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Abstract: Well-intentioned University Social Responsibility (USR) initiatives are increasingly 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 behaviourally-inspired solutions to mitigate this risk.

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 Jorge and Andrades Peña, 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) emphasized 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 & Mzoughi, 2022). HE institutions legitimacy is based on specific foundations (importance of research and teaching, promoters of a democratic citizenry, critical inquiry, and academic freedom) (Saltelli *et al.*, 2022). Hence, the consequences of misconducts are often serious and deleterious. Interestingly, the literature has shown scant interest in the downsides 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 evolutions and understand how these trajectories can lead to unexpected and counter-productive outcomes.

Our conceptual contribution does not follow the traditional organization of an empirical paper. Section 2 describes the methods used to generate our main rationales.

Section 3 overviews the literature about USR and provides key-elements of characterization. Section 4 develops several behaviorally-informed arguments explaining why USR activities can backfire. Section 5 proposes some practical solutions to overcome this issue. Section 6 concludes.

Methods for conceptual contributions

While several scholars called for increasing the number of conceptual contributions in academic outlets (Yadav, 2010; Jaakkola, 2020; Frey, 2021; Lindebaum, 2022), they remain relatively scarce compared to more conventional pieces. Although a conceptual paper is sometimes considered as 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 lie on reviewing the existing literature to identify a knowledge gap and 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 really considered before. They also include appropriate evidence and examples to support the developed insights. MacInnis (2016) suggests that successful conceptual contributions should fulfill 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). As such, they allow to escape a too 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 Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017; Ali *et al.*, 2021), the 'dark side' of USR remains overlooked. This is in stark contrast with 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 on the possible downsides of USR without any exclusion criterion. We notably used *Google Scholar* and *Google* as suitable tools to identify relevant papers (Martin-Martin *et al.*, 2018). Given the limited number of articles, we reviewed each article individually to check whether it was relevant for our research topic and 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" and so forth. We assessed whether the arguments conform to a logical reasoning. We selected examples that either illustrate the reality of possible effects and/or support the developed insights. 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 or 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 holistic 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 a rational critical reasoning and generated innovations that structured the development of 20th 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 that is 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)[1]. In a similar path, universities responsibility towards society and its development became the subject of a vibrant debate (see Box 1). One of the first publications on this topic, entitled 'The Social Responsibility of the State University' (Chase, 1923), developed the argument that (public)

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[1] While the modern understanding of CSR as a definitional construct has a long and varied history, tracing back to the 1930s when debates about the social responsibilities of the private sector began, the roots of CSR can be found centuries earlier (see notably Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Moon et al., 2017).

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 the neoliberal context on higher education institutions

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, e.g., Steck, 2003; Cox, 2013 and references therein; Brown, 2015; Gebreiter, 2022).

To fund other initiatives such as USR ones 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", or 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 prioritize 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.

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 in the benefit of their communities, were treated as an additional task and did not modify their usual missions and operations. Nevertheless, those 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 societal changes that 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 linked to the sharing of 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 between economic performance, environmental preservation and social welfare. These orientations are viewed as mutually supportive and captured in the triple-bottom line approach. 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, indeed, shaped by CSR developments, as well as the unique vocation of universities to create and disseminate knowledge, anchored in prevailing patterns of practice and values (Stadge and Barth, 2022). USR is the university rendition of the widely known phenomenon of CSR (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 cater to social needs and respect the limitations of the environment's ability to respond to future demand, as well as in 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.

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 (12c-18c)	Maintenance of a hierarchical caste system	
	CSR: Ø (modern understanding of CSR as a definitional construct)	
	USR: disseminate the 'established truths'	
Industrial societies (19c-20c)	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.	Philanthropic initiatives grafted onto the usual core activities without modifying business as usual.
	USR: teaching, research, and extension mission.	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 Radicalization of environmental degradation and social movements => institutionalization of SD (sustainable development)	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.
	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.

Today, most universities have a plan outlining their actions to exercise social responsibility (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 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 social actions[2] 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 issues. 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.'

Increasingly aware of this difference between strategic and integral forms of USR, higher education stakeholders are looking for ways to better assess the approaches taken by universities and optimize their effectiveness. The evolution of ranking systems reflects this expectation. Since 2022, the QS Sustainability Ranking takes an integral approach of USR and measures specifically an institution's ability to address the 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 initially 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 sources, 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 rather than as 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 also 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, focused 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.

Therefore, USR is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Its implementation and focus differ based on the type of institution, its funding structure, mission, and the socio-economic context in which it 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 biased 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 overtime can be counterproductive.

This argument suggests that HE institutions with USR activities may engage consciously or unconsciously in socially undesirable actions, leading to inconsistencies.[3] For instance, an institution may adopt an environmentally-friendly heating system while its staff travels around the world for meetings. The changes can even be cosmetic such as exhibiting gender equality at top level and getting sheep grazing the university lawns without going any further. Another example can be the organization of conferences on sustainable development while most courses and actions remain as usual. Vallaeys (2013, p. 91) captured this paradox as follows: "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 their 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 travels, 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 they have already "done enough" for gender equality. The challenge for universities is to recognize and mitigate this moral licensing effects ensuring that their commitment to social responsibility complements rather than substitutes their primary missions of research, teaching, and knowledge dissemination.

The contamination by association

When universities engage in USR initiatives they should consider that their audience is overwhelmed with a plethora of CSR and USR claims but also numerous publicized corporate (and university) misconducts (Grolleau and Mzoughi, 2022), leading many people to 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, i.e., CSR-related scandals in corporations are likely to spillover to universities (Laufer and Wang, 2018). Indeed, the same causes are likely to produce the same

effects (change of routines, habits such as an overreliance over metrics that can be conducive to misconducts [see, e.g., Asselineau *et al.*, 2022]). Moreover, the contamination can also arise because moral violations, so frequent in the business world, are transferred to universities that are suspected of adopting similar practices, even if it is not the case.

An important rationale to justify this contagion is the accessibility-diagnosticity 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 to 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 of 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. Without purporting to be exhaustive, they can set vague or easily achievable targets, engage in short-term initiatives without systemic change or practice tokenism. They can implement diversity only at a lower-level and focus on meeting numerical targets, but failing to address real inclusion and retention issues with a "revolving door" effect. They can 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, can be suspected to follow the same path by playing with numbers and behave cosmetically rather than addressing the root issues, which can lead to loss of confidence.

Some companies are frequently 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 misconducts or scandals), they can be suspected to be polluted by their corporate counterparts. Indeed, this situation raises potential conflicts of interests that could taint the university reputation and casts doubt on the integrity of the research conducted.

Last but not least, if the USR initiative is driven by imitation or ranking concerns (e.g., QS World University Rankings: Sustainability), a given university may be tempted to game (or cheat) the system, exaggerate its commitments and engage 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-oriented) and can threaten usual expected outcomes (e.g., targeted rank). This strategy also encourages to step out of the box and defines 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 request cannot be achieved because it contradicts the USR requirements. As such, a USR strategy often disturbs the status quo and creates new references and routines (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017).

Specifically, USR endeavors often threaten things people are attached to, and trigger loss aversion. For instance, a major motivation of academics is their academic freedom. An overemphasis on USR requirements can cause resistance from scholars or staff. If USR commitments are perceived as likely to reduce academic freedom (e.g., by guiding or formatting their activities and works) they can generate strong resistance (Stadge and Barth, 2022). Scientific freedom is necessary for the production of significant advances and the

functioning of democracy. Any ideological orientation of science has proven to hamper its productivity (Cole, 2012). HE institutions should thus ensure that their scientists integrate the objective of contributing to sustainable development, and also respect scholars' freedom regarding the way in which their work contributes to this objective.

Similarly, if additional requirements arise at times where university agents are already overwhelmed, they may oppose the proposed evolutions. In the same vein, promoting a director of USR or other related USR-positions can create additional hierarchical positions that can be perceived as threatening or diluting the pre-existing ones. Even if the changes become mandatory, they can lead to reactance, because the autonomy of the considered agents is jeopardized.

Resource and attention diversion

An increasing stream of research demonstrates that individuals rely heavily on lay theories or heuristics, such as the 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 that are devoted to reach social responsibility commitments are lost for other goals. In other words, satisfying USR goals is perceived as requiring sacrifices and tradeoffs 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 engagements. This antagonistic perspective can fuel resistance and opposition from concerned agents. In another direction, USR achievements can

be perceived or used as smokescreen to occult less-than expected performances on more core missions of universities. By diverting attention, USR can lead to skepticism and distrust.

Solutions to prevent counter-productive effects

Although USR downsides and USIR have attracted little attention, we argue that anticipating these situations can allow a better preparation. We propose some tentative solutions to address the previously-described downsides. As a general principle, we contend that the reasons (strong personal convictions *versus* instrumental motives like compliance with social norms or legal requirements) for which a HE institution engages in USR play a strong role in avoiding the possible downsides of these endeavors. We do not purport to be exhaustive but consider some practical ways to avoid USR backfiring.

Countering the moral licensing bias

A first strategy could be to inform individuals and entities on the possible USR downsides. Individuals can be warned that involuntary moral licensing is a serious issue and that there is a clear willingness to not use USR achievements as a way to liberate or tolerate inconsistent behaviors. Nevertheless, informing people about their own biases is not always as effective as expected (Fischhoff, 1982; Milkman *et al.*, 2009). It is particularly important to choose the right time and context to raise awareness about such sensitive topics (Nickerson and Roger, 2010). When the university presents its strategic plan (or its activity report) to stakeholders, it frequently mentions its social responsibility commitment. This presentation 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 on all the variables and potentially certain areas of setback that could be attributed to moral licensing effects.

Another way of getting around this bias is to focus on individual's values. People are embracing prosocial 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 behaviors, 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 morality 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 scoring points. The battle must be waged against the idea of a possible balance between good and bad deeds. In some cases, deciding to not publicize the USR and not using generic broad terms like '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 from key information or role models.

Avoiding the risk of contamination by association

Educating stakeholders to dissociate USR and CSR can diminish the likelihood of contamination effects. Emphasizing HE specific legitimacy foundations and different system of values, norms and definitions (Bräunig, 2011) is crucial. HE institutions have to create their own way. This strategy can mobilize various approaches such as rethinking what the society really expects from HE organizations rather than transposing corporate practices.

Several tools and standards are conceived to 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 Stars 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 well-known 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 different 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 reassure them and enhance their sense of belonging. Highlighting the USR-related achievements of some professors (institutions) who (that) are widely recognized and esteemed by their colleagues (peers) may demonstrate that commitment towards USR lies in the very nature of the faculty's profession (HE). Third, particular attention should be paid to the used words and temporal dimensions to introduce USR and develop plans (Nickerson & Roger, 2010). Following this logic, many universities have set up participatory workshops for their staff so that they can express 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

The implementation of USR should not lead to a perceived diversion of resources and attention, notably by avoiding to framing USR in antagonist terms. On the contrary, synergetic effects should be sought and emphasized. This idea echoes the concept of creating shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011), considering that it is by solving a social problem that value creation can be optimized on all levels (economic, social and environmental). For example, the European University EU-CONEXUS is entirely structured around a common goal (i.e., 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 stakeholders' 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 workforce 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 after (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 to obtain a substantial budget (notably from the European Union).

In addition, it can be emphasized that USR outcomes serve or derive from pursuing the university primary goals. 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 the students from disadvantaged backgrounds also make the regular work of faculty members easier.

A summary of the previous propositions is provided in table 2.

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 'practice 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)

Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge that the above suggestions are often presented optimistically, which may not fully reflect the complexities and potential drawbacks of implementing these strategies. 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 is more prudent for universities to focus solely on 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 can be insufficient in addressing 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 without neglecting the multiple facets of this goal.

Conclusion

While most contributions focus on USR upsides, we argued that downsides deserve more attention. We exposed several mechanisms by 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 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.

Our contribution offers a more balanced view of USR and invites concerned decision-makers to not take USR promises at face value, get beyond the rhetoric and pay more attention to the 'dark side' of USR. This rebalancing is crucial to prevent the transfer of excesses from corporate approaches to the HE world. Concerned actors can be trained and equipped to anticipate or detect early the possible counterproductive effects of well-intentioned USR initiatives and 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) will give more voice to the raised concerns. An idea is to test experimentally whether observers judge and react similarly in the case of similar CSIR and USIR. An experimental survey could

manipulate only the transgressor identity and see whether the moral judgment and behavioral intentions are similarly affected. Second, our article is not exhaustive and other rationales can be at work. Studying other motivations and the ways to address them could significantly enrich the toolbox of USR promoters and allow them to keep control. 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.

Notes

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

2. Common actions include setting up initiatives to save energy or recycle waste, charity work, opening libraries or sports facilities for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that help disadvantaged groups.

3. Interestingly, universities managed their social responsibility through the campus management rather than altering their teaching and research activities. This choice could be explained by (*i*) the desire to avoid a contest from academics who are attached to their academic freedom, (*ii*) budget issues, and (*iii*) a limited knowledge of sustainable development by stakeholders that was often reduced to its green dimension (waste sorting, green spaces).

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