USR are still under discussion by researchers as some research utilized the dimensions of CSR as a guideline of their study Plungpongpan et al (2016) Furthermore, Plungpongpan et al (2016) state that CSR in university is used as a long-term obligation that the institution has towards its stakeholders which provides the similar notion of CSR used in businesses.

For example, a study by Ahmad (2012) emphasizes the CSR activities made in Malaysian universities, both private and public. The researcher also showed that it is defined based on the CSR dimensions while applying it in a university context. Moreover, it specifies the benefits of CSR to implement towards conserving the environment and the community.

Rahman et al (2019) further note that universities that implement more CSR practices in the institution can improve the quality of reporting and benefit in building their reputation. Additionally, it gives a positive impact on the employability rate of their graduates after attaining their higher education in a university that performs well in terms of CSR initiatives.

### ***Concept of University Social Responsibility***

USR is still in its early stage, has yet to confirm the actual concept of USR. However, there were various concepts made by scholars throughout the years. For instance, Meseguer-Sánchez et al (2020), developed a conceptual structure of USR, where it was adapted from the dimensions of CSR to provide sustainable growth towards the economic development, whilst improving the lives of their stakeholders and the environment.

Despite that, the research was focused on the environmental impacts of USR based on previous scholars and has yet to study the awareness of the initiatives towards the development of its students in educational institutions.

Additionally, the concept of USR has been described as a process that defines the capabilities of a university to implement and disseminate a set of specific beliefs and values by using the key elements which consist of Research, Teaching, Management as well as the Extension (Ramos-Monge et al., 2017). Even so, USR provides their efforts of sustainability through their initiatives of quality management which includes students' activities of their campaigns as well as obtaining support through their students' involvement in volunteer work (Giuffrè & Ratto, 2014).

### ***University Social Responsibility and its Stakeholders***

The existence of USR has its goal to achieve the expectations as well as the needs of its stakeholders. As mentioned by Ramos-Monge et al (2017), this can be considered using the stakeholder's theory which describes it to be the groups that give an impact or are impacted by the decisions made by the organization. Stakeholders such as the students, parents, suppliers, and administrative staff are a few examples of the core stakeholders that provide an influence on the universities. The institutions need to consider them by distinguishing the strategies needed to meet the interest of their stakeholders.

Moreover, Cabrera et al (2018) inform that universities are required to interact with their stakeholders and ensure their participation towards the USR initiatives made by the institution while committing to the needs and expectations. In a study by Latif (2017), universities have a greater opportunity in being recognized by the internal and external stakeholders if the institution implements USR initiatives to fulfill the needs of the society through various factors such as ethical responsibilities, legal responsibilities, community engagement, and philanthropic responsibilities. Nonetheless, USR requires a time-intensive process through its complex strategic planning. This is to allow the USR initiatives made by the institution to accommodate the society as the results may vary depending on the perspectives of the different stakeholders (Chen et al., 2015).

### ***Awareness of University Social Responsibility***

Fundamentally, business organizations are required to provide a report on their CSR initiatives (Borkowski et al, 2010) Nevertheless, universities are required to consider the sustainability of the institution although it may not be required to be reported and accounted for (Lozano, 2011). The demands of reporting the use of USR have been discussed and the implementation of the disclosure made by the educational institutions is vital to provide awareness to its stakeholders (Ismail, 2019).

In Egypt, a study was conducted towards the disclosure of the USR initiatives made by the universities and it was found that low levels of disclosure in Egyptian universities failed to provide the necessary awareness to the stakeholders, although it is observed that high levels of the disclosure provide a positive impact in attracting potential stakeholders towards the institution (Ismail, 2019).

In addition, the awareness towards the USR initiatives acts to provide a reputation to their potential customers (students and parents) in attracting their interest in applying the educational institutions. Lack of awareness creates a negative perception towards the education institution (Plungpongpan et al., 2016) where a university that does not create a



good image is not well-known for the parents to encourage their children to enroll in the institution.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

Cropley (2019) highlighted that qualitative research is based on the key concept of how an answer can be subjective according to a person's point of view. Furthermore, participants of the research will give voice to their perceptions through narratives to understand the meaning of the individual's experiences. In this study, the researchers have used the interpretivism paradigm. Considering the nature of the research, the use of an interpretive paradigm enables the researchers to study the views of the participants. As mentioned by Rahman (2018), this enables the researchers to explore the meanings of the data collected from the participants to ensure that the information provided is rich and extensive.

### ***Sampling Procedure***

Palinkas et al (2015), highlighted that purposive sampling is often used in qualitative studies to determine if the participant of the study is the best suited to the research. This can include providing inclusive or exclusive criteria when explaining the sampling of the study.

A total of eight informants were chosen amongst the students and lecturers at a private university which includes 3 students, 1 internship student, 1 alumnus, and 3 lecturers as stakeholders of the university. As mentioned by Boddy (2016), providing a minimum sample size of six in-depth interviews is said to provide a result that is 'evident', whereas the sample size of 12 in-depth interviews concludes that the study is 'evident'. Thus, by having eight informants, the study will still provide sufficient results.

This research has focused on students in Year 2 or 3 of a private university along with the lecturers of the institution involved in teaching Public Relations (PR) courses, as well as an internship student and alumni who had previously studied in the university and majoring in PR. The choice of the sample can be justified as they are known to be the core stakeholders of the university as previously mentioned in the literature review. Students and alumni understand the subject of study as they were involved in the subjects related to the knowledge of social responsibility, whereas the other participants were lecturers of the faculty that have taught the subject or were previously careers involved in PR. Table 1 below shows the demographic of the informants selected.

Table 1: Details of the participants

Participants	Gender	Experiences
IH	Female	Year 2 student
JM	Male	Year 3 student
R	Female	Year 3 student
GK	Female	Intern student
ZH	Male	Alumni (major in PR)
AI	Female	PR's lecturer for 8 years, 9 years of experience as a PR executive, advisor for university PR student association
JC	Female	PR's lecturer for 3 years, brand communication executive in a private college, advisor for university PR student association
JS	Female	PR's lecturer for 11 years in private higher education institutions.

### Interview's Protocol

The interview protocol used in the study was an in-depth semi-structured interview which was recorded amongst the informants for about 40 minutes to an hour to provide as many inputs as possible and is normally used as an instrument for collecting data in qualitative studies (Ryan et al., 2009). Moreover, Adhabi and Anozie (2017) inform that this type of interview requires the participants to be carefully selected by the researcher. This allows participants to be more detailed in providing their views and experiences toward the phenomenon. Tables 2 and 3 below show the interview protocol questions asked to the lecturers as well as students and alumni.

Table 2: Interview questions asked to the lecturers

No.	Questions	Probing Questions
1.	Describe USR based on your knowledge/understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In your opinion, what is USR used in the Management</li> <li>What is USR used in terms of Teaching</li> </ul>
2.	What USR activities have been made so far in the university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have you become a member or an advisor previously in any USR initiatives?</li> <li>What was it like?</li> </ul>

Table 3: Interview questions asked to the students and alumni

No.	Questions	Probing Questions
1.	Do you know about USR?	Can you describe USR from your point of view? Do you think USR is important? Why?
2.	Are you aware of the USR activities made by the university?	What USR activities have you participated in? What was your position? What were the experiences like?

### Thematic Data Analysis

In this study, the researchers have analyzed the data using thematic analysis. This analysis provides an open approach whilst providing detailed data to the researcher (Nowell et al., 2017). It is useful to examine the different perceptions of the participants involved in the study. The advantage of using this analysis becomes apparent as its credibility can fit the view of the respondents.

The themes and sub-themes were created by the researcher as they were based on the narrative data collected from the participants of the interview. According to Mphepya (2018), this method of analysis reflects the hidden meanings of the information provided. Additionally, the themes were collected according to the similarities of the narrative data collected from the participants of the interview.

In addition, the use of inductive analysis was applied as the researcher developed the themes from the raw data collected from the interview. As stated by Azungah (2018), the inductive analysis uses open coding and categorizes the captured data into general themes or sub-themes.

Data saturation was reached once the data collected by the researcher does not provide newer emerging themes. According to Saunders et al (2018), a saturation of data is reached once the researchers find that the new data is repeated and becomes redundant towards to data that has already been collected. The theme is formulated as presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Themes and sub-themes formulated

Theme(s)	Categories
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Lecturer</li> </ul>
Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Society</li> <li>• Environment</li> <li>• Personal development</li> </ul>

### Results & Discussion

#### Theme 1: Understanding

##### *Student's Perspective*

The findings from the interview questions showed that students were unaware of the term 'USR'. As mentioned by Plungpongpan et al (2016), USR initiatives are made as marketing tools that can include scholarships, philanthropy, sponsorships, and academic services however, they differentiate from one another. It is found that the term 'USR' is not known by the students as they were more acquainted with the term 'CSR' instead. Nevertheless, their general definition of USR based on their point of view is a way for the university to give back to society.

*"I think it's almost similar for the CSR with a company and back when you're in university, I think this is almost similar. It has the same, almost the same goal, you know, help back the community."* – Participant ZH

Similar results can be found from Ali and Ali's (2016) study through the surveys collected from 20 universities across Pakistan which showed that students lacked awareness in USR as the institution did not provide sufficient information on the social responsibility made by the university. Students that informed that they were aware of the term 'USR',



however, some participants took the time to research the definitions of USR before the interview.

*“basically, it's a policy of ethnic, ethical quality in activities of the university like community, like in terms of students, lecturers or administrative staff. And also it's in another word, like university engagement, that the university partnership with its communities, like is achieved through education, like transfer in terms of like transferring knowledge, provision of service, research, and teaching and scholarship”- Participant IH*

However, this does not confirm that the students were aware of the initiatives made as can be seen from the excerpt above, the participant provided an answer that could be taken from the research before participating in the interview.

This can be associated with the study of Coelho and Menezes (2021), which states that universities tend not to include students in their core activities of social responsibility, which explains that universities would limit themselves as an organization that would only provide the service of offering knowledge through course subjects to the students for the career prospects.

### **Lecturer's Perspective**

Unlike student participants, lecturers were able to provide more thorough information on the definition of USR. As shown below, participants provided the similarities and differences between CSR and USR.

*“Let's go with the similarities first and that would be giving back to the society. From my observation, that is what I can see, meaning giving from what they have and providing back to society. The differences maybe in terms of, for CSR, because it depends on the area or the nature of the CSR – USR, it's more on teaching and on research so university is more on that.” – Participant JS*

Furthermore, universities would often focus on the effects that USR would produce on the students. This includes the personal impacts that would provide a change to the personal development of students through their experience in USR. It is often mentioned by the participants that USR is used to educate students.

*“...when university does a CSR program, all right, as a co-curricular activity for students, all right, one thing is that is to educate students, to educate students to instil you guys with experience and also leadership skills, and also educate you guys to know how you guys should actually give back to society.”- Participant AI*

*“...CSR is still CSR. But of course, it's a case by case basis, a different organization will have different interests, for example, the nature of business – but university level – they try to cultivate the culture as well. Because we are educating students, we are producing the next generation of people who's going to go out and work there.” – Participant JC*

This was congruent with the research by Shaari et al (2018) which mentions that USR provides the university a role to enhance the personal growth of the students involved in USR as it contributes to the development of skills that can be used in the working environment. However, Ismail and Shujaat (2019) inform that universities should not only focus on the aspects of teaching and research as they are required to provide social responsibility initiatives towards civic engagement as well.

### **Theme 2: Initiatives**

According to Bokhari (2017), social responsibility through universities can be found through education, this teaches the youth for their development of learning different types of skills as

well as basic social skills which can assist in cultivating the younger generation to present themselves and play a crucial role in the society when they are given the chance to explore, learn and solve the issues found in the 'real-world'. In this theme, participants provided their awareness/importance of this USR initiative.

### **Society**

Essentially, USR provides the philanthropic responsibility of 'giving back to the society. Most of the participants are aware of this USR initiative and can provide answers regarding the philanthropy aspect of USR.

*"In terms of scholarship, it does give students the opportunity to study and like to, you know, participate in more opportunities in life. So, yeah, it's (USR) really important, it does bring about a good change" – Participant JM*

*"I was aware, there was there was some USR activities – they have like blood donation during the university, and whatnot - ." – Participant ZH*

This can be referenced to the study by Miotto and Rom-Rodríguez (2017) which mentions the purpose of social responsibility of providing an impact to the community. This can include services provided by the universities such as financial aid in academics as well as charity and donation programs.

### **Environment**

Based on Gallardo-Vázquez et al (2020), the environmental aspect of USR refers to the universities' pursuit in providing a significant effect towards benefiting the environment.

*"...one of the activities I would say – the river of life – I was mostly involved in cleaning the river –we also got certain kind of awareness by looking at the river because the river was like really dirty – . And we also learn about nature - we start learning that the river is also important to everyone." – Participant GK*

Although the researchers have asked about the environmental responsibility that the university has provided, it is noted that participants (students and lecturers) would often give feedback towards the environmental campaigns made by the university rather than other green initiatives such as energy-saving. Additionally, lecturers are not aware of the university provides USR initiatives in their workplace such as reducing paper usage, which aligned with Ismail's (2019) study, that universities' lack of disclosure of their social responsibilities will result in a lack of awareness towards the USR initiatives made by the university.

*"...management wise to be honest, I'm not really aware of one of the activities they do, but ours is more, like I said earlier, like educational perspective." – participant JC*

### **Personal Development**

Participants agree that having students take part in USR assists in developing the student's social skills as it would later assist them in their professional career life. Participant JC informs that unlike business organizations' aim of providing CSR to obtain profit, USR acts as a way to educate the youth in being civic leaders in the future.

*"...We want to cultivate among children's itself like among youth, for them to develop it as an important aspect of life, instead of just focusing on business or work perspective, but you have an idea about how your life is going to be and how are you going to do despite whatever, you know, career you're going to dive further into, but what are the efforts you're going to make in order to contribute or to return to the society." – participant JC*

Students agree that participating in USR as volunteers or members of a campaign, helped them to nurture and improve their personal development. This also allows them to be more assertive in voicing out their opinions in developing plans and assist in their problem-solving skills. According to participant ZH, who is an alumnus of the university, states that being part of these USR activities helps in enhancing the communication skills as it is needed for students to acquire as many careers require early graduates to be able to communicate with different stakeholders of the company.

*"...my current scope is actually dealing with, with my clients, you usually the initial stage of the project, there will be a lot of kick-off meetings and then you know, clarifying all the specs for the project and also you're dealing with sensitive issues such as the commercial parts, pricing – so, for me, communication skills are very important for me like to get through all these stages."* – Participant ZH

Additionally, some participants include that USR had provided them a sense of awareness towards the environment and became more responsible towards the environment. This has aligned with the study of Ali et al (2020), who highlights that providing social responsibility training through courses or activities helps in developing the youth's mindset to be more environmentally friendly.

*"It made me like I also like now think twice before doing anything to the river. Because like there are. I also seen a lot of fishes dead, by people throwing rubbish in the river, I gain a lot of awareness in doing this.."* – Participant GK

## Conclusion

Based on the results shown, participants have some awareness of the USR initiatives made by the university through education, social, and philanthropy. However, it does not include other sustainability efforts than those mentioned by students and lecturers. Nonetheless, the efforts of implementing personal growth to students provide positive results. Students at the university further state that USR has improved their mindsets to be more socially responsible in their daily lives.

This study only explores the understanding of USR from the viewpoint of students and lecturers, hence, the researchers recommend the future research to include other university stakeholders such as the university's management, parents, potential students by applying focus group discussion to explore this phenomenon. An example of the study would be understanding employees' perception of USR to provide to clear view on the social responsibility used within the workplace of the university. Furthermore, this study mainly focuses on a private university in Malaysia, future research should consider other universities within the country or provide a comparison of USR initiatives made by public and private universities, to provide a holistic view of the competitive market of USR.

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