Social Responsibility: A Tool for Legitimation in Spanish Universities’ Strategic Plans

Responsabilitat social: una eina de legitimació en els plans estratègics de les universitats espanyoles

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The mission of universities is not limited to creating and transferring knowledge. Nowadays, universities have the responsibility of working towards the improvement of people’s lives and solving significant global problems. (Núñez and Alonso, 2009; Setó et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2017). This global, inclusive mission, along with the goal of having a positive impact on society while respecting all stakeholders, is framed within the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR). Through a participative and dialogic process with internal and external stakeholders, University Social Responsibility and Responsible Research and Innovation will become important and necessary tools for universities’ legitimation. The objective of this paper is to define whether or not USR and RRI strategies are considered tools for legitimacy in the Strategic Plans of universities.

La missió de les universitats no es limita a crear i transferir coneixement. Avui en dia, les universitats tenen la responsabilitat de treballar per millorar les vides de les persones i per solucionar problemes globals i importants (Núñez i Alonso, 2009; Setó et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2017). Aquesta missió global i inclusiva, juntament amb el propòsit de tenir un impacte positiu en la societat respectant a tots els grups d’interès, s’emmarquen en el concepte de Responsabilitat Social Universitària (RSU). A través d’un procés participatiu i dialògic amb stakeholders interns i externs, la Responsabilitat Social Universitària i la Investigació i Innovació Responsables (RRI) esdevindran una eina important i necessària per legitimar les universitats. L’objectiu d’aquest treball és definir si les estratègies de RSU i RRI es consideren com a eines de legitimitat en el...
Nowadays, most Spanish Public Universities are losing students to private universities. Up until know universities’ vision focused on the short term and did not almost take into consideration the service provided or the commitment to their stakeholders (students, professors, alumni, employers, managers, media or the society in general). These stakeholders’ groups were viewed as anonymous and passive receptive agents to any communication transmitted by the institutions.

Universities are experiencing a new business model based on market shares, economies of scale, unit cost, etc. This new context does not seem suitable for public institutions with social aim such as the Spanish Public University, but these institutions need to be able to deal with the new environment.

Due to globalization, within other factors, public universities need to compete to be highly ranked in national and international rankings in order to enhance their worldwide prestige and attract international students and faculty members.

Considering this complex situation, the analysis and study of concepts like government, strategy and legitimacy, applied to the public higher education sector, becomes necessary. Therefore, the ability of the university to fulfill social demand, competing with private sector, and, at the same time, to focus their teaching and research agenda in the common good improvement are topics which worth a deep scrutiny.

Universities are not expected to just create and share interesting and valuable knowledge. Nowadays, universities have the responsibility to work for people’s lives improvement and for global important issue solutions (Núñez and Alonso, 2009; Setó et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2017). This third

To define the theoretical framework, we carried out a review of scholarly literature about the concepts of USR and RRI as related to legitimacy. A set of Spanish universities’ Strategic Plans are analysed in order to determine the kinds of messages and projects related to USR and RRI that are included therein.

**Key words:** social responsibility, legitimacy, strategic plan, university.

plans estratègics de les universitats. Per definir el marc teòric, hem dut a terme una revisió de la literatura acadèmica sobre els conceptes de RSU i RRI en relació amb la legitimat.

S’analitza un conjunt de plans estratègics de les universitats públiques espanyoles per tal de comprendre quin tipus de missatges i projectes relacionats amb RSU i RRI s’hi inclouen.

**Paraules clau:** responsabilitat social, legitimitat, pla estratègic, universitat.
university’s mission is defined by two concepts: University Social Responsibility (USR) and Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI).

Besides that, developing a sustainability strategy and integrating social responsibility into corporate governance are important factors in today’s organizations management (Porter and Kramer, 2006, 2011) to gather legitimacy (Brønn and Vrioni, 2001; Brønn and Vidaver, 2009).

In the last decade, many universities have approved and published their Strategic Plans. However, it is important to analyze if these plans are legitimated by the different stakeholders’ support and if they include governance, social and environmental multistakeholders objectives, which will allow the institutions to increase their legitimacy level.

The development of social and environmental responsible strategies is crucial for the institutions’ legitimation, since legitimacy will improve the access to strategic and key resources, which enhances the possibilities of survival and success of the Spanish Public Universities (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002; Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Scherer et al., 2013; Díez et al., 2014; Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Beddewela and Fairbrass, 2016).

Under this highly competitive scenario, strategic management becomes crucial for universities. Strategic Plans are one of the most important governance tool for universities, including the different stakeholders’ perspectives and needs.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze how Spanish public universities introduce USR and RRI in their strategic plans in order to improve their legitimacy in front of their stakeholders and so ensure their right to operate, the acceptance and relevance in the society and the necessary resources to prosperate as prestigious institutions. In order to do so, a set of public Spanish universities’ strategic plans is analyzed according to their commitment to USR and RRI.

The structure of this article is as follow: a general theoretical framework about legitimacy is defined, afterword the relationship between legitimacy and CSR is explained, then a brief overview about USR and RRI is described.

Next, the research methodology and sample are explained in detail. The content analysis results and the research implications follow. Finally, research limitations and the future research agenda is defined.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Legitimacy

Achieving and maintaining legitimacy is one of the most relevant objectives for most organizations, and it is only possible to achieve it through their stakeholder’s support. Additionally, most of the organizations operate in highly competitive environment, and universities face the same situation (Newbert, 2008). Academic literature shows that organizations develop corporate social responsibility strategies to increase their legitimacy (Brønn and Vidaver, 2009).

Legitimacy reflects cultural alignment, normative support and consonance with relevant norms and laws (Scott, 1995). Its relevance lies in the acceptance
and desirability of an organization’s activities and actions by its environment and stakeholders, which will allow it to access the necessary resources to survive and grow (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Similarly, when stakeholders decide to maintain or start a relationship with an organization, they pay attention to the organization’s commitment to moral, ethical or social norms, which safeguard their interests and fulfill their needs (Patriotta et al., 2011; Du and Vieira, 2012; Scherer et al., 2013).

Institutional Theory suggests that organizations obtain legitimacy by fulfilling the general norms, beliefs and laws (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995) and that there is nothing to do to gain legitimacy since it is not possible for them to develop strategies to manipulate their legitimacy level (Mezias, 1995; Suchman, 1995). On the other hand, Scott (1995) or Suchman (1995) suggest that organizations can develop strategies to change their legitimacy type and level.

The concept of legitimacy is crucial in the strategical management field, since it is not a tangible asset that can be bought, but it is an element that can be managed. Alcántara et al. (2006) and Tornikoski and Newbert (2007) explained the existing positive relationship between the strategic actions orientated to gain legitimacy and organizational success. These studies show that organizations with higher levels of legitimacy have more possibilities to success and grow Therefore, understanding the mechanisms to manage legitimacy becomes a key element for organizations.

In fact, there are several authors that define different actions that organizations could develop to improve their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse, 1996; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002; Lamberti and Lettieri, 2011; Beelitz and Merkl, 2012; Díez et al., 2013). Suchman (1995) has categorized these strategies in three groups: a) strategies to gain legitimacy, b) strategies to maintain legitimacy and c) strategies to recover legitimacy. From this approach, it is assumed that organizations can take a proactive role to acquire, conserve or even repair their legitimacy. Many of these proactive steps are related with implementing social responsibility (SR) strategies.

In table 1 some of these legitimation strategies related with social responsibility (SR) are classified.

**Table 1. Legitimation Strategies Related with Social Responsibility (SR)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGIES TO GAIN LEGITIMACY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conformity. Involves following the social norms of the environment in which the organization operates without questioning, changing or violating them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conformity with the environment</th>
<th>Commit to the environment’s demands and expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enforce the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count with well-reputed managers with experience in team management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfy stakeholders’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involve stakeholders in the decision-making processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Strategies to Increase Legitimacy

**Conformity with ideas**

- Improve the organization’s reputation
- Present meritorious results, activities or processes
- Develop partnerships with respected and institutionalized institutions such as NGOs
- Offer desirable symbols for the environment
- Review the organization’s mission, vision and values and include social and shared values

**Conformity with models**

- Formalize the informal procedures to provide transparency for the organization

**Select a favorable environment in which the organization will not need to make many changes**

| Market selection  | Identify target public with social values |
| Environment selection | Select environments with social demands |
| Label selection | Include information regarding the sustainable offer and information |

**Modify the environment, creating structures that adapt to the company’s activities**

| Environment modification (Promotion) | Develop social marketing campaigns |
| Modification (Persuasion) | Motivate the company’s personnel |
| Modification (Popularization) | Events and research sponsorships and patronage strategies implementation |
| Modification (Standardization) | Establish protocols to standardize the SR area mainstreaming |

**Strategies to Maintain Legitimacy**

**Monitor to identify the audience reactions and foresee changes**

| Monitor tendencies | Monitor and respond to new social values |
| Monitor values | Consult experts’ opinion on society’s values |
| Monitor diverse points of view | Involve the organization’s stakeholders |

**Protect the obtained legitimacy, trying to maintain it instead of it being episodic**

| Protection | Communicate with credibility |
| Protection | Communicate actions with honesty |
Demonstrate that the developed activities are responsible with social concerns
Establish strategies vs negative campaigns
Adapt in a social manner to technological changes

**STRATEGY TO RESTORE LOST LEGITIMACY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities’ normalization, separating those socially problematic activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normalize through denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalize through excuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalize through explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalize through explanation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restructure the organization to mitigate the damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructure through decoupling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructure through decoupling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration drawn from Díez et al. (2013) and Suchman (1995).

**Legitimacy and Social Responsibility (SR)**

Despite the general agreement on the positive effect that SR commitment has on legitimacy, few empirical researches has been carried out to demonstrate the existing relationship between them (Rao et al., 2008; Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Claasen and Roloff, 2012). Johnson and Smith (1999) consider that organizations must develop social responsibility actions in order to gain their right to operate. In fact, stakeholders assess legitimacy when they believe that the organization will maintain certain behavioral standards (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999). Lamberti and Lettieri (2011) recommend to plan’s development managers to take into account legitimacy, SR and corporate strategy elements. Maxfield (2008), Barnett (2007), Orlitzky et al. (2003) and Mackey et al. (2007), among others, have identified that SR contributes in a positive manner to financial results, market value and that it is a competitive advantage source for organizations.

Scholar analyzes SR from two main different points of view: the stakeholders’ orientation and the economic orientation. The first approach focuses on the stakeholders’ theory (Godfrey and Hatch, 2007; Kleinrichert, 2008), which suggests that stakeholders are the organization’s allies. SR represents a reciprocal action between the organizations and its stakeholders, based more on the company’s duty towards these groups of interest, than on the benefit objectives
The SR activities represent an answer to the stakeholder demands regarding their social concerns. Without these SR activities, stakeholders could withdraw their support (Freeman, 1984; McWilliams et al., 2006). Some authors have criticized this approach since they consider that organizations are submitted to a to high institutional pressures (Bies et al., 2007).

The economic orientation analyzes the relationship between SR and the economic results (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Godfrey and Hatch, 2007; Kleinrichert, 2008). Empirical studies on this matter have shown different results. Margolis and Walsh (2003) were not able to establish a clear relationship between both concepts. However, Orlitzky et al. (2003) show that SR has a positive impact on economic results. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) establish that SR strategies are a tool to improve financial results, although not every company is able to do it. McWilliams and Siegel (2001) show that the relationship between SR and financial results is neutral. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) consider that this type of results can be explained with the fact that SR has a greater effect on the client’s internal behavior compared to their external ones. Other authors, explain that the investment in SR strategies represent, more than costs or obligation, a competitive advantage source (Smith, 2003; Porter and Kramer, 2006). Several authors have shown that SR activities only generate exceptional results when organizations avoid their competitors to imitate them (Reinhardt, 1998; Hoppe and Lehmann, 2001). Therefore, SR is associated with the differentiation strategy.

SR contributes to a company’s product and services differentiation, developing a positive brand image, safeguarding reputation (Fombrun, 2005). Brickley et al. (2002) and Lai et al. (2010) showed the existing relationship between SR, the company’s reputation, and even brand value. Barnett (2007) identified a positive link between SR and the relationship with stakeholders. Mackey et al. (2007) developed a mathematical model, which showed how SR could increase a company’s market value. It has also been demonstrated how SR facilitates client’s adjustment to negative information (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004) and to risk management (Husted, 2005).

Institutionalization facilitates the introduction of improvements in the organization’s internal processes. For example, those organizations which have tried to adapt to social norms and standards through environmental best practices, have seen how pressure for achieving sustainability has improved their systems and applied technology (Bansal and Clelland, 2004).

Porter and Kramer (2006: 64) argued that legitimacy has fallen to unexpected levels, and they describe a paradoxical phenomenon “at the same time that more companies are adopting socially responsible practices, many are also accused of failing society”. Within the educational field, Alford and O’Flynn (2009) establish that public education organizations should accomplish the following requirements: be valuable, politically sustainable, legitimated and feasible. Orlitzky et al. (2003) indicate that those organizations that include social initiatives within their strategies generate higher legitimacy and stakeholders’ identification levels with the given institution. In addition, these types of social initiatives encourage stakeholders’ commitment, which results in higher levels of legitimacy.
University Social Responsibility (USR)

It is assumed that universities have to develop teaching activities and knowledge transfer. However, nowadays a “third mission” is included in society expectations (Casani and Pérez, 2009: 127): working to improve the global sustainability and social responsibility development.

Considering United Nations and UNESCO projects as starting points, universities have been developing Social Responsibility strategies and policies that represent the new and relevant role of these academic institutions in today’s society. These SR strategies and policies are developed within the USR context.

Wigmore and Ruiz (2012) confirm the lack of agreement in the definition of USR since a variety of terms, including business/ethics, corporate responsibility, social responsibility, business and sustainability, etc. appear under this concept. Esfijani et al. (2012) argue that several terms have been used to refer to universities’ responsibilities towards society, such as: University Community (Civic/Public) Engagement (UCE), Outreach, Scholarship of Engagement (SOE), University Social Responsibility (USR), Civic Engagement, Public Engagement and Community University Partnership.

University Social Responsibility is the new forma mentis adopted by universities to approach their communities and sustain them (González and Túñez, 2014) at a social, ecological, technical and economical level: USR is a philosophy or principle for universities to use an ethical approach to develop and engage with the local and global communities in order to sustain their social, ecological, environmental, technical, and economic development (Chen et al., 2015: 165).

The university has the mission to educate ethical and responsible citizens (Gasca and Olvera, 2011), in order to meet the objective of promoting a positive sustainable growth worldwide (Wigmore and Ruiz, 2012). USR is the key for the universities’ purpose, vision and values redefinition.

According to Miotto (2018), following the new USR paradigm, universities are responsible, not only for executing their teaching and research labor, but also for identifying internal and external stakeholders’ needs, for adapting research to solving relevant issues, for sharing useful and important knowledge, not only towards the academic community, but with society, for shaping responsible citizens concerned with their social, environmental and economic impacts, for showing that ethics should be a relevant tool for corporate and political management, and finally, for presenting the obtained results due to transparent and consistent communication with the different stakeholder groups.
For a correct USR implementation, universities need to establish the following steps (Vallaeyes et al., 2009; Esfijani et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2015):

**a) Commitment:** University Social Responsibility needs to be part of the institution, it has to be present in its mission, vision and values, shared by every internal stakeholder (Students, faculty and administrative personnel) and promoted by the top management.

A dynamic environment that facilitates active stakeholder’s participation, influences in a positive manner the results obtained from USR strategies.

**b) Self-diagnosis:** It is necessary to develop a self-diagnosis to evaluate the Social Responsibility and Environmental Sustainability implementation in the different areas in the institution: organization management, teaching, research and social participation.

**c) Fulfillment:** As a consequence of the self-diagnosis, universities need to design the USR strategy, the action plan and begin its implementation in collaboration with the highest possible number of actors.

**d) Accountability:** Once the measures defined in the action plan have been implemented, it is important to review the obtained results, the impact towards the institution, society and the environment and communicate them to internal and external stakeholders.

From this moment on, the cycle needs to be repeated, with a new self-diagnosis, action plan definition, evaluation, result’s communication, etc. (Vallaeyes et al., 2009).

However, being responsible is not enough to legitimate an institution, in order to do so, it is necessary to share it with the stakeholders and to maintain a consistent and constant communication with all of them (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Castelló and Lozano, 2011). This communication objective is to share information in an environment that demands transparency and accountability (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006).

In conclusion, institutions have to justify their existence and involve their stakeholders constantly (Castelló et al., 2016).

Finally, an educational institution must receive its community’s support and acceptance in order to survive and fulfill its mission (Ravinet, 2008; Miotto and
Rom, 2017). Nowadays, public Spanish universities have chosen their Strategic Plans published in their webpages, visible and available for all the involved stakeholders, as the communication tool to share their USR strategies. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the universities’ strategic actions orientation, and USR concerns, allows to evaluate if this approach performs as a legitimation tool for universities.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

This research is developed through the content analysis of the public Spanish universities’ strategic plans published in their websites in 2018. The sample of the research is based on ten universities which apply to the following pre-requirements: the strategic plan is actual; the university is ranked by the 2018 QS Universities Ranking; the university is ranked by the 2018 Shanghai Universities Ranking; the university is ranked by the 2018 Times Ranking; and the university delivers degree programs in all the academic areas (table 2).

Rankings are used as a base for define the research sample since they are of vital importance in higher education industry (Wilson and Thomas, 2012; Mårtensson and Richtnér, 2015). Rankings became not just the guarantees of the quality and prestige of the institutions, they are one of the most important sources of legitimacy from the stakeholders’ point of view (Gioia and Corley, 2002; Wedlin, 2011; Mårtensson and Richtnér, 2015).

Table 2. Universities, Strategic Plan and Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>STRATEGIC PLAN</th>
<th>RANKING TIMES</th>
<th>SHANGHAY RANKING</th>
<th>QS RANKING</th>
<th>Students 2016-2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universidad Carlos III</td>
<td>2016-2022</td>
<td>601-800</td>
<td>301-400</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>15.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universitat de Barcelona</td>
<td>2008-2020</td>
<td>201-250</td>
<td>201-300</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>43.973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universidad de Oviedo</td>
<td>2018-2020</td>
<td>601-800</td>
<td>501-600</td>
<td>801-1000</td>
<td>18.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universidade de Santiago de Compostela</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
<td>601-800</td>
<td>301-400</td>
<td>601-650</td>
<td>20.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universidad de Sevilla</td>
<td>2016-2020</td>
<td>601-800</td>
<td>501-600</td>
<td>601-650</td>
<td>54.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universitat Pompeu Fabra</td>
<td>2016-2025</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>201-300</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>14.843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universitat de València</td>
<td>2016-2019</td>
<td>501-600</td>
<td>401-500</td>
<td>551-600</td>
<td>38.942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration.

With respect to the methodology, this is a synchronic, qualitative and interpretative semantic content analysis based on text coding (Friese, 2011; Olabuénaga,
Strategic plans are a tool for legitimation because they foster stakeholders’ involvement and society participation into the universities’ management and shared values. According to Eckel (2006), legitimacy is obtained when stakeholders believe that they have the opportunity of influencing in the organization’s process and results, thus, their involvement in the strategic plans is crucial. However, it is not part of the objectives of this research to evaluate if the mentioned projects in the strategic plans have been implemented yet. It is not an auditing work nor an “assurance of information” (Searcy and Buslovich, 2014).

To code the content and to manage the great quantity of data, the CADQAS software Atlas.ti is used (Valles, 2001; Trinidad et al., 2006; Abela et al., 2007; Silver and Lewins, 2014). The content codes of analysis are chosen taking into account the current theoretical framework related to University Social Responsibility (Cuesta and Valor, 2003; Reiser, 2008; Vallaey et al., 2009; Gasca and Olvera, 2011; Wigmore and Ruiz, 2012; Esfijani et al., 2012; Martell, 2012; Ramsenia, 2013; Chen et al., 2015; Vázquez et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2017).

The codes are defined according to the following topics:

- CSR, Ethics and Sustainability into Teaching and Programs Curricula: impact to the students
- RRI, ethic and sustainability in the Research activities: impact to the scholars and to the society
- Social Actions: impact to the community
- Responsible Corporate Governance, ethics, transparency and accountability: impact to the universities’ management
- Scholarships programs: impact to the students
- Disability service: impact to the students
- Teaching quality: impact to the students
- Gender equality
- Common good improvement and positive impact on society: impact to the society
- Human Resource policies: impact to the employees
- Corporate Knowledge transfer: impact to the companies and society
- Stakeholders involvement and participation
- Environmental sustainability

RESULTS

The selected universities’ strategic plans’ content analysis shows that the fourteen University Social Responsibility aspects are not represented in all of them (table 3). For example, six universities’ strategic plans do not mention any details about their “Scholarships programs”. Five universities do not provide any information about “Disability services”.
Nevertheless, all the universities introduce a lot of information and details about their Social Responsibility, since more than fifty quotations about this topic are highlighted during the strategic plans’ content analysis.

Table 3. Strategic Plans’ Content Analysis Results According with USR items. University Social Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEMS</th>
<th>A Coruña</th>
<th>Salamanca</th>
<th>Santiago Compostela</th>
<th>Oviedo</th>
<th>Sevilla</th>
<th>Barcelona</th>
<th>València</th>
<th>Pompeu Fabra</th>
<th>Carlos III</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships programs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Actions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Governance, transparency and accountability</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching quality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender equality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental sustainability</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common good improvement and positive impact on society</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders involvement and participation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource policies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Research and Innovation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR, Ethics and Sustainability into Programs Curricula</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Knowledge transfer</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing each university's strategic plan and its alignment to USR as a tool for legitimation, Universidad Carlos III from Madrid is the one that more focuses its strategy into the Social Responsibility's assets. Carlos III University's strategic plan highlights up to three times quotations if comparing with the others institutions. Its strategy is very much aligned with USR policies as instruments to manage the university and reach legitimation through the stakeholders.

The second position is occupied by Universidad de Oviedo, with 125 references dedicated to USR topics and policies, afterward Universidade Santiago de Compostela with 118 quotations and Universidade da Coruña with 98. Universitat Pompeu Fabra follows with 85 references, Universidad de Sevilla with 71 and Universidad de Barcelona with 67. Finally, Universidad de Salamanca (59 quotations) and Universitat de València (53) are the universities which less strategic alignment to USR.

Each university focuses its USR strategy and, therefore, its quest for legitimation, into different aspects of the Social Responsibility. The institutions highlight different kind of policies, projects and budget allocation (fig. 2).

These differences will be discussed widely in the implications' chapter, nevertheless briefly the table 3 and figure 2 summarize the content analysis results.

“Common good improvement and positive impact into the society” is the most important topic related to USR mentioned by the universities. “Corporate Knowledge transfer” and “Responsible Research and Innovation” policies follow as pillars for universities’ strategic development.

“Environmental Sustainability” and “Responsible Corporate Governance, transparency and accountability” are highlighted as priorities for universities’ legitimation process.

At the other hand, “Scholarships programs”, “Disability service”, and “CSR, Ethics and Sustainability into Programs Curricula” have a very low representation into the Strategic Plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEMS</th>
<th>A Coruña</th>
<th>Salamanca</th>
<th>Santiago Compostela</th>
<th>Oviedo</th>
<th>Sevilla</th>
<th>Barcelona</th>
<th>València</th>
<th>Pompeu Fabra</th>
<th>Carlos III</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total quotations</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration.
Figure 2. Ranking of the Strategic Plan’ USR Items

Source: own elaboration.

IMPLICATIONS

The fact that universities’ strategic plans include aspects related to social responsibility and that they affect the level of support provided by stakeholders is confirmed. Universities expect to increase their legitimacy by redefining their mission and vision, and by including the social approach and responsibility towards their ecosystem.

After developing the strategic plans’ content analysis, it can be confirmed that the key elements regarding social responsibility are common good improvement, knowledge transfer to corporations, responsible research policies, environmental sustainability and good governance.

Universities highlight that they are institutions that should collaborate towards the community development and the society’s general improvement and well-being growing. This fact underlines universities’ social responsibility “third mission” and their public approach.

The university should not only teach and investigate, they also need to answer to social demands because, among other motives, it is a public service and it is financed by citizen’s taxes. Moreover, this can be encouraged by the teaching and research personnel accreditation reform carried out by the National Spanish Accreditation Agency in which corporate knowledge transfer and positive impact into entrepreneurship and corporate innovation and development becomes a new pillar for accreditations, besides traditional teaching, research and professor’s management and training criteria.

Regarding Responsible Research and Innovation policies it is confirmed that the concept of RRI is not mentioned directly. However, universities very often mention that developing useful research for society, applying ethic procedures and stakeholders’ involvement into research projects is a priority in their strategic plans. Therefore, it shows that the concept of RRI remains in an embryonic phase. It will be very interesting to analyze if the European Union’s efforts to
include this topic into the “Horizon program 2020” evaluation criteria will be enough in order to place the RRI as a main priority for universities’ strategic plans.

In relation to environmental concerns and sustainability threats, universities mainly commit themselves to a zero paper policy and to a greater degree of energy savings. Universities should increase their efforts towards the implementation of a virtual secretariat and the digitalization processes in order to achieve this strategic axis and increase their legitimacy. Actually, ad Díez et al. (2013) argue environmental sustainability actions increase the legitimacy of organizations.

Regarding good governance, ethics and transparency, universities need to develop a transparent and collaborative management. All universities are making efforts to publish indicators related to transparency and to involve stakeholders in their strategic plans definition and in their decision-making processes. In addition, the official university titles follow-up and renewal systems, the AUDIT as well as the quality assurance commissions, are instruments that encourage this type of responsible attitude towards the stakeholders.

According to the strategic plans analysis, improving access to universities is not relevant for these institutions. Scholarships programs development are not a priority at the moment, there is almost no mention regarding gender equality and disability services.

Surprisingly, the introduction of Social Responsibility and Sustainability topics and criteria into the degree and masters programs is not a priority (Miotto and Rom, 2017). Following Snelson et al. (2016), private business schools worldwide, for example, understood that to maintain or improve their legitimacy they should commit to sustainability and incorporate social responsibility and ethics into their programs curricula.

The limitations of this research are mainly related to the limited sample of the content analysis and the lack of stakeholders’ inputs. Our future research agenda includes increasing the number of analyzed universities and collecting inputs by the different stakeholders, as, for example, interviewing universities’ managers, students, professors, analyzing the sentiment in social networks and the media set agenda about these public educational institutions.

These new data set will allow us to apply inferential statistical analysis and, therefore, being able to elaborate a more detailed theory about strategic plans as tool for legitimacy in public and private university industry.

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References


