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University Social Responsibility: A Paradox or a Vast Field of Tensions?

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Abstract

University social responsibility (USR) is a fashionable concept that is often presented as a paradox, with the implication that it can help universities meet the social dimension of higher education, without questioning the hegemonic meanings of academic excellence and the university mission. We draw on data collected through a focus group of experts on USR to suggest that this concept has the potential to contribute to the transformation of higher education, particularly if its tensions and contradictions are addressed. Three tensions emerged from the data: real versus unreal change, institutional cooperation versus competition, and the right to privacy versus excessive transparency. We conclude that USR is neither a neutral nor a consensual concept; rather, it is eminently political, and HEIs and their leaders, teachers, staff, and students should confront, discuss, and take a stand on its tensions and contradictions.

Keywords: university social responsibility, social dimension of higher education, third mission, university governance, public policy

Although not new, the concept of university social responsibility (USR) may help us to move beyond an image of higher education institutions (HEIs) as ivory towers, and to see them instead as institutions that are increasingly diverse, plural, and in horizontal and bidirectional communication with their communities, local and global. We argue that it is an inclusive and broad concept, covering not only the core missions of the university—teaching and research—but also the third mission (Vorley & Nelles, 2008) and governance. Many authors have problematized topics related to USR while preferring, and sometimes, as Keynan (2014) argued, confusing it with, concepts as diverse as community service and service-learning (Rhoads, 1998), the societally responsive university (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2002), civic engagement (McIlrath & Labhrainn, 2007), civic responsibility (Thornton & Jaeger, 2008), environmental sustainability (Ralph & Stubbs, 2014), prosocial sense (Ayala-Rodríguez et al., 2019), and sustainability (Jones, 2017), among others. Nevertheless, Larrán and Andrades (2017) showed that, despite attracting the attention of higher education academic journals (a selection of 15 of these journals have published 314 academic articles on this topic) and "the changes carried out in the university sector which have emphasized the social dimension of universities, there is still a long way to go on the subject of USR" (p. 315).

Universities' motives for engaging in USR are diverse and can be contradictory. It is not surprising, therefore, that the discussion around USR ranges from applause (Atakan & Eker, 2007) to caution (Kantanen, 2005). Some degree of ideological bias is unavoidable; consequently, some view the concept of USR as framed by a neoliberal logic that is not suitable for the public—as opposed to the corporate—nature of HEIs, and driven by large transnational organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others, against which the university must resist. For others, USR is guided by humanistic ideals and represents universities' commitment to fight poverty and build a more just and democratic society (Calderón, 2006).

Aware of this contradiction, we have argued (Menezes et al., 2018) that the definition of USR depends on the "positioning of the concept [on] a continuum that ranges from a conservative-managerialist to a transformative-critical pole" (p. 1). The former is mainly rhetorical and gives primacy to organizational governance and institutional reputation, instead of teaching and research; the latter implies a deep and transversal transformation of the university, encompassing teaching, research, governance, and interaction with the "glocal" community while emphasizing environmental and social sustainability. We think that the latter approach is far more relevant and socially responsible.

The two poles of conservative-managerialism and transformative-criticality represent opposing institutional drivers. Indeed, they are contradictory. It is not possible, we argue, to approach both simultaneously. On the contrary, the closer we get to one of the poles, the further we move away from the other. Nevertheless, it is possible to find a different standpoint in the existing literature, one that attempts to dilute or solve the contradiction through consensus, relying on the idea that it is possible and desirable to have the best of both worlds: market-oriented policies and practices, and social justice. For Vallaeys (2008, p. 203), for example, it is a mistake to see USR as a "right-left dispute," since the promotion of dialogue and "consensus" among stakeholders is its greatest value. This (at least apparent) ideological neutrality is defended also by Evans (2009):

> If greater social responsibility is to be genuinely embraced, a society that learns and pursues the spirit of mastery has to establish an ideological base for itself which attaches as much importance to active and engaged citizenry as it does to economic growth and productivity. (p. 245)

The best example we know of global consensus on USR is the ISO 26000 Guidance Standard on Social Responsibility, which has been the basis for several frameworks, including one we helped create (Amorim et al., 2015, but also Boer, 2013; CGE-CPU, n.d.). Developed by 450 experts from 99 countries and 40 international organizations, this standard has been adopted by countries all over the world. In the EU, for instance, the exceptions are only Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Slovenia (see http://iso26000.info/, a website published by the vice-chair of the ISO 26000 Working Group on Social Responsibility, Staffan Södderberg).

Appe et al. (2017, p. 14), contrary still to what we defend, argued that USR brings together, "with a quintessentially Latin American concept of solidarity," elements of two contrasting models of university engagement—the market-oriented and social justice models—and pursues "simultaneously" the "competing" goals of economic development and social equity (p. 28). Drawing on the organisational paradox theory, Aizik et al. (2017, p. 149) suggested that academy-community partnerships are "'fields of paradox' that allow for the coexistence of opposites at the same time." The same authors also defended the importance of overcoming "the attitude that views conflict as dysfunction" and considered inequality, for example, as "an integral part of institutional success" (p. 149). Even though we agree with the importance of conflict, the question is whether to accept or reject inequality. We do not accept it, just as we do not see USR as a miraculous paradox. We therefore argue that USR is not just a dispute between right and left; it also constitutes a tension between an orientation toward conservatism or social justice transformation.

However, very little can be found in the literature on the tensions and contradictions underlying USR, and this absence is key to understanding the policies and practices applied under the umbrella of USR. We therefore suggest that at least two factors increase the diversity of USR practices: the specific context and mission of each HEI, and the background, perspectives, and interests of people studying or implementing USR. Vallaeys (2008, p. 199) gave some examples of the second factor: corporate philanthropy, social benefit, quality management, labor claims, human rights, ecology, or fair trade. To which we could add, for example, the opening of higher education to underrepresented groups and the reduction of social inequalities and discrimination.

With this study, therefore, we sought to identify the main tensions within USR, and to understand whether they really are contradictory or whether, on the contrary, it is possible for HEIs to pursue the best of both worlds: market gains and social justice.

Method

The data was collected within a European project funded by the European Commission: EU-USR: Comparative Research on the Social Responsibility of Universities in Europe and Development of a Community Reference Framework. In Portugal, a face-to-face focus group was conducted with experts on USR from five public HEIs (three universities and two polytechnics) with the most systematic and acknowledged work in this field. As shown in Table 1, the group encompassed three females and two males, ranging from 34 to 62 years old. Their roles were diverse: one dean, one professor, two administrators, and one member of a working group on USR. Their background was mostly in economics, management, and finance. The experts were identified by searching for USR on their HEIs' websites and/or through nomination by the respective universities' rectorates and polytechnics' presidents. In this sense, they are both experts and representatives of their institutions.

The focus group, which lasted approximately two and a half hours, followed a script with five "question categories: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending" (Krueger, 1998, p. 21). We used the structure proposed by Krueger because it allows a gradual focus on the topic under discussion. The most important and/or complex questions, called key questions, were asked after a few rounds of questions, so that participants were more comfortable and willing to share their perspectives.

Initially, we referred to the project within which this group took place, explained its main objectives, asked for the permission of the participants to record the discussion, and guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity of the people and institutions represented. To open the discussion, we asked the participants to present themselves and their role at the HEI.

The introductory phase was inspired by the nominal group technique. In this research, however, rather than a "silent generation of ideas, in writing" (Delbecq et al., 1975/1986, p. 44), we spread seven cards on the table, each one of them presenting a topic: (1) trust, transparency, accountability, disclosure; (2) governance; (3) ethics, rights, respect, and justice; (4) labor and fair operating practices; (5) environmental responsibility; (6) democratic citizenship, development, and community involvement; (7) social responsibility in teaching, support for learning, and research. These topics were derived from relevant documents on USR (Council of Europe, 2006; European Commission, 2011; ISO, n.d.; UNESCO, 1998, 2009). The participants were encouraged to choose one of the displayed topics, presenting their understanding about it and explaining the reason behind their choice.

Table 1. University Social Responsibility Focus Group Participants

Participants	Sex	Age	Type of HEI	Role	Background
Barbara	Female	52	Polytechnic	Dean of Business School	Economics
David	Male	57	University	Administrator of the Social Action Services	Administration and management
Victor	Male	45	University	Assistant professor	Management
Maria	Female	34	University	Member of a working group on USR	Psychology
Antonia	Female	62	Polytechnic	Administrator of the Social Action Services	Finance

The transition questions focused on the relevance and the importance of the seven topics to USR (e.g., "Is it possible to sort the topics according to their importance?") and the existence (or not) of any missing topic. The key questions regarded the impacts of USR in the self-improvement and self-evaluation of HEIs: "Would a definition of these issues help universities to improve their practices?" and "Would such a definition promote the self-evaluation of universities?" The final question asked the participants what they would do, if they were in charge, to increase USR.

The discussion was transcribed, and the names of the participants and institutions were anonymized. The data were analyzed and reported to the EU-USR partners. For the purpose of this article, we returned to the data collected by the Portuguese team. Using an inductive approach, we searched the data for the most relevant themes. We found three main tensions, which we will address below: the change produced by USR, the interinstitutional relationship, and accountability.

Results

In this section, we present the three main tensions that emerged from the data. The first concerns change and the underlying objectives of USR. Here we question whether USR is really concerned with transformation or is just rhetoric. The advantages of having a USR department in each institution are also discussed.

The second is the interinstitutional relationship, that is, the prevalence of cooperation or competition among institutions. On the one hand, we see the sharing of interesting practices, self-assessment, and improvement; on the other hand, we see competition, benchmarking, and reputation. The market value of USR and the contribution it can make to institutional reputation was also debated.

The third tension was the variability of accountability between respecting and exposing the person who receives certain social support. That social support should be a responsibility of the state and not of the HEIs was also addressed, since USR, according to the participants in our study, should not be confused with charity.

Change: From Real Change to Unreal Change

Throughout the discussion, the experts provided examples of USR practices implemented in their HEIs: "food collection campaign" (Maria); "our Arts Schools give performances for the community, the Health Technology School does disease screenings in the community, the Institute of Education go to kindergartens" (Antonia); "the students provide home support for the elderly. They pick up supplies for them" (Victor); "We do a lot for the community, but it's invisible work, in various schools, from working with elders to . . . because we have health school, we do hearing and vision tests" (Barbara); the schools of arts give concerts to the community every week (Victor and Antonia).

It is precisely in this regard that the first tension arises. If institutions had already adopted these socially responsible practices, even before talking about social responsibility, USR runs the risk of being mere rhetoric; as one participant noted, the institutions' goal then is just "to achieve one more certificate in social responsibility [laughs]" (Barbara).

According to Antonia and Barbara, USR is "fashionable," as it may remind people "about ethics, values, respect for others' difference" (Antonia), but adding, in fact, little or nothing to the previous actions of HEIs. Maria and Antonia agreed, in a different moment of the discussion, that USR is very often a "buzzword."

The excerpt below shows an important moment of the interaction among participants, as different perspectives are perceived in confrontation. Participants questioned the importance of having or not, in each HEI, a structure dedicated to USR, such as Maria's working group.

Addressing the skepticism toward the concept of USR, Maria highlighted the outcomes of her working group: a database of USR initiatives developed by the HEI's services and research units; the organization of a USR week; and the promotion of discussion and reflection about USR. After that, Barbara confessed her envy of the work performed by Maria's working group: "Well, after these provocations, I'm filled with envy, I confess" (Barbara).

> Antonia: Amongst us, Maria is the only one having a structure, al-

though a working group, focused on social responsibility.

Maria: Yes, a structure that is a working group, but that is requested by people who . . .

Antonia: But this is evidence. None of us has a structure like this. What I want to ask you [Maria] is this: . . . looking from the inside, what do you think? OK, am I doing something that is of great importance or . . . is it another working group?

Barbara: Let me just . . . We're on the same wavelength. What was the effect of the working group? For what? What has changed?

Maria: . . . The group was formed with a very clear objective, to respond to those questions of benchmarking, et cetera. On the working group's own initiative . . . we identified the best practices, . . . and with that it was expected that maybe our working group would end there, it was another working group. Initially. But we didn't stop.

Barbara: If it is another working group, it is just an extra working group.

Maria: Yes. We felt, when we started, that we should do something else, we should really promote a culture of University Social Responsibility and lead . . .

Barbara: That there wasn't . . .

Maria: There wasn't at all.

Barbara: There wasn't the culture, but people did things.

Maria: Things were done, yes.

Barbara: So, what's the difference? It's just to see . . . I apologize, but I . . . There are . . . it's like you said . . . much talk and very little is done. Sorry, but it's the experience I have . . .

Maria: We have created a database, at this moment it is available, you can even consult it, where the various initiatives of the institution in this subject are already synthesized, at the level of the various services and research units. It was one of the results, let's say. We also organized a social responsibility week, where we involved the whole institution in the discussion of this issue, after all, it is a lot also what is happening now.

Barbara: It's fashionable.

Maria: It is not fashion, no. No. We put the institution to reflect, to talk about it, to somehow become aware of the importance that this may have, but we are at a very early stage.

Barbara: I'm not provoking, I'm just . . . [crosstalk]

Maria: You have to start somewhere.

David: Of course, of course.

Maria added that her working group "tried to collect scattered information" on "the various USR practices that already existed, . . . which are almost the DNA of HEIs." To achieve it, the "theoretical model" and the USR "framework" were "fundamental." With a clear definition of each dimension, the services, the research units, and the different faculties could identify existing practices in each USR area. The working group surveyed the university staff for their perspectives on USR, and concluded that, despite having "a vague idea, they [couldn't] say whether what they do is University Social Responsibility or not." This response would suggest that a USR model and a clear definition of concepts are essential "to create some consistency and trying to add information on this subject." Maria's and Victor's perspectives seem to align with emphasizing clarity, as Victor also argued for the importance of a clear structure for USR which "implements, monitors, coordinates all the practices, and then the governance, in theory, will have that role, and in [the definition of] what is the mission of the institution."

However, the existence of "a formal structure to develop" (Maria) USR does not mean exemption from USR of staff, students, and stakeholders who are not part of the structure. According to Maria, USR should be embraced by each HEI as a whole, and not only by a single department. Instead, it should involve "the whole community," from services, such as the social action services, research units, and also student associations (Maria).

Interinstitutional Relationship: From Cooperation to Competition

In terms of the relationships between HEIs, the discussion suggested that the focus on USR has increasing "weight" in university discourse (Victor and Barbara), with both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, the transparency and sharing of "interesting practices" may foster cooperation among HEIs and serve as an inspiration for transforming them. Victor, for instance, stressed the importance of benchmarking, so that institutions can evaluate their own actions. On the other hand, USR allows not only for institutional self-evaluation but also comparison. When the institutions provide open access to their "materials," for example, this sharing of knowledge and experience is "free" only in appearance, as Victor highlighted. In fact, "they sell, and we buy it though unaware that we are doing it" (Victor). As pioneers, "they are always the leaders," the ones having the "original," while the others have only copies. This "has an impact" (Victor), since it adds "market value" (Victor and Maria) and increases the HEIs' "reputation" (Antonia). Moreover, this impact is inextricably related to distinctiveness: When all HEIs do the same thing or share a certain feature, it is no longer new, so the reason for advertising diminishes: "While there is no one else . . . When everyone has it, this is no longer a reason to advertise . . ." (Victor).

The following excerpt shows that the emergence of this tension is different from the previous one. This time, the tension is stated by Victor, the moderator intervenes in order to clarify the idea, and this idea is concretized by Victor, exemplified by Maria, and accepted by the other participants.

> Victor: We only self-evaluate if we are forced to, point one. Point two, if this creates a market value, that is, if socially . . . if society sees . . . that university is good because it does this, I self-assess myself.
>
> Antonia: Uh, huh.
>
> Victor: If society does not pay any attention to it, I will not waste time on it.
>
> Moderator: And this may have a market value, especially for what Antonia said a little while ago about . . . this difficulty of capturing students, right?
>
> Victor: Yes, of course, it can. Imagine for example the Principles [for Responsible Management Education] . . . when they appear there on the UN website, . . . this is visible internationally, this has an impact. Anyone seeking for it sees . . . in Portugal, the only university is that one [referring to Maria's university]. So if you want, in Portugal, you have to go to that one, and this has an impact.
>
> Maria: By the way, I just add the international accreditations of the schools of management, the accreditation of the AACSB [Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business], EQUIS. One of the evaluation criteria, at least for EQUIS, there is a standard that is precisely ethics, responsibility, and sustainability, so there is market value.
>
> Victor: It has a market value.
>
> Antonia: And reputation.

As mentioned above, it was clear throughout the debate that Maria's HEI was developing USR activity that was more visible. Despite the provocations, Barbara confessed her "envy," Antonia acknowledged Maria's HEI as the only one having a formal USR structure, and Victor said it was the one in Portugal that had signed the United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management Education. So, USR also appears as a guarantee of institutional reputation.

Accountability: From the Right to Privacy to the Excess of Transparency

According to the experts, USR "has everything to do with . . . trust, transparency, accountability, and disclosure, because a socially responsible university is a university whose processes are participatory and democratic, transparent, and where all have an opportunity to participate, to have their opinion" (Maria).

The experts referred to at least two processes that are essential to transparency: monitoring and dissemination. According to Victor and David, monitoring is indispensable. Without evaluation, and without considering the consequences of that evaluation to correct or improve what is necessary, they agreed that there is no USR. Dissemination, in turn, is important to give visibility to one's actions—and the importance of making practices visible was advocated by the participants.

This idea seemed to be beyond question, but soon tensions emerged and the experts defended not only transparency—that is, the statutory requirement to make public how the nonrefundable subsidies are spent, such as the name of the students receiving a scholarship—but also respect for the person and their right to privacy, a right that is not necessarily guaranteed by a "reserved" disclosure; for example, the person with the password may share the list of "beneficiaries." The excerpt below illuminates participants' experience of the contradiction.

> Victor: There is one thing I even question in the scholarships, interestingly. . . . It is a legal obligation, that is, we comply with the norm, but look it has to do . . . with respect. When I have to advertise who is the student who receives a scholarship, I condemn this, nobody has to know who gets the scholarship. . . .
>
> Antonia: It was required by the State.
>
> Victor: It's a legal responsibility.
>
> Antonia: But do you know why? Because there is a law that says that all non-refundable subsidies have to be . . .
>
> Victor: But I said it is a legal responsibility, I am not condemning this . . .
>
> David: Sorry. This order, . . . which came out in February, . . . it says that the publicity can only be done in a reserved place . . . which means that we put it on our site but only people with the password can see this type of information . . .
>
> Victor: Once I received a file with the student list, but I don't want to know who is receiving a scholarship . . .
>
> David: But I keep saying, not to be inconsistent with transparency and accountability . . .
>
> Antonia: Of course.
>
> David: . . . it doesn't shock me that those who benefit from public money are publicized.
>
> Antonia: Yeah, but then you clash . . . okay. You see, do you see that we get there? From practices . . .
>
> Moderator: But it's exactly these issues that are on the table. That's what you're talking about . . .
>
> David: Because it clashes with the issue of respect for the individual.
>
> Antonia: From transparency . . .
>
> David: And then the transparency.

However, Antonia and David agreed that emergency support to students facing financial difficulties is "a terrible practice," because, with that justification, "policymakers evade responsibility to support students in need since we are creating internally another parallel structure to help those who should be supported" by the state (Antonia). In their view, responsibility for the "need for support" should not be placed on disadvantaged students and their families either. To distinguish USR from "assistentialism," as "USR is not charity" (Maria and Antonia), Maria's working group did not include a single person from the social support services. Although none of the participants would restrict USR to social support, Victor and Antonia stressed that the frontiers between USR and social support are quite complex and difficult to realize.

Discussion

Fashionable or not, the movement for USR is gaining worldwide momentum, reinforced by international networks. We offer a few examples: the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi), created in 1999 and supported by UNESCO, the United Nations University (UNU), and the Catalan

Association of Public Universities (ACUP); the Talloires Network, created in 2005, with 417 members in 79 countries around the world, committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education; the University Social Responsibility Network, founded in 2015 by universities from China, the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States, Israel, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, and Korea (Shek & Hollister, 2017); and the Union of Latin American University Social Responsibility (Unión de Responsabilidad Social Universitaria Latinoamericana, URSULA), with almost 200 members from 15 countries. The Observatory of Social Responsibility and Higher Education Institutions (Observatório da Responsabilidade Social e Instituições de Ensino Superior, ORSIES), in Portugal, is an interesting case of a national network. It was founded in 2017 by 28 HEIs—which is significant participation, considering the dimension of the country and the number of HEIs—and very recently published a wide range of USR indicators (ORSIES, 2020).

Our data show that, despite its global use, this concept is polysemantic, in that it may mean one thing and its opposite. USR emerges as a field of tensions, instead of a politically neutral paradox. We have found three main tensions (see Table 2). Each tension spreads over a continuum, and the poles are contradictory, so it is impossible to increase or improve them both simultaneously. An increase of real change does not mean that everything remains the same; more competition implies less cooperation, and the excess of transparency threatens the right to privacy of the person receiving public funds. Thus the closer the institutions get to one pole, the more they move away from the other.

As regards change, the first tension, two contradictory perspectives arose in the discussion. On the one hand, participants felt that USR may lead to an appearance of change: an alteration of words and discourse, eventually at the service of what Brunsson (2006, pp. xiii–xiv) would term "organized hypocrisy," with talk and decisions compensating for actions pointing in a different direction. This appearance of change may occur given the fashionable nature of USR (which appears also as a result in a study conducted by Larrán et al., 2011), with importance given to gaining a certificate or an award or even the attempt to achieve the highest possible scores—while seeking to change as little as possible—in the existing social responsibility and/or sustainability indexes and rankings. However, USR may also be pointless if it merely serves to name the socially responsible actions that HEIs already carry out (it is really important, however, that HEIs recognize, in an integrated and critical way, their socially

Table 2. University Social Responsibility Tensions

	Transformative-critical pole	Conservative-managerialist pole
Change	Real change: USR promotes discussion, the collection of scattered information on existing socially responsible practices, and an integrated, coherent, and transversal (to the entire HEI) action (although there may be a USR department).	Unreal change: USR has little or no effect (even in the absence of an organizational culture of USR, HEIs adopt socially responsible practices); it's mere rhetoric; HEIs engage in USR to win a certificate; it's fashion.
Interinstitutional relationship	Cooperation: sharing of interesting practices fosters institutional cooperation, and works as inspiration for transformation; institutional self-evaluation and improvement.	Competition: "sharing" of materials (copyrights) reinforces competition, reputation, market value, and distinctiveness; evaluation is mainly aimed at comparing HEIs (rankings and benchmarking).
Accountability	The right to privacy: respect for the person receiving a public fund; USR is not "charity" nor just "social action."	The excess of transparency: control of public money expenditures, lack of responsibility of the state (New Public Management) and responsibility (blaming?) of HEIs, families and "beneficiary" students, monitoring and evaluation, dissemination.

responsible words and deeds, also seeking to identify inconsistencies, omissions, and overlaps). As stated by Menezes et al. (2018), this “pole is conservative as it allows HEIs to appear to change by leaving their core mission (teaching and research) untouched” (p. 1). On the other hand, USR may be transformative, involving “a deep transformation at all levels of the institutional endeavour” (p. 1), and produce real change. This transformative change occurs, as stressed by the group of experts, whenever one or more of the following conditions is true: (1) USR fosters not only the collection of scattered information on existing socially responsible practices, but also debate and reflection; (2) USR gives more consistency and intentionality to socially responsible actions; and (3) USR engages the entire HEI—despite the existence, or not, of a USR department.

The second tension is related to interinstitutional relationships and ranges from competition to cooperation. Sharing and evaluation, for example, show how different and contradictory USR can be. The group of experts highlighted two contrasting cases of sharing. First, competitive sharing—of copyrighted materials published under public and open access, for instance—reinforces the HEIs’ prestige, market value, reputation, and distinctiveness. Second, cooperative sharing implies not the attempt to gain an advantage, but reciprocity, the inspiration for transformation, and even the intention to reduce inequalities between institutions. As regards evaluation, the proliferation of USR frameworks throughout the world has sometimes been associated with the creation of tools to measure HEIs’ social responsibility and/or sustainability. Applying such tools encompasses two main risks: first, this assessment may enhance benchmarking and, therefore, increase competition among HEIs; second, this comparative (and competitive) measure may not acknowledge properly the situated quality of USR (Amorim et al., 2015; Menezes et al., 2018)—that is, the contextual, historical, and cultural aspects of the different HEIs. However, when aimed at cooperation, HEIs’ self-evaluation prevails, as the goal is the self-improvement of each institution in a particular context, and not a comparison with other institutions. From this point of view, the USR criteria identified by the different frameworks can help this self-reflection process.

The third tension exposes the risks of being overly transparent and having increased control over what is done. Increasing accountability has been associated with reducing state responsibility and increasing the responsibility of HEIs, families, and students receiving “support.” As we have shown, the duty to disclose the destination of public money can be in conflict with citizens’ data protection rights. The degree of complexity of this tension seems to us higher than the others, because of the need for a balance between the public nature of accountability and the nonexposure of socially disadvantaged people. Hence, this tension can be better understood as a matter of power. For Foucault (1975/1995), contrary to the traditional conception of power, according to which “power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested,” disciplinary power “is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (p. 187). Therefore, and because “visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 200), HEIs should be cautious in the process of becoming more transparent, since they must safeguard the right to privacy of the people who work or study in them.

However, as transparency and visibility of actions is seen as fundamental to USR, the idea that socially responsible HEIs must be accountable and transparent has been widely spread (Amorim et al., 2015; Arango et al., 2015; Baraibar & Luna, 2012). As advocated by Brunsson (2006), “We are responsible for an action if we are regarded as having caused it to happen. . . . So a . . . way of avoiding responsibility is to try to make the action less obvious or visible” (p. 117). Other authors would disagree, as research on the impact of psychological support processes has indicated “that the costs and benefits of visible support hinge on recipients’ needs, whereas invisible support shapes recipients’ long-term goal achievement” (Girme et al., 2013, p. 1441). Arendt’s concept of goodness is pertinent here:

> Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or a dutiful member of a church. Therefore: “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 74)

In fact, goodness is one of the roots of university extension—a concept strongly criticized by Paulo Freire (1992), who saw "extension" as "transmission, delivery, donation, messianism, mechanism, cultural invasion, manipulation, etc." (p. 22, authors' translation). He preferred, therefore, the concept of "communication" through which human beings become subjects in the process of transformation of reality, instead of objects—that is, receptacles of knowledge, support, or good intentions.

USR should not be confused with "charity"—as stated by the experts who participated in this research—or "altruism" and "benevolence" (Bacigalupo, 2008, p. 57), or even with "social assistance" (Vallaeys, 2008, p. 202). This distinction cannot (or should not) mean, however, that HEIs are exempt from concerns about the reduction of social inequalities, but only that USR is different from university extension. According to Vallaeys (2008, p. 219), the extension is always "pleasant" and "comfortable," because generosity toward others—or goodness—is a source of pride and not of questioning of the one who gives. On the contrary, USR always "hurts," because it implies a university's reflection about itself.

Another distinction between USR and university extension is that the former should not be considered a less important mission of the HEIs, as the latter frequently is (Vallaeys et al., 2020). For this reason, Vallaeys et al. firmly argued that USR should not be the responsibility of an autonomous department, but instead should be seen as a requirement that cuts across all university departments. This position of Vallaeys et al. offers an excellent example of the lack of consensus concerning USR, as the experts we heard expressed diametrically opposed views: a USR department can be very important to provoke debate and action, as well as an integrated and systemic perspective on the USR developed by a given HEI—although this dynamic should not be confined to that single department but should involve transversally this same HEI and all its policies and practices: research, teaching, third mission, and governance.

From our perspective, USR's raison d'être must be the transformation of what is socially unfair and the promotion of social justice, considering the specific context in which each HEI is situated (Amorim et al., 2015). To achieve this, universities have to first transform themselves (Cruz Ayuso & Sasia Santos, 2008; Vallaeys, 2008).

In conclusion, based on the theoretical contributions we have reviewed and the data we have collected and analyzed, we suggest that HEIs' approaches have been shaped by contradictory policy forces. Currently, one of the most significant—and not surprising, as it was foretold by Martin Trow (1973): "elite functions continue to be performed within mass institutions" (p. 19)—contradictions is related to the fulfillment of the social dimension of higher education, since its "main objective—that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of the populations—is far from being reached" (EECEA, Eurydice, 2020, p. 121).

On the one hand, we find the discourse on excellence and academic performance, translated into rankings, auditing processes, the pressure to publish and to attract funding, and the selection of students who are expected to have more success (Amorim, 2018). These are some examples of policies and practices that aim to reinforce "academic normativity," that is, "the norms of academic practice that include both locally negotiated practices and the performative demands of auditing and metrics that characterise the neoliberal university" (Warren, 2017, p. 127). On the other hand, there is concern with the social dimension of higher education, widening access and participation of underrepresented students, civic engagement, and concerns with the moral and ethical development of students.

Further research should explore these and other tensions underlying USR in order to better understand the concept and the impacts it may have, as well as to try to avoid letting it become a meaningless buzzword. Precisely because there is no consensus, it is important to better recognize the different USR conceptions present in the discourses and practices of different social actors, both academics (e.g., HEIs' strategic plans, higher education syllabus) and non-academics, in USR frameworks and indicators, as well as in research projects. Furthermore, the existence of a specific USR department is a fundamental aspect both for research (by carrying out case studies, for example, that take into account the context, allowing understanding of what is most appropriate in each case) and for practice.

We must recognize, nonetheless, that this research has clear limitations, especially because our data were collected from representatives of only five Portuguese HEIs. For that reason, what we offer here may be, at most, a national-based perspective on the subject. It is important to underline, however, that the data were collected and analyzed without any pretense of representativeness and transferability of the findings—not even on a national scale. Even so, it seems to us that, among others, these tensions likely occur, in their current or other forms, in other institutions and contexts. Whether people and HEIs recognize themselves in these tensions or not, the most important thing is that the identification of these and other contradictions can contribute to the debate and the critical reflection on USR.

Rather than ignoring the tensions with understandings of USR, and pretending they are paradoxically (and neutrally and consensually) fulfilling opposite aims such as market-oriented and social justice models, HEIs should face the contradiction, position themselves explicitly at a point on the continuum of each tension underlying USR, and clarify the balance (or imbalance) that they seek to achieve.

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