



# University social responsibility: the role of the media and its stakeholders

## Responsabilidad social universitaria: el papel de los medios de comunicación y sus stakeholders

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes the growing importance of University Social Responsibility (USR), driven by a change of vision on the part of the governing teams of academic institutions. This change materializes in various aspects. This paper focuses on how the University implements its principles of USR through communication with its stakeholders. After a bibliographic review, Universidad de Málaga is taken as a case study and different communicative actions are analyzed related to how this institution informs referring to its USR to different interest groups. The analysis deals with two different communicative scenarios: direct communication of the University via its corporate pages, and the communication of its efforts through the media. Both types of communicative actions have differentiated dimensions and are directed to heterogeneous interest groups and work on different missions. Therefore, they are different manifestations of the same objective, guided in both cases by the principle of coherence and correspondence between the two. The analysis of the institutional information of Universidad de Málaga shows the importance of this responsibility, in addition to the degree of adequacy or compliance with the principles of social responsibility, their vision and identity as an organization.*

### Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la importancia creciente de la Responsabilidad Social Universitaria (RSU), impulsada por un cambio de visión por parte de los equipos rectores de las instituciones académicas. Ese cambio se materializa en diversos aspectos. En este trabajo nos centraremos en cómo la Universidad implementa sus principios de RSU mediante la comunicación con sus grupos de interés. Tras una revisión bibliográfica, se toma como estudio de caso la Universidad de Málaga y se analizan distintas acciones comunicativas encaminadas a que esta institución transmita a los distintos grupos de interés los aspectos referentes a su RSU. El análisis versa sobre dos escenarios comunicativos diferenciados: la comunicación directa de la misma Universidad a través de sus páginas corporativas y la comunicación de éstas a través de los medios de comunicación. Ambos tipos de acciones comunicativas tienen dimensiones diferenciadas, se dirigen a grupos de interés heterogéneos y cumplen misiones diversas. Por lo tanto, se tratan de manifestaciones distintas de un mismo objetivo, presidido en ambos casos por el principio de coherencia y correspondencia entre ambas. El análisis de la información institucional de la Universidad de Málaga muestra la importancia que ésta concede a la comunicación para transmitir a sus grupos de interés, además del grado de adecuación o cumplimiento con los principios de la responsabilidad social, su visión e identidad como organización.

### Keywords | palabras clave

Social responsibility, university social responsibility, media, institutional communication, corporate communication  
Responsabilidad social, responsabilidad social universitaria, medios de comunicación, comunicación institucional, comunicación corporativa.

**Citation:** Cea Esteruelas, N. (2018). University social responsibility: the role of the media and its stakeholders. *Retos Revista de Ciencias de la Administración y Economía*, 8(16), 93-103. <https://doi.org/10.17163/ret.n16.2018.07>

## 1. Introduction

The concern of society and social agents on Social Responsibility (hereinafter, SR) is growing. The University, as a socializing agent, also shows interest in developing a model of social responsibility adapted to its role and its social function. In this sense, with University Social Responsibility (hereinafter, USR), universities adapt and promote these principles to the essence and nature of their function as institutions.

During the last decade, social responsibility in the business world, and later also in institutions such as the University, has gained importance. Both in the business sector and in political institutions, scandals of different types have generated greater sensitivity to these issues, motivating companies and institutions to be more focused on transparency in their activities, a greater commitment to dialogue with society and an effort on the part of organizations to communicate their contributions in terms of SR to their stakeholders.

In this context of greater awareness of the impact that every business act has on markets, the people who make them up and the impact on citizens, the concept of social responsibility, that is, corporate social responsibility, becomes increasingly relevant. This paradigm has progressively been transferred to other institutions, under its adaptation to the nature, mission and vision of the organism or institution. This has been the case of universities. Thus, universities have also implemented the principles of corporate social responsibility applied to the context of their social function.

In this article, the increasing importance of USR is analyzed, driven by a change of vision on the part of the governing teams of academic institutions. This change is materialized, as will be detailed below. In this regard, this specific work describes how the University implements its principles of USR through communication with its stakeholders. For this, the analysis deals with two different communicative scenarios: the direct communication of the University via its corporate pages and the communication of USR through the media. Both types of communicative actions have different dimensions, are addressed to partially different audiences and fulfill different missions. However, they are different manifestations of the same objective and, therefore, must preside over the coherence principle.

## 2. University Social Responsibility

USR is at the point of intersection between: what the university wants to be (its mission, vision and values); what the university thinks it is (the image that its members have of it); what the university is and does (its actions and results) and what society expects from it (the expectations and opinions of its external audiences) (Vallaey, De la Cruz & Siasa, 2009).

López & Gil (2011) carry out a literature review on the concept of USR and conclude that there are two ways to respond to this question. On the one hand, it can be considered that the University, by its very nature, fulfills its social function, and it is assumed that this social responsibility is part of its mission. On the other hand, companies and institutions must comply with and give an account of their responsible performance to their interested publics and, therefore, the University, although it has a social function in its essence, must also comply with the requirement of transparency

and dialogue with agents, public or interest groups, and in this particular case it is the civil society.

Considering the social function, and its projection in the USR, some examples of USR missions could be the following: establishment of communities inside and outside the University that promote social responsibilities for the different stakeholders; promotion of activities that are ethical, inclusive and beneficial to the public; emphasis on environmental conservation, sustainability and balanced social development; promotion of the well-being and life quality of people, especially of populations which are vulnerable and in need; and the commitment to build a better world. In general, these missions are achieved through teaching, research and services within the university community and in collaboration with other organizations.

In this same sense, Ayala defines USR as «the ethical and intelligent management of the impacts generated by the organization in its human, social and natural environment» (2011, p. 37). According to this way of understanding social responsibility and the role of the University in society, we can agree to define USR as:

The ability of the University to disseminate and put into practice a set of general and specific principles and values, through four key processes: management, teaching, research and extension (Domínguez, 2009, p. 39).

Vallaey, De la Cruz & Siasa (2009) have made one of the greatest efforts to define and study University Social Responsibility. In their book *University Social Responsibility*, they propose to think about the University from the standpoint of its social responsibility. This implies that this organization has to «be accountable regarding the impacts of its mission of training, research and participation in society» (2009, p. 1). For this institution, the groups of interest, are encompassed in a broader context such as civil society as a whole; Vallaey (2014) talks about the potential of USR, since it forces institutional self-criticism.

According to this theoretical model, USR offers advantages and benefits for the institution in the following aspects: relevance and social permeability; coherence and institutional integration; institutional dynamics towards innovation; and rationalization of university management (Vallaey, De la Cruz & Siasa, 2009, p. 17).

Innovation plays a crucial role for Leyva & Farfán (2016), who consider that:

The projection of educational innovation in the context of university social responsibility is part of the cultural itinerary of the universities and of the fundamental functions that sustain their imaginary and praxis (p. 18).

USR, although it emerges as something different and has a specific purpose, can be a reflection of the mission and values of the university institution. Hence the importance of a correspondence between the guiding principles and how these fundamentals are expressed and articulated with coherence through USR. This highlights the importance of institutional coherence, which, as defined by Vallaey, De la Cruz & Siasa, «means at the same time a coincidence between action and institutional discourse and consistency among all areas of the university» (2009, p. 2).

That is the reason USR should occupy a place among the guiding principles of the University, only in this way can they have maximum support from academic authorities. These principles of USR would be part of:

The mission, vision, values and/or educational project of the institution, as well as its integration into the strategic planning process of the university with the necessary resources for the execution of the agreed upon programs (Vallaey, De la Cruz & Siasa, 2009, p. 25).

In the same sense, as indicated by Domínguez (2009, p.60), Social Responsibility:

In its double dimension of ethical requirement and rational development strategy for organizational intelligence, it asks organizations to respond to the world and the various social groups affected by their actions and consequences.

Hence, the University, given its nature as a social institution with other purposes, distances itself from the corporate social responsibility model, responding to these premises from its position as an institution with a differential social function.

Its obligations in the field of social responsibility respond to this differential nature. In fact, according to the objectives of the University, as a training agent, both human and professional, within the strictly academic sphere, as well as its role as a generator of knowledge through research, the University also tries to respond to the requirement to comply with the principles of social responsibility, but always under its own institutional model.

There is a correspondence between the objectives of the institution and USR. That is, as indicated by Aldeanueva and Jiménez (2013, p. 2) «each university usually reflects University Social Responsibility in its strategies and tactics».

This idea of the University's social pact is a concept proposed by Perić (2016), when he states that, as institutions responsible for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities must ensure that this knowledge is in line with current needs and future requirements of society. Indeed, in a context of economic, political and social changes, a broad reform has been undertaken to face the new social challenges that these institutions face. USR, from its field of action, also tries to respond to the social dimension of the University and its important role in society in the face of the changes that have appeared in recent decades (Larrán & Andrades, 2017).

Vallaey (2008) also addresses the challenge of the University's social pact and defines this issue according to the way in which the University's concern for contributing to social development is articulated. It is the environment of an organization that gives meaning to SR. «Social responsibility develops when an organization becomes aware of itself, its environment, and its role in that environment» (Vallaey, 2008, p. 2).

In this sense it is important to underline how USR can contribute to the reputation and social value of this institution. The importance of social cohesion as an ethical principle and, ultimately, the corporate name of the university is also an aspect underlined by Beltrán, Bajos, & Mata (2014).

Specifically, the social contribution of the University can be approached from different angles, that is, the University can intervene in social development through different actions. Domínguez (2009, pp. 47-48), in addition to the contribution of the

university in society through what he calls educational, cognitive and epistemological impacts, establishes different lines of action that articulate the impact of the University in its environment and contribute to social development. These are: 1) the University directly intervening in its immediate environment, for example, through the creation of infrastructures to serve the population, such as cultural centers, clinics, etc. 2) intervention through community impact activities that, as in the previous actions, tend to cover specific needs, with activities carried out in the immediate environment, that is, public buildings near the university center; 3) technical assistance activities by supporting groups that require technical-technological support or knowledge transfer to improve their results; and 4) volunteer activities, in which students are encouraged to be involved in volunteer programs (Domínguez, 2009, pp. 47-48).

Delving deeper into the importance of the social environment and the commitment degree of the institution, Vallaeys (2008) suggests the need to design a new «social contract» between the University and society. In this regard, it is suggested that each University and teaching group design their own policy of action in relation to their own identity and social context (Vallaeys, 2008, p. 12).

This social environment and the degree of commitment of the university to society is what allows university social responsibility to become a reality, that is, «when the organization becomes aware of itself, its environment and its role in this environment» (Beltrán, Bajos, & Mata, 2014).

Following Vallaeys (2008), the three main axes of this university social contract would be the following: the social responsibility of science, training for democratic citizenship and training for development. Vila (2012) agrees on the structural role that citizens play in the conception of the USR. In this regard, it suggests establishing mechanisms of internal communication and real participation of citizens in the processes.

The very existence of an explicit USR policy is a way of contributing to the development of that social contract, because through the elaboration and application of USR, the authorities identify and commit themselves to those guiding principles declared as intentions and adopt the mission of the university and purposes or objectives (commitments). In conclusion, the existence of this statement of USR principles allows the institution, as well as the rest of the agents or interest groups (students, professors, administrators, civil society...) to check the degree of adequacy and compliance with the principles of USR declared by the institution. And, in turn, it is a way for the parties involved in complying with these USR principles to keep them in mind and govern their activity and professional performance to achieve these ends.

### 3. USR at Universidad de Málaga

Although there is a growing concern on the part of Universities to develop social policies, we must not forget that their function is academic training and contribution to knowledge. Their social commitment is articulated around these two pillars. And by responding to these two pillars, social inclusion, equality and other aspects related to freedoms and human rights are fostered.

Shek & Hollister (2017) carry out an analysis and literature review on USR, which they complement with case studies applied to different American universities.

In their analysis they conclude that the universities studied have different objectives and strategies in regard to their USR initiatives. In addition, they observed that there are different USR plans, according to levels of resources and commitment, which can provide excellent frames of reference for the development of USR policies and programs of other institutions. They suggest that it is also necessary to intensify the work of evaluating USR initiatives by analyzing USR programs and initiatives, particularly those that study the impact of USR on stakeholders.

In Spain, González *et al.* (2016) apply a similar methodology for the application analysis of USR and conclude that less than half of the universities of the Spanish University System have a University Social Responsibility plan.

The implementation of USR in Spain arises in the context of modernization of the University in Spain and has as a backdrop the modernization process of this institution throughout Europe, following the recommendations of the European Commission.

With this background, the 2015 University Strategy plan was drawn up as a coordinated initiative between the Government of Spain, the Autonomous Communities and the Universities, «through the promotion of excellence in training and research, the internationalization of the university system and its involvement in economic change based on knowledge and improvement of innovation» (Ministry of Education, 2009). This Plan articulates the need for progressive implementation of SR plans in universities.

Out of the eleven Andalusian universities, all of them, except one, carry out USR actions and, in addition, except for two, the rest are part of the Forum of the Social Councils of the Andalusian Universities, which works as a network or working group in the field of Social Responsibility.

One of the universities committed to the development of an USR action plan is Universidad de Málaga (UMA), which makes explicit its commitment to society and its stakeholders through its USR Plan. UMA, like other educational institutions, fosters a dialogue with its community and stimulates the relationship with society, as it is reflected in its USR Report.

#### **4. The role of communication in the articulation of USR**

Through institutional information, the University transmits its vision, the model that defines its identity as an organization and the organizational culture that governs it. Communication with stakeholders is a continuous, constant and fluid process. Likewise, it should be presided by a dialogical spirit. We refer therefore to a communicative and dialogic process with its stakeholders, beyond annual accountability, which is a communicative act that summarizes all the activity carried out during the academic year.

The fact that the University remains attentive to the demands of its interest groups does not mean that it must maintain a constant dialogue, but it does enable the mechanisms that make it possible to be permeable to the exchange of information and opinion on how to improve and to better fulfill its mission and objectives.

Based on the premise that universities have different interest groups, the characteristics of communication with each of these audiences are analyzed below. Following Gaete's classification proposal (2011, p. 116), students, companies and other social

organizations can be considered stakeholders; the Government is also included, as well as the resource providers for the operation of the institution, and all the personnel who perform their work within the institution.

First of all, it is worth highlighting the work carried out annually by the Rector team of Universidad de Málaga through the report or progress report regarding the application areas of SR, following the recommendations of the aforementioned 2015 University Strategy Plan. In the case at hand, the USR report of the University of Málaga is structured around eight blocks. In this report, the actions in each of the areas included in USR are reported. Each block groups the commitment of Universidad de Málaga with the following aspects: 1) organization and resources; 2) students; 3) staff; 4) society; 5) the environment; 6) research and knowledge transfer to the business sector; 7) constant improvement and transparency; 8) internationalization (Universidad de Málaga, 2016, p. 5).

However, as indicated in the Memory of Universidad de Málaga, the main interest group is its students. This is also reflected in its Statutes, which underline the mission and vision of this academic institution.

The annual USR report of Universidad de Málaga has been elaborated for years and supposes, on the one hand, an effort of compiling, revising and comparing the actions carried out by this institution in the matter of social responsibility. In addition, it contributes to communication with the agents involved, by giving an account of the development of the different activities and strategic plans aimed at implementing the commitment of Universidad de Málaga with USR.

It should be noted that these reports, in addition to serving as a tool for transparency of the actions of this institution, also allow a process of self-evaluation. In fact, the same report includes in its final section a self-rating, verification and correspondence with respect to the principles and suggestions established in the *Global Reporting Initiative* (G4). Likewise, this document incorporates the Forum Recommendations of the Social Councils of Public Universities of Andalusia and the guidelines of the Strategic Plan of Universidad de Málaga.

One of the aspects emphasized in the report is the social dimension of its commitment to interest groups, specifically with inclusion through its program of psychopedagogical intervention. This institution was the first public university to receive recognition as a socially responsible institution with functional diversity, offering tools to integrate equality policies in all its areas.

On the other hand, it should be noted that Universidad de Málaga articulates all its actions included within the USR through the area of Quality Services, Strategic Planning and Social Responsibility. The function of Quality Services is to provide technical support, advice and training to all Units of the University to show the culture of quality and encourage and implement continuous improvement and excellence in all areas of the university community.

Quality Services is also responsible for the preparation of the USR Report. Likewise, it keeps information constantly updated with all stakeholders. This service attends globally to the interest group formed by the students and graduates, providing all types of information that may be of interest to this group. Among this information, this service periodically reports on students enrolled and their origin, students in inter-

national mobility, rate of success and performance, the supply and demand of registration of degree titles, and the evolution of the number of graduated students, all of this through a comparative analysis of the rates every year.

Likewise, it provides different reports on labor insertion and student internships in companies. This aspect is of great interest because, in these reports, the job insertion rate is analyzed by comparing the situation of the students one year and two years after graduating. Likewise, this information is completed with an analysis of employability of the graduates since 2010, which enables periodical analysis of how these numbers evolve. To this are added annual reports on the degree of performance in external curricular practices.

Of great interest, not only for the student group, but for the entire academic community, are the comparative reports on the opinion polls of the students regarding the performance of the teaching staff, the labor climate surveys of the personnel, satisfaction surveys of the students regarding the organization of the majors and centers, and the satisfaction survey of graduates, all of them on an annual basis and including an evolutionary analysis of the results obtained since its implementation.

Likewise, there is a centralized communication service that allows articulating different communication channels of the University with different interest groups. In addition to the direct information from Quality Service through the institution's website, the Communication Service is responsible for relations with the media, internal communication, editing and maintaining the institutional website and all types of communicative actions through social networks.

The different communication actions mentioned above cover, therefore, all interest groups. Non-teaching and teacher-researcher staff have their own communication channels, restricted to these groups, such as website and communication through email and distribution groups. In addition to the information available in the website, students and graduates have news published by the media via the communication service of Universidad de Málaga, which includes Radio Comutopia (radio station and university television), various fixed spaces in public and private media of regional scope, and the coverage that each medium gives to the information provided by the communication office of the University of Málaga.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The review of different authors allows providing some conclusions and suggestions for improving the accountability process of the universities to their stakeholders. Given their public nature and its social function, as Gaete (2011) points out, they have the obligation to explain to society the fulfillment degree of their social function.

This paper analyzes Universidad de Málaga and the different communication actions implemented by this institution to transmit aspects referring to its USR to different interest groups.

As stated by Larrán and López (2010), it would be advisable that this action be completed with an external verification system of the *Global Reporting Initiative*, which would allow a self-assessment validity of these reports. The system promoted by this institution allows internal and external self-evaluation for many institutions. It,

through an international agreement, promotes the guidelines to guide companies and institutions in the preparation of their reports. Likewise, every company or organization can request to evaluate its memory to know its validity degree, as already done by Universidad de Málaga. In turn, this allows performing studies on the adaptation degree of different institutions and centers to the recommendations made by it. This is the case of the analysis carried out by Huerta-Riveros and Gaete-Feres (2017) in Latin America and the Caribbean, in which the referred authors conclude that the Universities that apply the *Global Reporting Initiative* verification system represent 17% of the total number of universities.

On the other hand, as Gaete (2011) points out, the preparation of USR reports, given that it is based on an accountability process, and the elaboration and transparency of the indicators allow the agents involved to evaluate the impact of the strategies and actions implemented by the institution in the field of USR.

The analysis of the institutional information of the University shows the importance that it grants to communication in order to transmit to its stakeholders their vision and identity as an organization, in addition to the degree of adaptation or compliance with the principles of social responsibility.

Beyond the annual report, this institution establishes a constant flow of communication with its stakeholders on a constant basis through its website. The news related to all kinds of initiatives occupy an important part of their website's home page. Therefore, from the department in charge of the communication, it is considered that communication with interest groups should be a fluid process that goes beyond the annual accountability process through the USR memory.

Among the mechanisms that make this exchange of information and opinion possible with interest groups is the student assistance office and a space on the web where all kinds of suggestions and requests for information are processed.

Within the set of stakeholders, the University grants priority to students. This is also observed in its Statutes, which underline the mission and vision of this academic institution. To coordinate communication with this interest group, the institution has different channels enabled, as mentioned above. We emphasize the importance that is given to the feedback process and, therefore, the University maintains constant self-assessment surveys of its work and attention to students.

Likewise, the University also attends to the information demands of other interest groups, such as companies and other social organizations, the Government, suppliers and all the staff members that carry out their work within the institution. Again, the institutional page has been functioning to communicate efficiently.

Likewise, in the Annual Report the governing team reports the progress of the institution in the different application areas of SR. The structure that maintains the report covers the most significant aspects of SR, such as organization and resources, activities of the institution, including research and the transfer of knowledge to the business sector; personnel, students and the society, the constant improvement and transparency; and, finally, its commitment degree to the institution's internationalization.

In short, the institution analyzed shows the importance of compliance with the principles of USR, an aspect that is reported annually through the preparation of a report. As this aspect is crucial in order for different interest groups to evaluate the

adaptation and fulfillment degree of the social dimension of this institution's activities, it is important to reinforce the communicative aspects by means of a constant flow of information with its interest groups. Through the communication department and the coordinated work with the Quality department of this University, it is possible to maintain this constant communicative flow with different interest groups, which results in improving the social image of this institution.

In conclusion, if we agree that:

The University has the social responsibility to promote debate, facilitate it, lead it and enrich it, giving the public the means to inform, reflect and judge, and to the companies the adequate knowledge to apply their own form of social responsibility (Vallaey, 2008, p. 14).

It will be necessary to continue creating mechanisms to disseminate the monitoring degree of these principles, which will result in an improvement in the image of this institution and in the perception of the social value of it by the society.

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