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**HOW DO RESPONSIBLE  
UNIVERSITIES PERCEIVE THEIR  
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT? IN SEARCH  
OF SIGNS OF CREATING SHARED  
VALUE BY THE UNIVERSITY**

## SUMMARY

University social responsibility still lacks legitimisation and is perceived as a burden which hinders academics from doing research and teaching. The concept of Creating Shared Value by the University may serve as a tool to motivate universities to engage in initiatives for society, as this is beneficial for both parties, yet some researchers perceive the creation of economic value as inappropriate for academia. Thus, it was interesting to look closer at how the world's best universities elaborate on this matter. A thematic analysis of textual data obtained from the THE Impact Rankings 2022 webpages has been conducted. We have found that when the world's best universities elaborate on their USR practices, they mention the benefits they gain or expect to receive in return, which may be associated with creating shared (social and economic) value.

**KEYWORDS:** *University Social Responsibility, Creating Shared Value*

## INTRODUCTION

Universities and their communities are becoming more aware of the role of academic institutions in creating the future and there is an increase in interest regarding University Social Responsibility (USR) as an area of study. Theoretically, USR (see: Harkavy, 2006; Reiser, 2008; Vasilescu *et al.*, 2010; Nejati *et al.*, 2011; Jarvis, 2000; Garde-Sanchez *et al.*, 2013; Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017; Kouatli, 2018) is reflected in the third mission of a university, equally as important as teaching (first mission) and research (second mission). Still, universities are highly engaged in developing ambitious strategies related to their first and second missions, but their social responsibility may appear to be the equivalent of spontaneous initiatives and voluntary activities of students and staff, rather than strategies or programmes. It may be a result of lack of integration and legitimization (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2015) and lack of coordination and evaluation of social initiatives (Tauginienė and Mačiukaitė-Žvinienė, 2013). Existing evaluation systems do not support social engagement, and universities do not create consistent research programmes and tools to manage social problems or measure progress (Clark, 1998, 2004; Jongbloed *et al.*, 2008; Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017; Pollock *et al.*, 2009).



The abovementioned problems lead to treating social responsibility of the university as a burden. Interestingly, one concept that may be used to face this issue is Creating Shared Value by the University (CSVU). As proposed by Karwowska (2021), Creating Shared Value (CSV) applied to academia may be a motivational tool which could enhance the societal impact of universities, since it links solving social problems with creating benefits for a university.

By definition, CSV means *policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates*. (Porter and Kramer, 2011, p. 6). As de Tommaso and Pinsky (2021) outlined, CSV is an engine for purpose-driven organizations to achieve their goals and it helps them to drive innovation by seeking opportunities to create a sustainable future. Moreover, CSV increases competitiveness and profitability by solving societal problems (Kramer *et al.*, 2020). In spite of originating from business practice, it is also being researched and developed by increasing number of academics (Chen *et al.*, 2022; de los Reyes *et al.*, 2016; Ham *et al.*, 2020; Kiminami *et al.*, 2022; Menghwar and Daood, 2021; Nandi *et al.*, 2022; Yang and Yan, 2020). Researchers try to apply it in different contexts, not limiting this idea to western countries (Kim, 2018; Kouatli, 2019) and large private corporations (Chun, 2017; Kwon and Park, 2019; Kouatli, 2019; Karwowska, 2021; Seung-Hyun and Seong-Gon, 2022).

There are also few works which examine the Shared Value in the university context. Especially Kouatli's (2019), who proposed a contemporary definition ofUSR that includes CSV. He stated that universities may benefit from CSV-like projects, but they should use the profit gained to develop social responsibility programmes. Similarly, Alzyoud and Bani-Hani (2015) suggest that USR may lead to creating value for society and the university itself, since being socially oriented and solving relevant issues is a great foundation of competitive advantage. Also, Păunescu Găucă and Drăgan Gilmeanu (2017) observed that the social development is a two-sided process, therefore both sides should benefit from such goals: society and the university.

The CSVU is one of the existing advancement of CSV. Karwowska (2021) defined it as implementing a strategy that concerns environmental, academic, social and economic goals which are in line with a university's strengths and



the needs of stakeholders. In other words, this approach drives the creation of both social and economic value. Examples of social value are solving environmental problems, social impact or improving the quality of life, and it is difficult to measure with quantitative indicators. The economic value, similarly, could not only be profit from commercialisation and contracted research, but also employer branding, strengthening the morale and motivation of employees, building a reputation, the identification of novel research problems, and last but not least – attracting similarly engaged students and researchers (see: Table 1).

**Table 1.** *CSVU initiative and created values.*

Example of CSVU initiative	Examples of Social value	Examples of Economic value
Engaging in research projects that focus on the prevention of environmental disasters in cooperation with business	Facing environmental problems Social impact Improving the quality of life of underprivileged people	Reputation Publicity Identification of a novel research problem Income from commercialisation

**Source:** own work based on Karwowska (2021).

Still, some academics understand social engagement as voluntary and treat economic value that may be created for a university as irrelevant or inappropriate (see: Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017; Tauginienė and Pucėtaitė, 2021). It shows that applying CSV to academia may be controversial.

For this reason, we find it legitimate to examine how world-leading universities perceive generating benefits for themselves while benefitting society and contributing to the common good. They not only set standards, but also inspire universities in other cultures and economies. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyse how the world's best universities elaborate on their social responsibility with a special focus on CSVU, which means creating social and economic (business) value simultaneously.

The research interest concerns how CSR was talked about by the most impactful universities in the world (2022). Theoretically, social responsibility



is covered by the assumptions of the third mission of universities. Practically, USR is not only limited to the third mission, rather it is reflected in all areas of a university's activities: teaching, research, management, and cooperation with external stakeholders (or social service). In this study we focused on the broader, practical meaning of USR and the benefits universities link it with, and the dataset consists of all instances across the entire data corpus that had some relevance to this focus. We conducted a thematic analysis of the textual overview of the 30 best universities from THE Impact Rankings 2022, starting from a bottom-up approach. The bottom-up analysis of the data led to the formation of specific research questions:

- RQ 1. Do universities create shared value (create social and economic value from the same initiatives, especially strategic)?
- RQ 2. What do universities receive (or expect to receive) in return for what they give to society?

To answer the first research question, we searched for indirect and direct signs of CSVU in the dataset, applying the top-down approach to our thematic analysis. **Indirect** signs include mention of particular initiatives and their results, which may be indicated as economic and social, clearly linked to each other. This was to examine whether CSVU (generating benefits from social responsibility) is perceived by the most socially impactful universities as appropriate for academia. **Direct** signs are understood as using terms related to CSV (shared value, creating shared value) and their existence could determine whether the most impactful universities are aware that they use this concept.

To answer the second research question, we analysed what universities state that they receive in exchange for being socially responsible organisations or what they expect to gain from that. This question aimed to examine the motivations of universities for their USR activities and practices. If one of them is to create economic (while creating social) value, CSVU could be a legitimate tool for the development of USR.



## METHOD

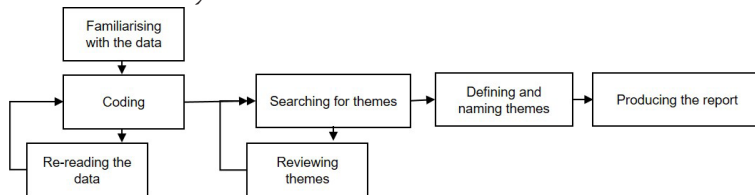
### DATA COLLECTION

The research is based on textual data published online by universities placed in the top 30 in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022. The qualitative data have been extracted from individual profiles of universities on the main THE Impact Rankings website (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/>), since it is a place where each institution is able to provide information regarding their social impact and their perception of it. Universities are free to update any kind of information, as long as it is linked to evaluated areas of their activities. As stated on the website, *The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings are the only global performance tables that assess universities against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. The THE Impact Rankings use carefully calibrated indicators to provide a comprehensive and balanced comparison across four broad areas: research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. Short descriptions provided by the universities and available on public websites of international initiatives may be an interesting source of information on how they perceive themselves, what their values are, and what achievements they find the most distinctive. When the best universities summarise themselves in public documents related to sustainability, they directly and indirectly show how they evaluate their social responsibility, thus such dataset is an interesting source regarding stated research questions.

### DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis of the collected data has been conducted according to the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Thematic analysis.*



**Source:** Braun & Clarke (2006).

We started our analysis by familiarising ourselves with the data with no preceding idea or theory in consideration. While reading the textual data, we identified messages which suggested that universities may be aware of creating benefits for society and themselves from their engagement simultaneously. It led to the formulation of a broad research question related to Creating Shared Value. We aimed to examine whether this idea is present in the way universities elaborate on their performance, and the specific research questions evolved through the coding process (which maps onto the inductive approach).

The coding technique was manual since we focused our research on the benefits universities link their USR activities with (the dataset consists of all instances across the entire data corpus that had some relevance to USR activities and the benefits associated with them). Using notes and highlights, we created initial data-driven codes which covered all the identified messages (data extracts). We copied the extracts to a separate computer file for further analysis to facilitate the process, not limiting the extracts to the message, but also including the text which presents the message context. Some extracts were assigned to many initial codes at first, since the messages were broad and complex. Then, through multiple re-reading of the text and giving equal attention to each data item, we organised the data into narrow groups of meaning.

The second step was searching for themes which linked the codes logically, which started when we developed a list of codes. It was helpful to use visual representations to sort the various codes into themes, especially mind maps and writing the names of codes with short descriptions in a separate file. We analysed the relationship between codes, themes, and possible different levels of themes, which resulted in creating sub-themes (related to four areas of university engagement: teaching, research, social engagement and management). Some of the codes were turned into themes and we did not discard any of the identified codes. This stage resulted in a collection of potential themes and sub-themes, and data extracts related to them.

Grasping the sense of significance of particular themes, we started the next stage – reviewing the themes – which involved refining them. We made clear and identifiable distinctions between themes. Some of the themes do not cover an excessive amount of data, but because they cover information we



find interesting, they were not excluded. The result of this stage was thematic maps which show the overall story of the dataset.

The next stage was defining themes, identifying the core meaning of each theme and deciding what message in the data it captures. We identified the story each theme tells and how it fits into the broad story in relation to the research questions. We focused on not giving too broad a meaning to each theme and in the case when a particular theme was still too diverse or complex, it was divided accordingly. We clearly defined what the themes are, and what they are not. To test whether we understand the themes, we checked whether we can describe the scope and content of each theme in a couple of sentences and attempted to give them distinctive, punchy names.

The last step was preparing the report which tells the story of the dataset, choosing vivid extracts which capture the essence of the point without excessive complexity. We embedded the extracts within an analytic narrative, not only describing the data, but also making an argument in relation to the research questions.

## RESULTS

The results show that the world-leading universities are open about the returns of their social responsibility. When those universities elaborate on their social performance, they mention the benefits they gain or expect to gain as a result of their activities which indicate that shared value may be created by them indirectly. Still, no direct mentioning of CSV or CSVU was identified, thus universities may be oblivious to this concept (RQ1).

The observed benefits are both intangible and tangible, but most are related to increasing brand value: receiving recognition and awards, building reputation, strengthening competitive advantage, boosting brand attractiveness, and employer branding. Universities modestly mention that they gain tangible benefits, such as an expansion of research funds, and earned or passive income, which may point out that such values are not perceived as suitable in an academic context. It may indicate that they are motivated by the benefit they receive, thus CSVU could be a legitimate tool to develop the theory and





practice of USR. Still, probably any CSVU framework should focus mostly on intangible benefits (RQ2).

Data show real examples of benefits created for universities alongside benefitting society (Table 2). We elaborate only on the most vivid examples in this section below.

**Table 2.** *Benefits created by the world's best universities as a result of their research, teaching, social engagement and management.*

Benefits	AREAS OF A UNIVERSITY'S ACTIVITIES			
	Research	Teaching	Societal engagement	Management
<b>Intangible: Getting recognition and awards</b>	<p>Due to responsibility in research, we get recognition</p> <p>Due to conducting impactful research, we get recognition</p> <p>Due to conducting leading-edge research, we get recognition and awards</p>	<p>Due to offering practical and inspiring learning, we get recognition</p>	<p>Due to our societal impact, we get recognition</p>	<p>Due to advancing the SDGs, we get recognition</p> <p>Due to inclusivity, we get recognition</p> <p>Due to our strategic focus on USR, we get recognition</p>
<b>Intangible: Building reputation</b>	<p>Due to conducting impactful research, we build reputation</p> <p>Due to conducting groundbreaking research, we build reputation</p> <p>Due to conducting impactful research, we build reputation</p>	<p>Due to offering practical teaching, we build reputation</p>	<p>Due to our national contribution, we build reputation</p> <p>Due to collaboration, we build reputation</p> <p>Due to our societal impact, we build reputation</p>	<p>Due to balancing research, education, and social engagement, we build reputation</p> <p>Due to our strategic focus on USR, we build reputation</p>

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<b>Intangible:</b> <b>Strengthening competitive advantage</b>	Due to our innovative research, we maintain our competitiveness	Due to developing leaders, we maintain our competitiveness	X	Due to our strategic orientation on open innovation, we maintain our competitiveness
<b>Intangible:</b> <b>Boosting brand attractiveness and employer branding</b>	Due to our impactful research, we have an extensive network of international cooperation	Due to our inclusive teaching, we attract international students  Due to our inclusive teaching, we attract ambitious people	X	Due to innovation and accessibility, we attract the best researchers and international students  Due to employing prominent faculty, we position ourselves as the right place to complete a career
<b>Tangible:</b> <b>Expansion of research funding, earned research income, and passive research income</b>	Due to conducting excellent research, we expand our research funding  Due to conducting impactful research, we make a remarkable income  Due to conducting impactful research, we turn intellectual property into profitable enterprises	X	X	X

Source: own work

Universities, while describing themselves in the context of their third mission, outline the benefit of **getting recognition and awards**, which means receiving appreciation or acclaim for an achievement, service or ability. I. e.,



in exchange for conducting responsible, impactful and leading-edge research, the world's best universities gain top positions in rankings, which measure their innovativeness or entrepreneurial achievements.

*Due to conducting impactful research, we get recognition*

*Arizona State University ranks top 10 in the U.S. and #11 globally for U.S. patents awarded to universities in 2020, along with MIT, Stanford and Harvard. This notable ranking highlights ASU's entrepreneurial and innovative approach toward solving global challenges. [2]*

Another interesting theme identified in the dataset is **building reputation**, which means earning a place in public esteem or regard due to the outstanding offer. One important area of universities' activities is social engagement, which could refer to producing the top intellectuals for the country, bringing change and the spirit of innovation to the world, as well as extended cooperation with industry and academic partners, or making an impact.

*Due to collaboration, we build reputation*

*UTS is for people who want to change the world through practical innovation with real impact. Our close partnerships with industry and academic partners across the globe have made us Australia's top university for research impact. [15]*

The benefits of **boosting brand attractiveness** and **employer branding** were observed connectedly, and this means attracting the best students from around the world and extending the network of cooperation due to positive associations or the quality of relationships, attracting talented employees due to the university's reputation as a place to work. Especially management practice plays an important role here. Creating accessibility and inclusivity on the campus, alongside the innovativeness, leads to attracting the best researchers and international students.

*Due to innovation and accessibility, we attract the best researchers and international students*

*Through innovation and a commitment to accessibility, ASU has drawn pioneering researchers to its faculty even as it expands opportunities for qualified students, attracting some of the highest caliber students from all 50 states and more than 158 countries. [2]*

**Tangible assets** gained due to a socially responsible attitude are less visible in the way universities elaborate on USR activities. These benefits are linked to improving performance in terms of an **expansion of research funding, earned research income, and passive research income**, which are clearly a result of



engagements in research, and innovation. I.e., passive research income means receiving money from special purpose companies established with the university's intellectual property in the form of a dividend from shares or a license fee. It also suggests that the research projects conducted aim to solve real needs of the industry or society. Generating impressive investment revenue may indicate that the products or services offered by the university's startup firms attract many clients due to quality and usefulness. Patents and invention disclosures are issued to new and original solutions, and an impressive number of these reflects the innovativeness and practical orientation of the university.

*Due to conducting impactful research, we turn intellectual property into profitable enterprises*

*Since 2003, ASU research has resulted in more than 3,800 invention disclosures and more than 845 U.S. issued patents. Startups based on ASU intellectual property have generated more than \$833 million in investment capital. [2]*

All the tangible benefits are related to conducting research only. Interestingly, there were no data which clearly suggested that financial performance may be impacted by responsibility in teaching, social engagement or management.

## CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the fact that the analysed data are limited to the information provided by the universities on the THE Impact Rankings website, where universities are free to publish information they find accurate, we have identified some useful outcomes.

The world's best universities in terms of social impact openly state that alongside their engagement, they generate benefits for themselves. Signs of indirect Creating Shared Value by the University were observed in the dataset. Some universities create social and economic benefits from the same initiatives, mainly strategic. They mention particular results which may be indicated as economic and social, clearly linked to each other in the narrative of the story they tell on the THE Impact Rankings webpage. This may suggest that generating benefits from social responsibility is perceived by the most impactful universities as appropriate for academia.



Still, most of the benefits universities create or expect to gain due to their activities are intangible. There were only few bold statements suggesting that they gain tangible assets, such as profit or additional funds. It may suggest that the topic of financial benefits is not worth mentioning, obvious to university representatives or inadequate. Moreover, it may indicate that universities are open to elaborate on their gains as long as they are intangible, and while developing any CSVU framework, one should pay extra attention to this type of benefits for a university. Economic value in the business world is mostly based on profit, but clearly universities have different obligations.

Remarkably, there was no direct mention of Creating Shared Value or Creating Shared Value by the University, neither by using the terms CSV/CSVU nor definitions of them. It may indicate that they are not aware that they may be creating shared value or even not aware that such an idea exists.

The results shed new light on the perception of creating economic value in academia, indicating that CSVU could be a legitimate tool to develop the theory and practice of USR. As the discourse of CSV is evolving, and researchers tend to analyze different contexts this concept may be used within (Kim, 2018; Chun, 2017; Kwon and Park, 2019; Kouatli, 2019; Karwowska, 2021; Seung-Hyun and Seong-Gon, 2022), it naturally leads to implementing CSV in academia. At the same time, the concept of University Social Responsibility is getting nearer to the creating value for the society and the university at the same time (Kouatli, 2019; Alzyoud and Bani-Hani, 2015; Păunescu Găucă and Drăgan Gilmeanu, 2017). It shows that Creating Shared Value by University may naturally be a next step in this evolution in the theory and practice.

Still, it is important to broaden our understanding of the contemporary approaches to University Social Responsibility, because the better our understanding is of this area, the more accurate tools one may propose for improving the performance of universities. Furthermore, we conclude that more research in the area of Creating Shared Value by the University is needed to deepen our understanding of ongoing processes and changes in attitudes at universities towards gaining benefits from social responsibility. When the works proposing new tools and methods to implement CSVU accompanied by the opportunities and threats will arise, it additionally will lead to spreading the awareness among academics and decision makers at universities.



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