

RESEARCH PAPER

Why university social responsibility initiatives can backfire and what to do about it

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Submission date: 12 June 2024; Acceptance date: 14 August 2024; Publication date: 6 March 2024

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ABSTRACT

Well-intentioned university social responsibility (USR) initiatives are increasingly being implemented in higher education organizations. Nevertheless, these initiatives can sometimes backfire and undermine USR goals. We explore four mechanisms for this possible ‘dark side’ of USR: moral licensing, contamination by association, resistance from key agents and diverting attention and resources. We develop behaviorally inspired solutions to mitigate this risk.

KEYWORDS

corporate social responsibility, university, disadvantages, resistance, moral licensing

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) constitutes one of the major innovations to cope with sustainability objectives (Fatima and Elbanna, 2023). This holds for higher education (HE) organizations (universities, engineering schools, business schools) which are increasingly engaged in social responsibility, also referred to as University Social Responsibility (USR) (Larrán and Andrades, 2017; Ali *et al.*, 2021). For instance, more than 200 universities around the world report social responsibility activities and most of them started recently (Zapp, 2022). Implemented through holistic management processes covering all aspects of value creation, these initiatives indicate a lasting institutionalization. Ali *et al.* (2021) emphasize that ‘the start of the twenty-first century necessitated the universities to reconsider their role and position in the social sphere’, notably through the implementation of USR activities to show ‘their duty as socially responsible entities’.

Nevertheless, despite several advantages, USR innovations can backfire. We document why universities are not immunized against USR-related misconducts and scandals (Downes, 2017; Grolleau and Mzoughi, 2022). Unlike profit-oriented organizations, the legitimacy of HE institutions

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ACCEPTING EDITOR: Peter Drahos

is based on other foundations (importance of research and teaching, promoters of a democratic citizenry, critical inquiry and academic freedom) (Saltelli *et al.*, 2022). Hence, the consequences of misconduct are often serious and deleterious. Interestingly, the literature has shown scant interest in the downside of USR or University Social Irresponsibility (USIR) while they correspond to real-world situations, such as the Varsity Blues scandal or the Penn State's sexual abuse scandal.¹ In USIR cases, the laudable values and principles defended and promoted by HE organizations are eroded.

We fill this gap by adopting a conceptual stance (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020; Lindebaum, 2022) to explore *why* and *how* well-intentioned USR endeavors can backfire and even facilitate USIR events. Conceptual reasoning and compelling logic could help to map the current situation, its possible evolution and aid our understanding of how these trajectories can lead to unexpected and counterproductive outcomes.

Methods for conceptual contributions

While several scholars have called for increasing the number of conceptual contributions in academic outlets (Yadav, 2010; Jaakkola, 2020; Frey, 2021; Lindebaum, 2022), they remain relatively scarce compared with more conventional pieces. Although a conceptual paper is sometimes considered a paper without data, this perspective is reductionist (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015; Frey, 2021). We concur with Conduit and Kleinaltenkamp (2020, p.6), who define a conceptual paper as:

an avenue through which the researcher can critique the existing literature, position their research in an ongoing theoretical conversation, demonstrate their original theoretical contribution to the field, and build the foundation for further research, including empirical research ...

From a methodological viewpoint, conceptual papers often rely on reviewing the existing literature to identify a knowledge gap and then propose new relationships between constructs (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015). While there is no commonly accepted template to write conceptual contributions, they often use compelling logic and arguments to justify relationships that were not previously considered. They also include appropriate evidence and examples to support the insights developed. MacInnis (2016) suggests that successful conceptual contributions should fulfil four objectives: (i) bringing a new big idea or provocative perspective, (ii) raising (and addressing) a set of questions that are foundational to their idea, (iii) being conceptually clear and logically coherent and (iv) using a range of conceptual thinking skills when unpacking their ideas. According to Gilson and Goldberg (2015), conceptual contributions expand the scope of our intuitions and focus on 'what's new' and 'what's next' concerns rather than reviewing the state of the art (Whetten, 1989; Thaler, 2018). They allow escape from backwards-oriented reasoning and open new research avenues (MacInnis, 2016; Frey, 2021).

While there is an impressive literature on the 'bright side' of USR (e.g., Larrán and Andreas, 2017; Ali *et al.*, 2021), the 'dark side' of USR is overlooked. This is in stark contrast to the scholarly attention devoted to corporate social irresponsibility (CSIR) (e.g., Riera and Iborra, 2017). After taking stock of the literature devoted to the definition, characterization, implementation and drivers of USR, we searched for both academic and non-academic articles and papers on the possible downside of USR without any exclusion criterion. We notably used Google Scholar and Google as suitable tools to identify relevant material (Martin-Martin *et al.*, 2018). Given the limited number of articles and papers, we reviewed each individually to check whether it was relevant to our research topic and to identify arguments, reasoning and examples. More concretely, we used various combinations of terms such as 'concerns', 'issues', 'problems' and 'backfire' combined with 'USR', 'university social irresponsibility'

¹The Varsity Blues scandal of 2019 refers to a criminal conspiracy to influence undergraduate admissions decisions at several top American universities. The Penn State sex abuse scandal in 2011 concerns child sex abuse committed by an assistant coach for the Penn State Nittany Lions football team over a period of 15 years.

and so forth. We assessed whether the arguments conform to logical reasoning. We selected examples that either illustrate the reality of possible effects and/or support the insights developed. We also paid attention to how validated rationales developed to explain how CSR can backfire can be extended to the case of USR (e.g., Dizik, 2018). Indeed, we contend that the principle that ‘the same causes produce the same effects’ can inform reflection on the possible evolution of USR. As a result, we obtained a non-exhaustive list of rationales that explain how and why USR can backfire.

Universities and social responsibility: an overview of the literature and characterization

Because they create and disseminate knowledge, universities have a specific responsibility in the societies in which they operate. When they developed in the Middle Ages in Europe, universities taught the ‘established truths’, guardians of the hierarchical caste system of traditional societies. They then accompanied the rise of industrial democratic societies by placing research at the center of their *raison d’être* (Charle and Verger, 2012). Strongly inspired by the Humboldtian model, universities fostered the development of rational critical reasoning and generated innovations that structured the development of twentieth-century societies (Cole, 2012). Along with industrialization, the progressive scarcity and concentration of resources prompted organizations to demonstrate the merits of their activities to a better organized and better informed society increasingly concerned about its future. After a first movement of rationalization during its industrialization, society experienced a second movement of rationalization by questioning this development and its consequences (Beck, 2008). This reflexivity was exercised in all fields of social life, including education.

In this context, the idea of CSR gained ground: a balance had to be found between the financial expectations of shareholders and those of employees, customers and the community demanding a fairer distribution of the value produced (Carroll, 2009).² In similar vein, the responsibility of universities towards society and its development became the subject of a vibrant debate (see Box 1). One of the first publications on this topic, ‘The social responsibility of the state university’ (Chase, 1923), developed the argument that (public) universities, financed by taxes, have three missions: teaching, research and extension, meaning direct application of knowledge through projects designed to improve the living conditions of citizens.

Box 1. The impact of neoliberalism on higher education

The impact of neoliberalism on higher education has led to significant changes with several challenges and contradictions. Neoliberal policies have notably resulted in reduced state funding for public education, forcing universities to adopt more corporate-like structures, cultures and practices. The corporatization of universities has intensified competition among institutions, manifested notably through accreditations, rankings and league tables. This competitive environment has led to various approaches, such as aggressive student recruitment strategies, cost-cutting measures, including the underpayment of casual staff, increased focus on marketable research over public good-oriented scholarship and so forth (see Steck, 2003; Cox, 2013; Brown, 2015; Gebreiter, 2022).

To fund other initiatives, such as USR, and compensate for reduced public funding, universities have often resorted to increasing student fees. This has resulted in higher student debt levels, a shift in student perception of education from a public good to a commodity, increased instances of questionable practices or academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, grade inflation, incremental papers and the sale of examination answers (see, e.g., Edwards and Roy, 2017). The emphasis on competition and profit-maximization has become deeply ingrained in public universities and has led to prioritizing revenue-generating and legitimacy-conveying activities over traditional academic pursuits, potential conflicts between traditional goals and financial objectives and new challenges in maintaining academic integrity and ethical standards (see, e.g., Gebreiter, 2022; Grolleau and Meunier, 2024). The neoliberal transformation of higher education has created a complex and often contradictory environment.

²While the modern understanding of CSR as a definitional construct has a long and varied history going back to the 1930s with debates about the social responsibilities of the private sector, the roots of CSR can be found centuries earlier (see notably Latapi Agudelo *et al.*, 2019; Moon *et al.*, 2017).

During the first half of the twentieth century, actions explicitly related to social responsibility were grafted onto the core activities of organizations. For universities, activities carried out for the benefit of their communities were treated as an additional task and did not modify their usual missions and operations. Nevertheless, these various forms of community engagement reflected the explicit efforts of companies and universities to act with and for their stakeholders in order to obtain the legitimacy necessary to conduct their activities (Suchman, 1995).

The need for such a ‘license to operate’ (Nielsen, 2013) gradually increased in response to the societal changes that have shaped the last decades. USR policies sometimes reflect historical legacies, such as the ‘civil clause’ in German universities, which forbids military-related research (Schlögl-Flierl and Merkl, 2018). At a more general level, the seriousness of environmental degradation, as well as the development of the middle classes and their demands to share political power led international institutions to formulate the objective of ‘sustainable development’. With this goal, governments agreed on:

the possibility for a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the environmental resource base. And ... believe such growth to be absolutely essential to relieve the great poverty. (WCED, 1987, p.11)

Put differently, the broadly adopted vision for humanity development did not require a choice among economic performance, environmental preservation and social welfare. These orientations are viewed as mutually supportive and captured in the triple-bottom line approach – that companies should commit to focusing as much on social and environmental concerns as they do on profits. This consensual response to people’s social and environmental concerns has gradually become institutionalized among all types of organizations. Like CSR, USR practices represent for universities the most common innovation to contribute to sustainable development, establish their legitimacy and facilitate access to resources (Bondy *et al.*, 2012).

The USR conceptualization has been shaped by CSR developments, as well as by the unique vocation of universities to create and disseminate knowledge, which is anchored in prevailing patterns of practice and values (Stadge and Barth, 2022). USR is the university rendition of the better-known CSR phenomenon (Ali *et al.*, 2021). USR refers to the way universities integrate sustainable development principles into their core missions of teaching and research, as well as into their administrative procedures and management policies. In this sense, the act of social responsibility in the university is played out in the production and dissemination of knowledge that caters to social needs and respect the limitations of the environment’s ability to respond to future demand, as well as to the way it is produced and disseminated. This holistic (integral) approach implies placing the resolution of environmental and social concerns at the very core of university’s *raison d’être* (Ramos-Monge *et al.*, 2017). It requires the engagement of internal and external stakeholders at all stages of the value creation process. It goes beyond specific community engagement actions. Table 1 summarizes the links between the dynamics of the social context, the main representations of organizations’ social responsibility and their practices in this regard.

Today, most universities have a plan outlining their actions to exercise social responsibility (Larrán and Andrades, 2017; Zapp, 2022). In some cases, this reflects an ‘integral USR’ approach. In others, it is more a strategic approach to social responsibility seeking to maximize the legitimacy of the university by carrying out the social actions that remain at the periphery of usual activities. Their impact is therefore limited. The handling of societal issues relies on a trade-off for the organization’s core business (an unpopular shift in resources from ‘business as usual’ to ‘special societal projects’). As for corporates, USR could sometimes correspond to cosmetic arrangements that mainly target public relations. Stensaker and Hermansen (2023) conclude that:

many analyzed universities seem to reflect a more symbolic adaptation style characterized by highlighting the 17 SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015 by all United Nations Member States] as important but without specifying more concretely how the institutions themselves will take action as a result.

Table 1. Main representations and practices of corporate and university social responsibility (SR)

Social context	Main representations of organizations' SR	Main practices of organization's SR
Traditional holistic societies (12thc–18thc)	Maintenance of a hierarchical caste system CSR: Ø (modern understanding of CSR as a definitional construct) USR: disseminate the 'established truths'	
Industrial societies (19thc–20thc)	Balancing different types of value	Additional social-oriented tasks
First movement of rationalization	CSR: a balance to be found between shareholders' financial expectations and employees', customers' and community's demands for a fairer distribution of the value produced. USR: teaching, research and extension mission.	Philanthropic initiatives grafted onto the usual core activities without modifying business as usual. Application of knowledge through special projects designed to improve the living conditions of citizens.
'Risk societies' (from 1980s)	Contribution of all organizations to SD	SR strategies
Second movement of rationalization	CSR: the way corporations integrate the principles of SD into their activities, operations and governance.	Bundle of coordinated actions, with the aim of achieving a positive social and/or environmental impact, more or less integrated to the corporation's core business and procedures.
Radicalization of environmental degradation and social movements => institutionalization of SD (sustainable development)	USR: the way universities integrate the principles of SD into their missions of teaching and research, as well as into their administrative policies and management procedures.	- USR's strategic approach: policies seeking to maximize university's legitimacy by shifting some resources to a bundle of social/environmental-oriented actions. - USR's integral approach: placing the resolution of some specific concerns of the university's community at the core of its missions and functioning.

Increasingly aware of this difference between strategic and integral forms of USR, higher education stakeholders are looking for better ways to assess the approaches taken by universities and optimize their effectiveness. The evolution of ranking systems reflects this expectation. Since 2022, the QS Sustainability Ranking has taken an integral approach to USR and specifically measures an institution's ability to address social, environmental and governance challenges through teaching, research and community engagement. The Times Higher Education's (THE) impact ranking evaluates the contributions of 1,400 universities to the UN's sustainable development goals. Overall, there is a rising interest in supporting universities in the development of integral USR policies to provide impactful solutions to social and environmental challenges with and for their stakeholders.

At this point in the discussion, it is crucial to emphasize that universities and higher education institutions vary significantly in their structure, funding and objectives, which directly influences how university social responsibility (USR) is applied. While USR was conceptualized by Chase (1923) in the context of public universities, the higher education landscape has evolved substantially. In many countries, particularly the United States, private universities play a significant role alongside public ones, and can be categorized into non-profit and for-profit entities, with some even incorporated as companies. This diversity results in a broad spectrum of USR applications, ranging from traditional quasi-corporate social responsibility (CSR) to highly specialized social engagement. Public universities, typically funded by government, tend to prioritize serving the broader

public interest and often have explicit mandates for community engagement and regional development. Conversely, private non-profit universities, which are not accountable to shareholders, have unique USR considerations related to their endowments, alumni relations and institutional missions. For-profit institutions, on the other hand, must balance educational responsibilities with profit-making objectives, often blurring USR and CSR lines. On a global scale, universities operate under varying regulatory frameworks, cultural expectations and societal needs, which significantly shape their approaches to social responsibility.

Country-specific factors can significantly influence how universities approach USR. For example, in some nations, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are legally mandated or strongly encouraged by the government, leading to a widespread and consistent implementation across the higher education sector. In contrast, in countries with a highly competitive university landscape, particularly those with many private institutions, USR may sometimes be utilized more as a marketing strategy than a core value. The extent of state influence on universities can be a key determinant in whether DEI initiatives are adopted as genuine commitments to social good or as promotional tools to attract students and funding. Recognizing these national differences is essential when analyzing the motivations and outcomes of university-led diversity, equity, inclusion, and social responsibility programs globally.

While there are some parallels between CSR initiatives in state-owned companies and USR in public universities, they are not entirely equivalent. Both types of organizations are influenced by government policies and expectations, accountable to the public and expected to contribute to societal well-being (see, e.g., Córdoba-Pachón *et al.*, 2014). They are often expected to exemplify social responsibility practices. However, there are characteristics that distinguish them, such as underlying motivations, scope of activities and the nature of stakeholders. State-owned companies often engage in CSR activities with an economic rationale, while public universities, focusing on education, research and knowledge dissemination, have different motivations for their social responsibility initiatives. These motivations may include educational and research-related goals. Although there is some overlap, CSR activities in state-owned companies typically include environmental protection, community development and support for education and culture. In contrast, USR activities in public universities often emphasize educational access, research for societal benefit and community engagement through academic programs. In conclusion, while comparisons between CSR in state-owned companies and USR in public universities can be made, they should be seen as related but distinct concepts, each tailored to the specific role and context of the institutions involved. USR is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Its implementation and focus differ based on type of institution, funding structure, mission and socio-economic context in which the institution operates, necessitating a nuanced understanding of each institution's specific challenges.

Why USR initiatives can backfire?

Based on behavioral insights, we present below some reasons why USR can backfire. To back up our arguments, we use real-world examples and anecdotes related to the implementation of USR or other domains that could feed the analysis.

USR actions can activate a moral licensing effect

By engaging in virtuous initiatives, entities or individuals can feel licensed to perform bad deeds (List and Momeni, 2022; see also Dizik, 2018; Bouzzine and Lueg, 2023). In the moral credit model, when individuals or groups perform good deeds such as USR endeavors (e.g., switching to green power, attending a diversity training session), they increase their moral credits. Consequently, the positive balance of their moral account can offset or balance out future bad deeds (e.g., increase in energy consumption, more bias against minorities). This effect can occur even if the good deed has been performed in another domain (e.g., overcharging the university for travel expenses because of green efforts) or

even by close individuals (e.g., colleagues, other departments) (Tiefenbeck *et al.*, 2021; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). The net effect on performance over time can be counterproductive.

This argument suggests that HE institutions with USR activities may engage consciously or unconsciously in socially undesirable actions, leading to inconsistencies. For instance, an institution may adopt an environmentally friendly heating system while its staff travel around the world for meetings. The changes can be cosmetic, such as exhibiting gender equality at the top level of management and letting sheep graze university lawns – but with no further developments. Another example might be the organization of conferences on sustainable development while most courses and actions remain unquestioned. Vallaeys (2013, p.91) captured this paradox nicely:

What use is it to adopt initiatives regarding a sustainable campus if the economic faculty continues to teach neoclassical economics that ignores environmental costs?

The net effect in terms of social responsibility can fall short of expectations.

Universities might use virtuous activities in one area to justify less responsible behavior in another, highlighting the potential conflict between different aspects of social responsibility and core academic functions. For instance, a university heavily investing in community service programs may neglect improving teaching methods or updating curricula, believing it has already fulfilled its social responsibility. Similarly, implementing extensive sustainability measures on campus, such as installing solar panels and promoting recycling, might lead some departments to feel entitled to conduct environmentally harmful research or engage in frequent long-distance travel, thus offsetting their environmental gains. Likewise, after achieving gender balance in student admissions and implementing women's leadership programs, a university might become complacent in ensuring gender diversity in faculty hiring or promoting women to senior academic positions, assuming it has already done enough for gender equality. The challenge for universities is to recognize and mitigate these moral licensing effects, ensuring that their commitment to social responsibility complements rather than substitutes their primary missions of research, teaching and knowledge dissemination.

Contamination by association

When universities engage in USR initiatives, they should consider that their audience may be overwhelmed with both a plethora of CSR and USR claims and also numerous examples of corporate (and university) misconduct (Grolleau and Mzoughi, 2022). The consequence may be a skepticism towards social responsibility endeavors. We have already argued that CSR and USR are intertwined. Universities can thus be contaminated by association. If universities adopt USR as corporations adopt CSR, the risk of contagion is real as CSR-related scandals in corporations are likely to spill over to universities (Laufer and Wang, 2018). The same causes are likely to produce the same effects – a change of routines when there is an over-reliance on metrics can be conducive to misconduct (see, e.g., Asselineau *et al.*, 2022). Contamination can also arise because moral violations, so frequent in the business world, are transferred to universities that are suspected of adopting similar practices.

The rationale behind this contagion is explained by the accessibility-diagnostics model of Feldman and Lynch (1988; see Roehm and Tybout, 2006). In this model, a factor that raises the accessibility of an input (i.e., perceived vividness) compared with other inputs is also expected to raise the likelihood of that input being used for judgment (i.e., perceived relevance). A well-publicized corporate scandal that illustrates how much a company (or university) falls short in its CSR commitments can make observers more suspicious of USR commitments, although the situations are objectively unrelated.

Like corporations, universities often engage in DEI initiatives in their recruitment procedures. Some corporations have been accused of gaming or manipulating their DEI programs in ways that undermine genuine progress. They may set vague or easily achievable targets, engage in short-term

initiatives without systemic change or practice tokenism. They may implement diversity only at a lower level and focus on meeting numerical targets, but fail to address real inclusion and retention issues. They may also practice selective data reporting and emphasize domains where they are already close to parity (e.g., gender) while neglecting other important dimensions of diversity (e.g., race, disability status). These practices frequently create an illusion of progress while failing to address systemic inequities or create truly inclusive environments. When these practices and their effects are publicly disclosed, universities that have similar DEI goals may be suspected of following the same path by playing with numbers and behaving cosmetically rather than addressing root issues.

Some companies get entangled in conflicts of interests. Given that universities often receive research funding from corporations (that sometimes have questionable CSR practices or are later involved in misconduct or scandal), they can be suspected of being polluted by their corporate counterparts. Indeed, this situation raises potential conflicts of interest that could taint university reputation and cast doubt on the integrity of its research. If the USR initiative is driven by imitation or ranking concerns (e.g., QS World University Rankings: Sustainability), the university may be tempted to game (or cheat) the system, exaggerating its commitment and engaging in USR-washing.

Provoking resistance from key agents

Implementing a USR strategy frequently implies changes that may reveal contradictions with traditional orientations (teaching and research) and threaten usual outcomes (e.g., targeted rank). The strategy may also encourage employees to step out of the box, defining new roles, standards, incentives, sources of authority and so forth. For instance, an academic can perceive a loss of power or a higher administrative load when his/her requirements cannot be achieved because they are in conflict with USR requirements. A USR strategy often disturbs the *status quo* and creates new references and routines (Larrán and Andrades, 2017).

Specifically, USR endeavors often threaten things people are attached to, and trigger loss aversion. For instance, a major requirement of academics is academic freedom. An overemphasis on USR requirements can cause resistance from scholars and staff. If USR commitments are perceived as likely to reduce academic freedom (e.g., by guiding or formatting academic activities), they can generate strong resistance (Stadge and Barth, 2022). Scientific freedom is necessary for the advance of science and the functioning of democracy. Determining the ideological orientation of science hampers its development (Cole, 2012). HE institutions should thus ensure that contributing to sustainable development is integrated with respect for academic freedom. Similarly, if additional requirements arise at times when university agents are already overwhelmed, they may be opposed. In the same way, creating a director of USR and other USR positions can be perceived as threatening or diluting the existing hierarchy.

Resource and attention diversion

A stream of research suggests that individuals are heavily influenced by such notions as zero-sum bias where individuals mistakenly expect that increased efforts or gains in a given domain are directly balanced by decreased efforts or losses in another domain (Meegan, 2010). Implementing a USR strategy can be perceived as a zero-sum or negative-sum game, where resources devoted to social responsibility commitments are lost for other goals. In other words, satisfying USR goals is perceived as requiring sacrifices and trade-offs over the main higher-level goals of HE institutions.

While this zero-sum or negative outcome is not necessarily real, there is a non-negligible risk that scarce resources (e.g., professors' time, money, staff resources, status, position) are perceived as being diverted from their most productive or valuable use (e.g., teaching or research) to serve USR requirements. This antagonistic perspective can fuel resistance and opposition. In another direction, USR achievements can be perceived as being used as a smokescreen to hide underachievement in the core missions of universities. By diverting attention, USR can lead to distrust.

Solutions to prevent counterproductive effects

Although USIR and the downside of USR have attracted little attention, we argue that anticipating these situations can reduce the problems they create. We propose some tentative solutions. As a general principle, we contend that the reasons (strong personal convictions versus such instrumental motives as compliance with social norms or legal requirements) for an HE institution engaging in USR are important in avoiding the downside of these endeavors. We do not pretend to be exhaustive, but we consider some practical ways to avoid USR backfiring.

Countering moral licensing bias

A first strategy could be to inform individuals and entities of the possible downside of USR. Individuals can be warned that involuntary moral licensing (people's perception that they are permitted to take actions that could be seen as socially undesirable or morally questionable) is a serious issue and that there is a clear willingness to avoid using USR achievements as a way of tolerating inconsistent behavior. Even so, informing people about their own biases is not always effective (Fischhoff, 1982; Milkman *et al.*, 2009). It is particularly important to choose the right time and context for raising awareness of such sensitive topics (Nickerson and Rogers, 2010). When the university presents its strategic plan (or its activity report) to stakeholders, it frequently mentions its social responsibility commitment. This can be an opportunity to point out that the university's USR strategy is global and must be deployed across all activities and operations, and that the good results already achieved in certain areas are just one stage in a process of continuous improvement. This can be illustrated by a dashboard showing the results achieved in all variables and areas of setback that could be attributed to moral licensing effects.

Another way of getting around this bias is to focus on individual values. Many people have embraced social values and a growing proportion of the population now considers itself to be 'sustainable-oriented'. Universities can build on these individual inclinations to facilitate responsible behavior by explaining or simply reminding individuals how responsible actions (reducing air travel, sorting waste, etc.) resonate with their personal identity and values (Yam *et al.*, 2017).

Moral licensing risk can also be reduced by avoiding framing behavior in moral terms, meaning 'good' versus 'bad'. Elkington (1998, p.37) insists on the need to go beyond the vision of 'an unending battle between the forces of good and evil, of light and darkness', which inevitably leads to point scoring. The battle must be waged against the idea of a possible balance between good and bad deeds. In some cases, not publicizing the USR and not using such generic terms as 'sustainable development' to designate actions that have a good impact on society and/or the environment can also limit the risk of moral licensing. However, this form of 'USR-hushing' (Falchi *et al.*, 2022) can deprive others of key information and role models.

Avoiding the risk of contamination by association

Educating stakeholders to dissociate USR and CSR can diminish the likelihood of contamination effects. Emphasizing that corporations and HE do not share the same legitimacy foundations and do not evolve in the same system of values, norms and definitions is crucial (Bräunig, 2011). HE institutions have to create their own way. This strategy can mobilize various approaches, such as rethinking what society really expects from HE organizations rather than transposing corporate practices.

Several tools and standards facilitate the integrated application of the core principles of sustainable development by HE institutions. While these instruments follow the same methodological approaches developed for companies, their content has been adapted to academic organizations. In particular, they consider the imperatives of institutional autonomy and academic freedom of faculty members. For instance, accreditation bodies such as AACSB encourage business schools to 'demonstrate impacts for the betterment of society within their strategy, curriculum,

research and community engagement' (AACSB, 2023). Similarly, with the launch of its sustainability ranking in 2022, QS ranks universities on the level of integration of environmental and social issues into their operations and activities (QS World University Ranking, 2023). Referring to specific and familiar structuring tools can reduce the risk of CSR-USR association in the minds of observers.

Preventing potential resistance

The resistance that USR can provoke among key agents can be prevented in three ways. First, it is important to develop a USR strategy that shows that the university actually applies what it teaches. Second, USR narratives and role models can address agents' concerns and enhance their sense of belonging. Highlighting the USR-related achievements of professors who are widely recognized and esteemed by their peers may demonstrate that commitment towards USR lies in the very nature of the profession. Third, particular attention should be paid to the words used to introduce USR and develop plans (Nickerson and Rogers, 2010). Following this logic, many universities have set up participatory workshops for their staff so that they can outline their plans to participate in USR initiatives (when, where, how and so forth). By relying on the involvement and ideas of the people mobilized during this type of workshop, universities can benefit from valuable field information, reflecting stakeholders' real expectations.

Addressing the diversion of resources and attention

By avoiding framing USR in antagonistic terms, its implementation should not lead to a perceived diversion of resources. Synergetic effects should be sought, an idea that echoes the concept of creating shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011). It is by solving a social problem that value creation can be optimized on all levels (economic, social and environmental). For example, EU-CONEXUS is entirely structured around a common goal (smart urban coastal sustainability) that is expected to feed all crucial missions of universities (La Rochelle Université, 2023). It brings together nine universities to address the issues raised by the major societal challenges resulting from the anthropization of coastlines. This goal represents a positive-sum game. The project aims at addressing the various stakeholder concerns, providing scientists with research fields and resources, enabling students to gain skills related to the needs of the territory, allowing companies to hire competent workers and generate innovations, satisfying local authorities by answering the expectations of citizens, and so forth.

Similarly, framing USR strategies as conveyers of what is sought (e.g., academic recognition, grants, career advancement) reduces the risk of resources and attention diversion. In the case of EU-CONEXUS, the social nature of its strategic project enabled it to obtain a substantial budget (notably from the European Union). In addition, it can be emphasized that USR outcomes derive from pursuing the primary goals of a university. This idea ties in with the centrality criterion, indicating that social responsibility initiatives must be closely linked to the organization's original mission and objective (Burke and Logsdon, 1996). For instance, tutoring measures to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds also make the regular work of faculty members easier. A summary of the previous propositions is provided in Table 2.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that the above suggestions are often presented optimistically, which may not fully reflect the complexities and potential drawbacks of their implementation. While these approaches aim to mitigate negative impacts, they may not completely eliminate them and could even introduce new challenges. For instance, funds directed towards USR initiatives are effectively removed from other crucial areas of university operations. This diversion of resources might lead to a net negative outcome if the benefits of USR activities do not outweigh the opportunity costs. In some situations, the reduction of negative effects might be minimal, raising the question of whether engaging in USR is truly beneficial or if it would be more prudent for universities to focus on

Table 2. Possible solutions to avoid or reduce the risk of USR backfiring

Why a USR strategy can backfire	Possible solutions to avoid or reduce the risk of backfiring
Moral licensing	Make people aware of the moral licensing effect (at adequate times) Avoid framing behaviors in morality terms (good versus bad) leading to a morality accounting Focus on the individual's values and intrinsic motivations: What kind of person s/he wants to be and how her/his actions support her/his values?
Contamination by association	Avoid the equivalence between CSR and USR Create the university own way (e.g., dedicated standards instead of corporate ones) Educate the USR audience by emphasizing that university is not a corporation
Provoking resistance	Design USR strategies that do not trigger loss aversion and that fit a 'practise what we preach' principle Use USR narratives and role models that address agents' concerns and reassure them (sense of belonging) Use adequate words and timing to introduce USR (e.g., by creating implementation intentions)
Diverting resources and attention	Avoid framing USR strategies in antagonistic terms and emphasize synergistic effects (win-win-win or positive sum game) Explain (sometimes) that USR outcomes are somewhat 'unintentional' and serve/derive from pursuing the university primary goals Frame USR strategies as conveyers of what is sought after (e.g., academic recognition, grants, additional positions)

their core academic missions. This nuanced reality underscores the need for a critical and balanced evaluation of USR initiatives, considering both their potential positive impacts and the trade-offs they necessitate. Besides, the above approaches may not be sufficient to counter the negative consequences of USR in a neoliberal context. More robust and systemic approaches may be necessary to address the higher education challenges, including comprehensive reforms that realign universities with their core mission of serving the public good.

Conclusion

While most interest is on the upside of USR, we argue that the downside deserves more attention. We have exposed several ways in which well-intentioned USR can backfire: the moral licensing effect, contamination of universities by association, the risk of triggering resistance from key agents and diverting attention and resources. We have also proposed practical ways to mitigate this risk and even rethink the whole concept in the context of HE. We emphasized some nudges, such as informing individuals about their own biases and selecting the 'right' words.³

Our contribution offers a more balanced view of USR and invites concerned decision-makers not to take USR promises at face value, to get beyond the rhetoric and pay more attention to the dark side of USR. This rebalancing is crucial to prevent the transfer of the excesses from the corporate world to higher education. Concerned actors can be trained to anticipate possible counterproductive effects of well-intentioned USR initiatives and to react accordingly.

Our study has some limitations. First, besides conceptual reasoning and anecdotal evidence, empirical data (e.g., interviews with key agents in HE, green metrics over time) would give more voice to the concerns raised. One idea is to test experimentally whether observers react similarly to similar CSIR and USIR. An experimental survey could see whether moral judgment and behavioral intentions are similarly affected. Second, our paper is not exhaustive and other rationales may be at

³Common actions include setting up initiatives to save energy or recycle waste, charity work, and opening libraries or sports facilities for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that help disadvantaged groups.

work. Studying other motivations and the ways to address them could significantly enrich the toolbox of USR promoters. One potential avenue relates to the dilution bias, where increasing the number of objectives that a single means (here USR) can achieve reduces the associative strength between this means and each individual objective (e.g., teaching, research, environmental performance) and thus weakens the perceived effectiveness of this means for the achievement of each objective.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Alexandre Asselineau, Naciba Chassagnon, Dejan Glavas and Christoph Weber for their useful comments and suggestions.

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