

## Chapter 2

# USR Network: A Platform to Promote University Social Responsibility

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**Abstract** Higher Education is facing rapid and enormous change, one of which is the corporatization of higher education. Given the market-driven nature of university education, a natural and reasonable concern is its social responsibility towards the community it serves, particularly when corporate social responsibility is the normative expectation of contemporary organizations by the general public. This is also an intrinsic mission of the university. This chapter aims to outline the importance of University Social Responsibility (USR) and the emergence of such an initiative entitled University Social Responsibility Network (USRN) initiated by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In particular, we pay close attention to the network development of the collective effort, in contrast to the endeavor of a single institution. The rationale, mission, organizational structure and strategy of USRN, as well as the strengths and challenges of this partnership approach, will also be discussed particularly drawing on the lessons learned from other similar and related initiatives. Ideas for the future development of the USRN are also discussed.

**Keywords** University social responsibility · The Hong Kong Polytechnic University · USR network · Civic engagement · Partnership approach

## 2.1 Background

The call for increased community engagement of the higher education sector has received attention for some time. A recent attempt, under the notion of University Social Responsibility (USR), has received much attention given the enormous

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This work is financially supported by the Global Youth Leadership Institute at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

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changing environment in the higher education setting. Especially the commercialization of higher education with the increasing trend of for-profit higher education has gained much notice (Morey 2004; Vasilescu et al. 2010). While universities are steering towards the market mechanism but still enjoying much autonomy and academic freedom, social responsibility becomes the normative expectation of nowadays organization (including university) by the general public (Vasilescu et al. 2010). On one hand, some traditional top tier universities still focus on the narrow perspective on knowledge (e.g., technical rationality) and enjoy the prestige gained from academic “ivory tower” (Hoyt and Hollister 2014). On the other hand, other newly established universities benefit from the “massification” and rapid expansion of higher education system, primarily emphasizing student enrolment and providing traditional curricula. No wonder some scholars will doubt if universities “miss what matters most” (Basken 2016, p. 3).

Apart from the reactive response to the accountability issue towards the society and relevant stakeholders, proactively speaking, USR could also play a significant role in the societal development. Herrera (2009) notes that educators have to be creative and use multidisciplinary strategies to ensure the sustainable development of people, while USR is one such approach because USR includes wide ranges of actions and processes, which help facilitate the greater alignment between the university and the societal need in an appropriate manner and with a strong sense of ethics. Herrera even argues that USR is seriously needed in the present, as the globalization and the over-reliance on the economic development have created many social ills, which the university could solve by utilizing their knowledge. “This approach is of great importance because globalization and the application of neo-liberal models of economic development have led to social crises to which universities must respond by providing innovative solutions to the complexity of the current problems at the national and regional levels (Herrera 2009, p. 40).” Therefore, while the traditional and more civic oriented mission of higher education is slowly giving way to the profit motive in the practice of some higher education providers, raising the profile of USR could not only restate the often ignored, if not lost, mission of the higher education, but also raise the spirit and aspiration of educators for the greater good of the society.

This chapter outlines the importance of USR and the emergence of an initiative, University Social Responsibility Network (USRN) initiated by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In particular, we pay close attention to the network development of the collective effort, in contrast to the endeavor of each institution (which will be presented throughout this volume). Besides the rationale, mission, organizational structure and strategy of USRN, the strengths and challenges of this partnership approach will also be discussed particularly drawing on the lesson learned from the other similar and related endeavor. Ideas for the future development of the USRN are also discussed.

## 2.2 Definition of USR

The social relevance of higher education has been discussed in the literature. De Ketele (2009) highlights that the importance of higher education is best expressed through the variety of “academic services” it offers for the society, while taking into consideration the needs of people and society. Herrera (2009) notices that the new notion of USR steps further to request educational policies, which could “encourage greater correspondence between the fundamental objectives of universities and the environment in which they operate” (p. 40). In practice, it is to promote the social usefulness of knowledge, as a result contributing to improving the quality of life. As Herrera notes, USR requires “a two-way perspective between universities and society, which involves directly multiplying the critical uses of knowledge in society and the economy” (p. 40).

Acknowledging that USR is a wide-ranging and evolving concept, which is open to interpretations, we propose, in its broad meaning, that university social responsibility could be understood as the responsibility shared by universities in contributing to social betterment through the integration of social responsibility policies into institutional management, teaching, research, services and public activities. Consistent with the view of Vasilescu et al. (2010), our underlying rationale for USR is that, as corporations, universities should have corporate social responsibility, which we call university social responsibility. Furthermore, USR can renew the traditional mission of universities to improve human quality of life and address societal needs (Glass and Fitzgerald 2010; Herrera 2009; Watson et al. 2011).

## 2.3 The Need to Set Up a USR Network

The idea of USR does not only deserve further examination but also have to be implemented to create changes in real life. As such, there is an increasing interest in creating platform or infrastructure to help promote USR in an individual institution or as a coalition. For example, Spiru Haret University (Vasilescu et al. 2010) and the chapters presented in the present volume are examples of individual efforts at the institutional level. Nevertheless, to bring the impact of the individual efforts to a higher level, network or alliance should also be formed to promote USR. For example, there are a few strong regional networks focusing on specific countries, such as (e.g., Ma'an Arab University Alliance for Civic Engagement and the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum, Engagement Australia) (Hoyt and Hollister 2014).

Internationally, University Social Responsibility Alliance (now renamed Global University Social Responsibility Network) was set up in San Francisco in 2008 to

advocate for the idea that social responsibility has to be incorporated into the fundamental basis of all university education. As such, the global citizen with sense of responsibility can be developed. The members of the network, mainly from the Asian Pacific, North America, and Western Europe, includes business-related parties, international organizations, and governmental sectors, all of which share the same objective to promote social responsibility in higher education (Global University Social Responsibility Network 2016).

A closely related initiative, mainly derived from universities, was the formation of Talloires Network in 2005, which targeted international coordination and exchange at the senior management level of higher education (Hollister et al. 2012). As the largest international network focused on the community engagement of higher education, Talloires Network composed of 367 higher education institutions in 77 countries combined with an enrollment of over 6 million students. Their primary goal is “for the exchange of ideas and understandings (of community engagement in higher education) and for fostering collective action” (Hollister et al. 2012, p. 83). Watson et al. (2011) also have a nice summary of the information about other active higher education networks that focus on civic engagement.

Another important organization, The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi), is an international network created in 1999 and supported by UNESCO, the United Nations University (UNU) and the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP), which hosts the organization’s secretariat and presidency. GUNi’s mission is to strengthen the role of higher education in society contributing to the renewal of the visions and policies of higher education across the world under a vision of public service, relevance, and social responsibility. The network is currently composed of 209 members from 78 countries, and includes the UNESCO Chairs in Higher Education, higher education institutions, research centers and networks related to innovation and the social commitment of higher education (Global University Network for Innovation 2016). The GUNi book series on the social commitment of universities “Higher Education in the World” is also an invaluable resource of USR, providing both global and regional analysis of higher education in the world and delicate discussion on the key issues and challenges facing higher education in the 21st century. These collective efforts are important as they could facilitate the deeper exchange of knowledge and practice, and also raise greater awareness of the issue.

While these networks or organizations are conducive to the USR movement, they vary in number, size of membership and capability. In addition, the experiences from the Northern part of the globe and the western societies are still dominating the discourse and practice. Furthermore, the idea of USR is ambiguous and interchangeable with community engagement/action or social innovation, which requires further clarification and refined understanding.

## 2.4 USRN: A Global Initiative

In view of the world facing huge economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges, USR has not only become a central topic of discussion in the higher education sector but also appears to be a potential pathway towards the solution (Herrera 2009; Vasilescu et al. 2010). Furthermore, the expansion of higher education system and the rapid expansion of online educational offering provide a rare but timely opportunity for the university to influence the public life (Hoyt and Hollister 2014). Thus, USR, focusing on the alignment between educational practice in the universities and the societal needs are enormously and timely needed.

It is in such a context the University Social Responsibility Network (USRN) was established in 2015 based on the belief that universities have an obligation to work together to address these challenges and find solutions so as to make the world more just, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable. As compared to the large network, the size of USRN was kept small in the beginning stage to create uniqueness and strength of the network. The USRN places emphasis on collaboration, coalition, and networking among members and with other networks and alliances. It recognizes the importance of advancing USR in networks of co-responsibility that link each other and link with key stakeholders and the wider society. It is hoped that the network endeavors, together with other initiatives, can push forward the emerging trend of higher education sector, taking seriously the community needs as their core business.

There are several missions of the USRN. First, it provides a platform for the exchange of ideas, resources, policies, practices, problems and solutions to foster USR among the Network members. Second, it develops collaborative USR projects with varied scope and scale among the Network members. Finally, it steers and contributes to the global discussions and development of USR through networking and partnership within the Network, and with other networks and alliances.

In the establishment stage, fourteen universities joined the network as the founding members. They are (in alphabetical order), Beijing Normal University (China), Clare Hall, University of Cambridge (U.K.), Kyoto University (Japan), Peking University (China), Sichuan University (China), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong, China), The University of Manchester (U.K.), Tufts University (U.S.), University of Haifa (Israel), University of New South Wales (Australia), University of Pretoria (South Africa), University of Sao Paulo (Brazil), Washington University in St. Louis (U.S.), Yonsei University (Korea). Selection criteria for membership cover track record in USR, geographical location, commitment to USRN and institutional reputation in a country/region.

The Network's decision-making body is the Executive Committee, with representation from each of the founding members of the Network. The Committee is

tasked with setting strategic direction and providing development plans for the Network. The Secretariat is set up at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Secretariat provides support to the work of the Committee and the Network, including creating and maintaining a website as the platform for collaboration and for members to exchange and disseminate information and views, and share best practices. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is initially responsible for soliciting the fund needed for the operation of the Secretariat.

To generate impact and become hallmarks of the network, USRN is strategic and focuses on a selected few collaborative initiatives. In the initial phase, it was agreed that collaborations surround four major areas. The first area is joint research and publications. Collaboration on USR-related research in disaster management, and culture and design is proposed while the sharing of research results concerning student learning outcomes in community engagement with in USRN are being facilitated. This joint research is valuable as it could facilitate cross-country comparison and mutual learning, hopefully with the beneficial results in student learning. Furthermore, research on USR index is under discussion, which can help to promote the adoption of USR as a core mission of all universities in future. In addition to the joint research, a joint publication is also under preparation, while this edited book is an example of collaboration which will document the USR practices and case studies. This joint publication has potential to develop into a book series.

Besides research and publications, student programs and scholarships are being established. To facilitate stronger student programs, student exchange are being actively pursued among USRN member institutions. Students of USRN are encouraged to join hands in initiating projects to promote inter-cultural understanding, youth leadership, and community service. Furthermore, student community engagement programs (such as summer volunteer opportunities) are being made available to students of other member universities, while scholarships are provided to enable students of member institutions to participate in USR related activities among the network universities. What is more, we will set up Faculty Exchange & Visiting Fellowship program through which staff can learn from the host country's USR experiences. Currently, annual staff development program has been firmly established with visit and workshop organized by a member institution. Finally, to further promote USR globally, a USRN website was developed to provide an open platform for member institutions to share their experiences, research results, resources, and programs/projects/events related to USR. Also, USR Summit is being held every two years to facilitate further discussion and mutual learning.

## 2.5 Uniqueness and Challenges of USRN

Compared to the other alliances or networks with similar nature, USR has both common and unique features. Similar to the Talloires Network, USRN also targets the senior management of the university and solicit for their support. The representatives of the USRN founding members are mainly the key persons who are not only in charge of the associated USR practice in the school but also may play a strategic role or are in a position to mobilize the university practice (such as vice-presidents or chair person in the university council). As Hollister et al. (2012) note, in their experience, getting the support from the university leaders is critical in institutionalizing engagement.

Furthermore, USRN is global in nature. While many existing networks are targeting a specific country or are primarily US based (Hollister et al. 2012; Watson et al. 2011), USRN include members from the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Brazil, South Africa, Israel, Korea, Japan, China and Hong Kong. It is also expecting that several more universities will join the Network soon. Global presence and representation are important because it not only raises public awareness and displays the unifying force, but also demonstrates the collective effort and shows the collaboration to be real and viable.

USRN is unique in several aspects. First, the founding members of USRN have quite a strong commitment and track record in USR practice when they joined the network (please refer to the detailed examples provided throughout this volume). Instead of just paying the lips service or taking advantage of the benefits offered by joining those networks (e.g., recognition or eligibility for associated Prize), as observed by Hollister et al. (2012) in their Talloires Network experience, the rich and various experiences shared among the USRN members work as a source of inspiration for more consolidated work. Second, despite the fact that at the current stage USRN has relatively few members, the dynamic and interaction between the USRN members are favorable, if not optimal. As the network members have agreed, the key at this stage is not to increase the number of members, but to generate impact, which could underpin further collaboration in the future. Thus, small is beautiful at this stage.

Third, USRN is strategic and realistic. Instead of doing some common global project, which failed finally in Talloires experience (Hollister et al. 2012), USRN is wise to focus on a few collaborations. As Roussos and Fawcett (2000) highlight in their study, that the outcome of a project matters a lot in the coalition process as it could further boost human and financial support. Nevertheless, as the essence of USR is closely related the community itself, which varies in its cultural, economic and political situation, the USR practice across the globe will not be uniform. Therefore, instead of standardizing the USR practice or working on some highly ambitious and grand projects, the diversity of USR practice create many opportunities for research and learning. USRN, surrounding their works on research and

student and faculty learning (i.e., the four area mentioned above), is making sense. Last but not least, the presence of China in the Network is worth noting. While the abovementioned network or other related higher education networks with a primary focus on civic engagement may involve South East Asia countries, the involvement of China is almost non-existent. As China is a country with rapidly expanding higher education, the lessons learned in this context will be valuable to the global community.

The use of network approach is with strengths and challenges, which we discuss below. Watson et al. (2011) highlight that global network could be an ideal platform for synergy and collective power. Hoyt and Hollister (2014) also argue that the power of network related to university civic engagement lies in the coalitions, which are “effective vehicles for the exchange of experience as well as capacity-building and collective voice in policy advocacy” (p. 132). For example, USR network could provide a “gateway to diverse experiences and knowledge that cut across cultural, political and economic boundaries.” (p. 228). This could nurture and facilitate innovation through sharing good practice and exchange of ideas. Hoyt and Hollister (2014) also highlight many innovative examples regarding the university engagement in the Global South from which the universities in western societies could learn (e.g., how to move forward the civic engagement initiatives with fewer resources or under the constraint by authoritarian regimes).

In terms of capacity building, the network could help build up local resources, such as broadening and encouraging partnerships with the local and regional funders. Furthermore, working collectively and as a unifying force, the network is more likely to influence the policy development, and thus enabling changes that would be difficult for a single institution to do alone. Therefore, we can say that the nowadays, network approach could be better-suited to handle and address complex issues facing society. This approach has already been commonly used in addressing community problems or health issues (Butterfoss et al. 1993; Roussos and Fawcett 2000; Wolff 2001a). We are also witnessing an increasing number of regional or global networks formed to promote the social responsibility and civic engagement of higher education (Hoyt and Hollister 2014).

Nevertheless, the network approach comes with challenges as well. First and foremost, financial sustainability is essential (Hoyt and Hollister 2014; Watson et al. 2011). While Watson et al. observe that the networks could receive funding from a variety of sources, including private foundations, government, investments by the initial host university, and international organizations, sustaining ongoing resources will be difficult. Second, Watson also raises the important role of the leadership and the associated challenge of inevitable change in the leadership in the network development process. Third, maintaining a shared vision is not easy. Watson noted that it is difficult to change the perceptions of faculty and community partners about the social role of the university. It is particularly apparent in the academic circle as the incentive structure for USR practice is minimum, if there are any. This may



pose a great challenge to keep the momentum for the socially responsible way of engaging the higher education in the society and as an engine for institutional change. Last but not least, relationship building among the network members, maintaining an effective platform for co-operation (in term of organizational structure and membership), technical assistance (e.g., administrative support and communication among members), and the broader environment (the societal readiness for USR) are all challenges facing various kinds of partnership and critical factors leading to the success of coalition (Butterfoss et al. 1993; Wolff 2001b).

## 2.6 The Way Forward

USRN is still in its spawning stage. As such, its mission and vision are to be realized and much more work needs to be done. There are several tasks ahead of us. First, the students' work could be further cultivated. Hollister et al. (2012) noticed that while they have done a good work to solicit support from the university leaders, not enough work had been done to build up a sustainable community of students. Thus, how to cultivate the next generation and translate the USR spirit from the senior level to students' level is critical. Good practices and experiences accumulated among the USRN members could be shared and would be a good start to develop further action. Besides, financial resources for USR initiatives are required, both in the institutional or network level had the ideal of USR be realized. Thus, helping line up or develop relationships with appropriate funders may be a potential pathway to success. Talloires Network had tried to raise the interest of several key funders, as a result providing critical financial support to some innovative local initiatives. Thus, documenting and publicizing the emerging impact of effective USR practices can help encourage the funders to understand how USR can be a promising investment opportunity (Hoyt and Hollister 2014) and may invite and expand new sources of funding.

Furthermore, systematic and rigorous evaluation of USR is enormously needed to demonstrate the impact of a higher level coordination at the policy level of higher education, despite the difficulty. The impact could be measured at multiple levels, including the student (e.g., students' civic awareness and engagement), faculty (e.g., staffs' engaged scholarship), institution (e.g., USR could become a key performance indicator in the University ranking game), and society (e.g., whether the USR practice of the university is related to the subjective well-being of people in the specific area). Last but not least, attention should also be paid to building an effective partnership. Though the success of USRN also depends on the broader environment (such as the community readiness for USR or government policy), facilitating an effective partnership and managing well all the nuts and bolts (e.g., having a clear vision and mission, supporting leadership, documentation and

ongoing feedback on progress, technical assistance and support, expansion of coalitions, as reflected in Butterfoss et al. 1993; Roussos and Fawcett 2000; Wolff 2001b) are certainly critical if we envision a larger and bigger change in the policy level. All in all, USR could be a timely response to the global society facing rapid change and challenge, but more collective work has to be done, collective voice has to be advocated and collective wisdom needs to be shared and learned through active partnership and exchange. This is what USRN aims to achieve.

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University Social Responsibility and Quality of Life

A Global Survey of Concepts and Experiences

Shek, D.T.L.; Hollister, R. (Eds.)

2017, XI, 283 p. 10 illus., 3 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-3876-1