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«WHERE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES MEET»



“THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF
UNIVERSITIES”

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“THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF UNIVERSITIES”

Universities have three key functions—teaching, research, and service. Often, the service responsibility of universities is undervalued. Yet, service to society and to the academic community is of central importance, and a key element of service is social responsibility. A university’s social responsibility can be defined as the obligation to represent and practice a set of principles and values through its core functions of teaching, research, community engagement, and institutional management. Fundamental to this social role is a commitment to fairness, truth, and excellence; promotion of social equity and sustainable development; recognition of an individual’s dignity and liberty; appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism; and promotion of human rights and civic responsibility.

One important aspect of the social responsibility of universities is the development of student talent, so that graduates can be productive and responsible citizens. In an age where political conflict continues in most world regions and where peace is threatened at national, regional, and even global levels, universities must instill in their students an understanding, appreciation and respect for diverse cultures, a desire to assist those with fewer advantages and greater personal challenges than themselves, and the recognition of their role in making society (and the larger world) a better place to live in. Programs to promote social responsibility include both curricular and extracurricular elements as well as off-campus service and educational programs.

Social responsibility on the part of universities assumes even greater importance in a modern economy that is driven by globalization, rapid advances in information technology, scientific and technological innovation, and global competitiveness. Universities need to apply new technologies and new knowledge to address major global challenges—including climate change, poverty, health, and armed conflict. In an era when industries and businesses are more concerned with short-term benefits and use economic power to influence public policies accordingly, universities can contribute to policy discussion by emphasizing the long-term and ensure that their current actions have no negative impact on society in the future.

Teaching and Learning

An important service that universities render to society is the cultivation of human capital to support the country’s social, economic, and scientific development. In this endeavor, however, universities must ensure equity of access and the success of minority, as well as majority groups, the physically challenged, and the less-privileged members of society.

Universities have also a responsibility to ensure that their academic programs and research are not governed solely by market demand. While science and technology courses are important for a modern economy, social sciences and humanities are equally important, especially in the long-term.

Faculty today must consider a multidisciplinary approach to teaching, integrating natural, applied and social sciences so that knowledge is not separated from context. Universities must ensure that professional courses address issues such as environmental and social impact, as well as the moral implications, of professional activity. Students must be introduced to the concepts of ethics and social responsibility, sensitized to global challenges, and encouraged to “act locally, think globally.” By embedding an

international dimension in the curricula and encouraging student exchanges with institutions in other countries, universities can help to promote greater multicultural understanding and intercultural skills.

Research

Research is, of course, vital for producing knowledge to serve society and improve quality of life. In order to improve their position in global rankings, most often influenced by research productivity, some universities are closing departments with modest research output and recruiting highly-skilled researchers from developing countries, while diverting resources from teaching and other critical academic functions. Research must not become the primary mission of most universities.

Some advanced research, in medicine and genetics for example, often raises ethical and moral issues that may have serious social impact. Universities have a responsibility to ensure that such issues are addressed in a responsible manner, taking into account not only the local ethical and moral environment, but also the global one.

Advanced technology and intensified competitiveness have led to an increase in fraud and corruption. This, together with the drive for fame and recognition, has led to tampering with research results as well as increased incidences of plagiarism in research papers and theses. Universities must take every step to avoid these occurrences and to inculcate in faculty and students the social costs of fraud.

With a general decrease in public funding, research is more often funded by the private sector. There have been instances where the private sector has funded research with the sole aim of promoting its particular interests, for example in the areas of pharmaceuticals, applied agriculture, and food products. Academic researchers must be prepared to confront the ethical challenges and conflicts of interest that can occur in this context.

Community Engagement

One central aspect of the social responsibility of universities is the development of productive and responsible citizens. Encouraging broad-based participation in civil society, and the development of the skills and attitudes to do so is of central importance to higher education. This is often labeled the “third mission”, that also includes technology transfer, innovation, and continuing education. This element of higher education is a critical part of the university’s commitment to the larger society and important to the educational experience of each student. Yet, this dimension of higher education is rarely evident in the curriculum and requires the cultivation of noncognitive skills that are not generally contemplated in program design.

Students represent an enormous pool of valuable resources for assisting communities served by a university. Through community engagement students can learn how they might address social, political, and cultural issues; this promotes a sense of civic responsibility and encourages more socially responsible graduates willing to work for the improvement of the quality of life for all sectors of society. Universities in developed countries are encouraging students to consider international community service in developing countries with increased frequency. This kind of exposure promotes new kinds of cross-cultural collaboration and greater multicultural understanding.



A Green and Responsible University

By promoting sustainable development practices in the management of their campus, universities can lead society by example. They can introduce energy-saving measures and promote the use of renewable energy sources on campus. They can decrease their use of disposable materials and recycle waste products. They should create a pleasant, healthy and safe campus environment for students and staff.

“Green” management aligns closely with other policies of responsible management. Universities should practice consultative, fair, transparent, and accountable management. Above all, by ensuring that students are fully engaged in these processes, universities can teach important aspects of social responsibility.

Conclusion

Because universities train future leaders and decision makers, it is incumbent on them to ensure that their graduates become socially responsible citizens. Universities must resist the influences of commercialization and commodification brought about by globalization that tend to divert institutions from their critical responsibilities as social institutions. Responding to short-term market demands must not be their sole mission. They also have a responsibility to long-term societal needs.

The planet stands at a critical juncture—environmentally, politically, and economically; and the future will be determined by the decisions made by individual societies. Universities have the responsibility to contribute to knowledge and intellectual capacity that will promote healthier societies and a healthier planet; they must consider their social responsibility as a major guiding principle in all their core functions.

