Higher Education Institutions and their Social Responsibility Role:
A Case Study of the Australian College of Kuwait

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مقام للمؤتمر العربي الدولي الثاني المُحكم:
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الملخص:

تعد مسّاعات التعليم العالي ليست فقط مراكز للبحث والتّعلم بل هي أيضًا مسّاعات مؤثّرة في التغيير الاجتماعي والنمو. تختلف بيئات المعيشة والعمل في الحاضر والمستقبل اختلافًا كبيرًا حتى عن الماضي القريب. وعلى ي ينبغي على فئة الشباب الملتحقة بمؤسسات التعليم العالي اكتساب ليس فقط المهارات الأكاديمية ولكن أيضًا المواطنين مسؤولين وفاعلين ومسؤولين في التنمية المستدامة للمجتمع والبيئة. يستعرض هذه البحث المسئولية المجتمعية لمؤسسات التعليم العالي كعامل جوهري وليس فقط كإضافة. وعلى ي ينبغي أن تعكس بيئات الجامعات وأنشطته روح الباستدامة. يتضمن البحث خلفية نظرية وتلبي دراسة حالة للكلية الأسترالية في الكويت كمثال عملي للمسؤولية المجتمعية للجامعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسؤولية المجتمعية للجامعة، المسؤولية المجتمعية، التنمية المستدامة، الاستدامة
Higher Education Institutions and their Role in Social Responsibility: A Case Study of College Australian

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions are not only centers of research and learning, they are also influencers of social change and development. The living and working environments of the present and future are vastly different even to the recent past. Therefore, at the present, youth involved in higher education must be equipped not merely with professional capabilities, but also with the skills needed to become responsible active citizens to contribute to the sustainable development of the community and environment. This paper therefore considers the social responsibility of higher education institutions as a core factor and not just an added role. Campus environments and activities must reflect the sustainability ethos presented in the classroom. A theoretical background is presented and followed by a case study of the Australian College of Kuwait as a practical example of the university social responsibility.

Keywords: University Social Responsibility (USR); Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); Sustainable Development; Sustainability; Lifelong Learning; Graduate Attributes; Ethics; Values; Responsible Citizenship; Resilience; Single-loop Learning; Double-loop Learning; Conceptual Age.

1. Introduction

Learning, working and living environments of students in this Conceptual Age are paradigm shifts from that experienced by previous generations. Eberle (2009) expands on the Argyris (1977) concept of double-loop learning to highlight that students must now be nurtured beyond the Industrial Age left brain control focus to an emphasis on right brain creative and big picture activity. This adjustment is necessary for graduates to succeed in corporations and communities where the boundaries are constantly changing and, accordingly, learners must remain fluid in their thinking and planning. Diagram 1 below reflects this expanded learning process to not only compare outcomes to the original problem but also to allow for changes in externalities that may lead to redundancy of the existing model.
Diagram 1. The flow of double-loop learning (Eberle 2009, p. 183)

In preparing students for increasingly complex challenges ahead in both their professional and personal lives, Eberle refers to the need for heutagogical or self-determined learning, where “the student becomes the problem solver, not just the regurgitator of facts” (Eberle 2009, p. 184). Graduates in this 21st Century require knowledge, skills and “resilience” to not only cope with but ideally contribute to the ongoing adjustments in their places of income generation (Seibert, Kraimer & Heslin 2016, p. 245). What then is the role of Higher Education Institutions in preparing students for continuously evolving workplace and living environments where it is estimated that even in the short period from 2018 to 2022, “no less than 54% of all employees will require significant re- and upskilling” (Schwab 2018, p. 9).

2. Role of Higher Education in the 21st Century

Until the later part of the 20th Century, higher education institutions were not regarded as a stepping stone for the average school graduate. Even in 1971, globally only 9.9% of students progressed from secondary to tertiary education. By 2016, this had increased to 36.8%. During the same period, in North America and Western Europe the rate increased from 30.9% to 76.7% and in the Arab States from 6.1% to 32% (Calderon 2018, p. 13). This has been driven partly by the increasing sophistication of the job market as societies progressed from the Industrial to the Knowledge and more recently Conceptual Age. It has also been facilitated by the introduction of the internet and online access to learning materials. Universities, along with all organizations have been required to address and respond to such externalities. Accordingly, it was appropriate on the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna in 1988, that almost 400
university heads signed the Magna Charta Universitatum as a unified vision for higher education in a rapidly changing world. The document affirmed that key roles of universities include the empowerment of younger generations with knowledge and to “respect the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself”.

At a wider level, on the eve of the new millennium, UNESCO established the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century. The resultant report was deliberately titled “Learning: the Treasure Within”, to emphasise that each person is unique and therefore learning must enable everyone, throughout their life, to continue on a personal journey of enrichment and self discovery. Accordingly, the Commission declared that education should be holistic and cover not only knowledge (Learning to Know), but also skills (Learning to Do), engagement (Learning to Live Together), and awareness (Learning to Be). Specifically with regard to universities, the Commission highlighted that in addition to their roles in research and education, they must remain the “guarantors of universal values and cultural heritage” (Jacques 1996, p. 26). Later a fifth pillar, Learning to Transform Oneself and Society was added by UNESCO to confirm the need for a double loop approach to personal and community growth (Fien 2010).

Shortly after the conclusion of this Commission, in 1998, the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century affirmed that the primary mission of such institutions is to “Educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity” (UNESCO 1998, p. 4). Accordingly, students who enter higher education should exit with the tools to participate usefully toward economic growth and community development. In this later regard, Wigmore-Alvarez and Ruiz-Lozano (2012) note that if the institution is to promote social responsibility to students then it must lead by example and as part of this

govern and administrate its resources in a socially effective and efficient manner, promote personal values and socially responsible citizens, generate and transfer knowledge, apply socially responsible criteria to the internal management of the
university and become involved in both its local community and the global world of solidarity.

This growing recognition among Higher Education Institutions that citizenship is both an individual and an organizational responsibility has been formalized through the term University Social Responsibility.

3. University Social Responsibility (USR)

Reiser (2008) presented an early definition of USR and more recently Kouatli (2018), referred to University Social Responsibility as one of the strategic dimensions of a university targeting the well-being and involvement of all stakeholders in encouragement and management of holistic view of economic, social, environmental and academic knowledgeability as well as acting as a hub between corporates and local and environmental needs of the society by creating shared value activities and projects with the objective of high sustainability.

(p.11)

Vazquez, Lanero and Aza (2014, p. 27) clarify that as part of its commitment to USR on campus, the institution should “respect and develop a sense of responsible citizenship by encouraging the students and the academic staff to promote sustainable development in their community”. Indeed, Kouatli (2018, p. 2) notes that University Social Responsibility and Sustainability are “two sides of the same coin” and that “to achieve sustainability, USR activities must be conducted and vice versa”

Kouatli (2018, p. 12) has developed an illustrative means of presenting the connectivity between the various dimensions of USR Sustainability:
Diagram 2: USR Sustainability

In the above diagram, the three vertical oval shapes represent the sustainability contribution by universities in the areas of educating students, economic growth, and expansion of knowledge through research. These areas overlap and, in turn, interconnect with the top horizontal egg shape representing the university contribution toward environmental and community sustainability. Kouatli (2018) goes on to provide examples of how institutions can contribute toward sustainability within each of these intersecting areas. For example, the area identified as Zone A represents the environmental/social/educational role of a university to nurture growing awareness and action by students with regard to local and wider environmental and social sustainability. Similarly, Zone C reflects the important role that universities contribute through their research activities toward environmental and community sustainability.

3.1 Scope of University Social Responsibility

Jorge and Pena (2017) nominate four key areas and related examples for the institutional manifestation of USR:
- Education programs for students, with USR being evident through incorporation of social, ethical and environmental considerations within the curriculum;

- Research, with USR being apparent through encouragement of specific research that leads to improved environments, economies and communities;

- Community Engagement, with USR obvious through active participation by the institution in projects and activities of benefit to the local and wider communities and environment; and

- Management and Infrastructure, with USR ostensible through such mechanisms as open accountability with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), highlighting economic, environmental and social performance.

Reiser (2007), reflected the above diagrammatically by identifying the four action areas of USR as Education, Knowledge (for research), Participation (for Community Engagement) and Organization (for Management and Infrastructure):
Diagram 3: 4 Axis of Socially Responsive University Change (Reiser 2007, p.2)

### 3.2 USR as the heartbeat of a university

University Social Responsibility must be seen as much more than just another box to be ticked in developing annual plans and submitting yearly reports. Universities are societal leaders and have a unique role as “shapers of identity” in forming the vision and values of the next generation (Vazquez, Lanaro & Aza 2014). If universities are to foster “professional citizens… (with)… ethical principles... (and)… social values” (Wigmore-Alvarez & Ruiz-Lozano 2012, p.480), then the learning and living environments across the campus must serve to incubate such attributes. Indeed, social responsibility should be “part of the core functioning of the university” (Parsons 2014, p.4). Accordingly, USR should be evident in the Strategic Goals and Policies that govern the direction and priorities of individual tertiary institutions.

If Higher Education Institutions are serious about the importance of University Social Responsibility, there must be associated action, not mere articulation. Students are perceptive. Vallaeyes (2014) challenges tertiary institutions to self-examine their commitment to USR. For instance, “What use is it to adopt initiatives regarding a sustainable campus if the economic faculty continues to teach neoclassical economics that ignores environmental costs?” (Vallaeyes 2014, p. 91). In addition to such forms of greenwashing, Vallaeyes (2014, p. 91) also identifies other risks such as “blind intelligence of academics and scientists, so expert in their tiny disciplinary niche that they fail to see the negative impacts they are generating in the transdisciplinary social fabric”. Vallaeyes (2014) presented the possible negative impacts of universities in each of the four key areas of USR in the following diagram:
Although USR is widely accepted as a priority, there is evidence that practice is yet to catch up with planning. In this regard, a 2011 study of Australian universities (Jorge & Pena 2017, p. 311) revealed that the majority “did not explicitly incorporate social responsibility themes into their business and management curricula” even though it has been shown that inclusion of such themes “contributed to a higher level of civic awareness of graduates”.

Various studies have been undertaken regarding key generic attributes for university graduates. Such attributes are “the core abilities and values a university community agrees all its graduates should develop as a result of successfully completing their education at the university” (Barrie, Hughes & Smith 2009, p. 6). The dilemma faced by both faculty and students is that the ideal of promoting qualities such as “responsible citizenship” (Jorge & Pina 2017, p. 312) is often subsumed by the overriding practicality of maximizing employability upon graduation. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that a research study conducted in Qatar revealed that although

Diagram 4: Possible Negative Impacts of Universities (Vallaeys 2014, p. 93)
Ethics and social responsibility are both really important… (However), students in the Middle East are more interested in obtaining high grades rather than actual knowledge gained from learning… for example, some of them will use unethical tactics such as having their assignments completed by a professional third party without engaging adequately in the learning process… students need to know the consequences of being unethical (Osami 2017, pp.20-21).

3.3 USR versus CSR

University Social Responsibility is related to but not the same as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Kouatli (2018) provides a detailed comparison of the linkages and differences between Social Responsibility from Corporate and University perspectives. The essential area of difference is that ultimately companies are driven by the profit motive whereas universities have their roots in education and knowledge as a public service. However, with the emergence of privately owned Higher Education Institutions, at least some universities, of necessity, must realize financial expectations, whereby “accountability is increasingly focused on corporate concerns rather than social responsibility” (Parsons 2014, p. 32).

As with a trend in other economic areas toward multi-national ownership, Vallaeys (2014) presents the scenario where universities become absorbed by profit focused transnational corporations that are able to offer streamlined and online courses with competitive fees. Regardless of whether universities are publicly or privately owned, the commitment by the institution toward USR is a means of obtaining “a competitive advantage”. Further, it has been asserted that “a university that promotes USR can be seen as an organization of quality and this increases the students’ satisfaction” (Vazquez, Lanaro & Aza 2014, p.26). Therefore, those higher education institutions that commit themselves to USR can expect not only the intrinsic returns from making a positive difference but at the same time also be more appealing as a prospective place of study for the next generation who are socially and environmentally aware.
3.4 USR in Action

Examples of USR in action include:

- University of Manchester, which has set five strategic priorities for social responsibility
  - Research with impact. Research should make a difference to society.
  - Responsible graduates. As key citizens and leaders of tomorrow, graduates should represent the widest range of social backgrounds and develop not only academic and professional skills, but also a sense of ethical, social and environmental responsibility towards the societies they will serve.
  - Engaging communities. Events and activities should harness knowledge, resources and cultural attractions for the benefit of our communities.
  - Responsible processes. Processes should balance efficiency and opportunities to create social/environmental benefit.
  - Environmental sustainability. Research, teaching and activities should be guided by the university’s commitment to environmental sustainability.

These priorities are outlined on the university website and all stakeholders including students, alumni, staff and the general community are actively invited to participate by registering interest online. In particular, to encourage and recognize involvement by students, the Stellify Award was set up as the “most prestigious extra-curricular accolade” for those students who complete a series of achievements toward environmental/community care, leadership and ethical challenges.
• Hashemite University of Jordan’s commitment toward USR is evident through:
  o Social involvement;
  o Delocatization of the education process by distance learning centers;
  o Industry collaboration toward sustainability;
  o Institutional management; and
  o Community engagement (Alzyoud & Bani-Hani 2015).

USR networks of universities have also been established to facilitate sharing of experiences and to foster best practice with regard to social responsibility. Such consortiums include the USRNetwork and AUN.

4. **USR at the Australian College of Kuwait**

The Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) is a privately owned Higher Education Institution established in Kuwait in 2004. It offers programs up to Bachelor Degree level in Engineering and Business and presently (2019) has a total fulltime enrollment of 3000 students.

University Social Responsibility at ACK is summarized under the four areas identified by Reiser (2007):

• Education (curriculum)
  o The methodology of experiential learning is used across all programs at the college for the purposes of enabling students to gain not only the requisite academic knowledge for their chosen career path but also related workplace standard skills and positive team attitude. As a result, ACK graduates are job ready and immediately able to contribute toward the success of their place of employment.
All programs of study are developed in collaboration with international partner universities and also to meet the membership requirements of international professional associations. As a result, ACK graduates hold qualifications that reflect global educational and professional standards.

The ACK Industry Advisory Board includes representatives from key local businesses and industries to ensure that course content meets emerging market needs.

All students are able to enroll in courses of Innovation and Entrepreneurship specifically designed to not only provide theory but also mentorship for those students who wish to progress with business ideas to establish a commercial or retail activity within the local market.

All students have access to internship opportunities with local and international workplaces to gain firsthand experience under the supervision of qualified industry experts and mentorship of ACK faculty. Such placements also enable faculty to network with practitioners for the purpose of maintaining currency regarding emerging trends.

All students are required to research and present a major graduation project to demonstrate synthesis of individual aspects of learning during their studies and apply this to an approved workplace project or challenge. Wherever possible, students are encouraged to liaise with local workplaces or research organizations in the development of their project and in many instances, this has led to continuing research and/or graduate employment.

As a result of the experiential approach to learning, ACK graduates are highly regarded by local employers as immediately able to participate as team members with a practical approach and positive attitude.
• Knowledge (research)
  o The ACK Research Center was established to facilitate and coordinate research by faculty across the various disciplines of engineering and business. Funding and support for individual and team research is prioritized toward sustainability initiatives including:
    ▪ Water and Environment
    ▪ Energy
    ▪ Innovation and Entrepreneurship.
  o Joint research committee with Australian educational partner, Central Queensland University to enable shared research.
  o Joint research projects locally with major industrial organizations such as Kuwait Oil Company and Kuwait National Petroleum Company as well as research organizations including Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research and Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science

A priority with all research at and through ACK is the contribution by faculty and students toward knowledge, technology and processes that improve quality of life and the environment.

• Participation (community/environmental contribution)
  o Both the Schools of Engineering and Business hold weekly seminars and discussions at which industry and business leaders conduct sessions on topics related to professional developments within the region. As a result, students and staff have face-to-face interaction with key marketplace influencers.
  o The ACK Healthy Living Committee holds major events each semester on sustainability themes such as the environment, recycling, diet and cultural diversity. Students, staff and their families are invited to attend and take part in the various educational and fun
activities that are planned and presented by Engineering and Business students as part of their experiential learning. The committee also facilitates Smoking Awareness interactive presentations by student volunteers to classes in local schools on a regular basis as a community service.

- Students are encouraged to take part in local and international events and competitions related to community development and environmental care. Such participations include Engineers Without Borders Community Project in India, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Exhibition in the United Arab Emirates, and locally in Kuwait through the INJAZ entrepreneurship competition.

- All students are able to participate for the ACK Award which is a voluntary program of personal development requiring the nomination of goals across the Delors (1996) four pillars of learning and then documentation of progress on a regular basis with the encouragement of an approved mentor. There are four incremental levels of the award to promote both lifelong and lifewide learning.

Through initiatives such as the above, the college actively encourages and recognizes both staff and students for participation in projects that benefit the local and wider environment and communities.

- Organization (management/infrastructure)

The ACK Strategic Plan is in line with both the government’s New Kuwait 2035 Vision and also the college’s commitment toward Social Responsibility. The ACK Strategic Plan and related Goals act as the reference point for priorities and actions at all levels and across all areas of the college. The Strategic Goals expressly state the focus on a positive contribution by ACK toward research, industry partnerships and experiential learning that maximize employability
together with a holistic learning experience for personal enrichment.

The above summary of policies and practices at the Australian College of Kuwait demonstrates the application of University Social Responsibility across the four Reiser (2007) action areas of Education, Knowledge, Participation and Organization. From an education perspective, students are prepared through experiential learning to be job ready upon graduation to maximize their employability and to contribute as fully as possible toward the growth of their workplace. Priority with regard to knowledge expansion through research is focused on key local areas of sustainability including water, energy, the environment, innovation and entrepreneurship. Community involvement by students and staff is actively encouraged not only for the betterment of the local society and environment but also, in the process, to enrich the lives of the participants themselves. Lastly, from an organizational perspective, the strategic direction of the college has been consciously geared to reflect government priorities through the New Kuwait 2035 Vision and the commitment by the college toward University Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development.

5. Lessons Learned

ACK is still a relatively young institution, with 15 years experience in a growing local education marketplace. Accordingly, policies and practices remain fluid to allow for continued growth. Taking this into account, the following lessons have been learned specifically with regard to the infusing of USR across the College objectives and operations:

- Although Social Responsibility is implied, it is not explicitly stated within the current 5 year Strategic Plan. This has been addressed for the coming Plan for 2020-2024 so that the term and purpose are identified as priorities for all stakeholders;
- Research undertaken by the College must be translated into benefits for society and all research submissions must include clear statements with regard to expected benefits;
• The College website has public information regarding past and existing research projects. These details are in the process of being included on accessible databases to facilitate the updating and tracking of such information as progress with Patent and Trademark applications.

• Previously, there was no generally accessible database covering the topics of Student Graduation Projects. As a result, knowledge and experiences gained from past project work are not readily available as a base for incremental learning by subsequent students. Accordingly, innovative projects that have potential for sustainable development regarding the economy, environment or community, remained dormant. To facilitate continued research and advancement of graduation projects, centralized databases are being established within both the Schools of Engineering and Business so that the work and contact information by past students remains accessible. At the same time, these databases will enable faculty to maintain contact with former students who wish to continue their association with the advancement of their own graduation project work beyond their time at ACK.

• Specifically regarding the college wide course on Innovation and Entrepreneurship, it has been identified that more one-on-one support is needed to guide students with potentially viable marketplace ideas. During their studies for this particular course, students are provided with the basic tools and contacts to enable them to consider business ideas. However, the step from interest to action is not without challenges. Therefore, the ACK Incubator has been included in the next 5 year Strategic Plan as an on campus resource for students and alumni who are actively pursuing their fledgling business interests.

• Local internships have provided a valuable opportunity for students to gain first-hand workplace experience. However, the experiences gained from such work placements have not been filtered back to the wider faculty. This is a loss as the
feedback from students is a most useful means for individual faculty members generally to reflect on course content. Accordingly, the individual student feedback questionnaire has been expanded to include the following questions: “What technical knowledge did you gain from your internship that was not covered during your studies at ACK?” and “What practical skills did you gain from your internship that you were not aware of from your studies at ACK?”

- Although all students are presently encouraged to complete surveys each semester regarding their attitude to academic formation and campus engagement, there have been no specific surveys regarding student attitude toward sustainable development and their perception of the College contribution toward Social Responsibility. Accordingly, a campus wide survey of all students and staff is now being undertaken on an annual basis for the purposes of increasing awareness and participation.

- All teaching and learning activities must be industry relevant and designed to ensure students develop the necessary technical, personal and interpersonal skills to contribute to building a knowledge based economy;

- The College recognizes the importance of fostering a holistic environment that develops lifelong learners who are innovative and contribute to the national growth;

- The College has adopted UNESCO’s pillars of learning which ensure that students not only develop academically but are also prepared for their future careers and personal growth. The College provides opportunities for students to develop across all five (5) pillars of learning: Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together, Learning to Be, and Learning to Transform Oneself and Society;

- The College has been expanding its partnerships with the industry, local businesses, and government entities in order to contribute to the local economic development of the nation;
• The College has expanded its outreach programs to serve the community through its facilities such as the Library, auditorium, and football pitch;

• The College periodically engages with the community to raise awareness on social issues such as cancer prevention, and antismoking campaigns.

6. Conclusion and Remarks

Institutions of Higher Education are community hubs where research experts, teaching faculty, industry and student learners meet for the purposes of gaining, sharing and expanding knowledge for the betterment of individuals, economies, communities and the environment. The living and working situations beyond the university campus have changed radically even in relatively short periods of time and will continue to do so, creating wicked challenges for individuals, corporations and societies to progress in positive and sustainable directions. To reflect the importance and urgency for places of higher education to act decisively for the betterment of present and future generations, University Social Responsibility should not simply be a tick item on annual plans and yearly reports but rather a core function of Higher Education providers. This paper has provided a background to the theory of USR and then presents the related policies and practices of the Australian Collage of Kuwait as a Case Study for consideration and review.

To further promote the importance and implementation of USR at an institutional level, the following specific recommendations are made:

1. Social responsibility must be incorporated within the governing strategic plans and key performance indicators;

2. Involve students in the discussion and planning phases of USR to nurture engagement;

3. Include social responsibility activities in the financial planning of the institution;

4. Develop policies and procedures that take into consideration the impact of social responsibility;
5. Endorse learning activities and curriculums that incorporate the ethos of social responsibility;
6. Conduct comprehensive research on social responsibility;
7. Link all the research activities with the national development plans;
8. Contribute to the movement of advancing knowledge-based societies;
9. Emphasize the attributes that entail socially responsible graduates; and
10. Participate effectively in ongoing awareness campaigns to foster the values of engagement in the culture of social responsibility instead of having infrequent spikes here and there.

As a follow-up to this paper, the College will be conducting a campus-wide survey to gain information from staff, faculty, and students concerning their understanding of USR. The findings will be presented in a subsequent paper.

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