A Review of University Social Responsibility and Its Role in University Brand Image In India

Rina Angel¹ and Dr. Amit Mittal²

¹(Associate Director, Administration, Chitkara University, Punjab, India)
²(Professor & Dean, DRC, Chitkara University, Punjab, India)

Abstract: Universities are not only socially responsible to educate the students and make them employment worthy; but also to inculcate the attitude of Social Responsibility amongst the students and staff. In a bid to create a USP, Universities could go the extra length to compete and improve their ranking in the List with an aim to attract maximum students. But along with making students employment worthy, can Universities find methods to inculcate the attitude of Social Responsibility (USR) amongst the students. Any Institution would incorporate a practice only if the same give the institution any gain in the long run. If USR can be inculcated in the youth of the country, and that too through HEIs, the country would also stand to gain. But what could encourage HEIs to go that extra length is what needs to be analysed. And if HEIs accept to inculcate USR, the gain could be for the staff, students as well as the companies that employ these students and hence the nation in the long run. This study is a review if in case USR is a criterion that employers would prefer in their student candidates, would Universities adopt and portray USR as part of their brand image?

Keywords: University, USR, Stakeholders, Brand Image.

I. INTRODUCTION

Role of Universities & the Importance of Ranking of Universities

University is a part of Society which aims to create new knowledge and inculcate the desire in people to do good for society, (Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern and Speece, 2014). Though desired by (Doghaim 1991) that Universities have three major roles to play, that of teaching, that of research and also that of serving the community, one may like to do a reality check if they take these roles seriously and if there is any agency to measure and ensure they do. As per the report on webometrics, in July 2015, there are about 23,729 Universities around the World. The number of Universities in India as declared by University Grants Commission (UGC) of India, on 16 Feb 2016 is 744. Further, State-wise list of fake Universities declared by UGC as on 15 March, 2016 showed that 23 Universities were declared fake, which makes it necessary for students to be aware of not being trapped in spending efforts and resources in a fake University and to choose the University that would suit best for their requirements. It is indeed an onerous task for the parents and students to decide the organization for higher education for the students.

What is it that attracts students and parents to choose a particular University? This decision depends not only on what the University has to offer but also on what the University can publicize that they offer. The ranking of Universities helps in comparison of the performance on various aspects and position of the Universities.

Prospective students should be able to recognize the brand image of universities during the decision process (Plungpongpan et al., 2014). With an aim to brighten up their image and to move up the ladder as regards ranking, Universities now, are more than willing to shell out millions of dollars (Azoury, Daou and Khoury, 2013). And in the race for outperforming its competitors in the national as well as international market, a situation has arisen where efforts are being made by Universities to stand out. This has led to Universities around the world trying to establish a unique definition of themselves so they are to be able to differentiate themselves in order to further attract students and academic staff (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007).

Considering the two words - differentiate and stand out, let’s have a look if branding enables products to standout or be differentiated. Branding has various definitions. “A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, that is intended to identify the goods and services of one business or group of businesses and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Bennett 1995). A university is no longer confined to being only an institution of higher learning, they could be treated at par with business organizations (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana,2007; Melewar & Akel, 2005). Hence we have an argument that Universities now are more like “business organizations”, and would like to have “unique definition”.
Corporate get their manpower from Universities. Now linking these, a point that one could ponder is - Do Universities give importance to inculcating and encouraging Social Responsibility among their staff and students? And if yes then how much?

**Construct of University Social Responsibility**

University Social Responsibility (in abbreviated form USR), as a practice originated in Chile in 2001, with the joint efforts of 13 universities with an initiative and aim to spread the concept and the practice among Chilean universities. USR can be explained as the ability to disseminate and bring in force a set of principles and values through four processes: Responsible campus, social knowledge management, professional and civic education, and social participation. Social responsibility in the field of higher education now includes, identifying the stakeholders, understanding their perceptions and expectations of satisfaction and quality of service, and establishing a relation with these groups. Universities hence have to face this new mission, vision, and design new institutional strategies of social responsibility, including social responsibility in all academic areas to be able to create a competitive advantage (Vasquez, Alequin and Vadi, 2014).

In the study made by (Vasquez et al.,2014) to analyze and evaluate internal social responsibility practices at University of Puerto Rico Rio piedras Campus. As brought out in University Social Responsibility: A social transformation of learning, teaching, research, and innovation, Social responsibility today has gained importance and recognition not only in the corporate world, but also in the academic setting.

**USR—Acceptance by Stakeholders (Internal & External)**

In a research by (Abrokwah, Mensah and Teye,, 2010), Attitude and perception of university students towards community service, 200 students from a University of Cape Coast, Ghana on random technique from almost all faculties were interviewed. It was observed that despite the fact that students are altruistic towards voluntary activities they do not usually join voluntary associations, as they have no long term gains, there is no force that drives them to participate in such deeds.

(Plungpongpan et al., 2014) examine the effects of USR on the brand image of the university. As brought out in University Social Responsibility and BrandImage of Private Universities in Bangkok, USR elements are mandated components of quality assurance in Thailand. Based on qualitative interviews it was found that university executives agreed that USR is a duty and that students are well aware of their USR activities; but parents were not very interested in the USR factor.

Study by (Waeraas & Solbakk., 2009) in Defining the Essence of a University: Lessons from Higher Education Branding argued that it is not sufficient that the brand and its concept is known and understood only by the top management; but it is essential that even the employees should “live the brand”.

The 12th Five Year Plan, as per United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), has recognised ‘Social Responsibility in Higher Education’ as one of the important pillars of the future directions in Higher Education in India and this cannot be cannot be taught just in a classroom. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of India is a statutory body set up by the Indian Union government under Ministry of Human Resource Development, and looks after the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education in India. Event Report of the Symposium on Mainstreaming University-Community Research Partnerships, held at Delhi in April 2015, brings out that UGC has recently launched a new scheme CFSRCE. CFSRCE is the short for Centre for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement. Launched in October 2014, its objective is to encourage community-university partnerships so as to be able to create knowledge and ideas in improving the society. But what is the driving force? How can UGC or UNESCO ensure that the Social Responsibility be driven into students, and that it be made a sustainable habit?

**Brand Image & USR**

(Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009) define that a university brand is “a manifestation of the institution’s features that distinguish it from others, reflects its capacity to satisfy students’ needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrolment decisions.” Hence it may be deemed that Brand Image can help create a perception in the mind of the customers, and that the stakeholders also need to be encouraged to appreciate and accept the features of the Brand Image, for the brand image to be successful.

The world over, the concept of USR seems to be growing. The reader UNIBILITY from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to University’s Social Responsibility (USR), (Dima & One., 2016) make an effort to analyse if the leading Universities of the world are involved with CSR. This paper elaborates on the issue by exploring the content displayed and being updated in the websites of the world Top 10 universities as well as by analyzing their annual reports. The findings of this research show that most of these universities declared their CSR/USR and were committed to the responsibility they have to the Society. But it was sadly noticed from the websites, that majority of top Indian Universities are not doing much about the same.

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HOW THIS STUDY CAN BE RELEVANT

Any HEI would inculcate the USR only if there is a gain. The recent incidence of Jawaharlal Nehru University, (JNU) a public Central University in New Delhi, India, brings to limelight the need of the hour to bring in a sense of Social Responsibility in our students. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an autonomous body funded by University Grants Commission of Government of India and is an organisation that assesses and accredits institutions of higher education in India. In 2012 NAAC awarded JNU a score of 3.91, which is the highest that has ever been awarded to a university in India. And in 2016 the same University was in news for Students’ conflicts and students raising anti-national slogans.

Justification of the Study

Figure 1 below reflects the three major roles of a University.

Universities try to attract maximum students for which they need to achieve good ranking. To achieve a good position in the Rank List, creating and maintaining good reputation is very crucial. And for the same having a Unique Selling Point (USP) / Point of difference (POD) is very essential. This USP /POD needs to be communicated to the Stakeholders through Brand Image, to be able to stand out.

Now let’s have a look at the relation of the two:

Figure 2

Figure 3
1. University aims to attract Maximum Students
2. The aim of Universities to create Better Citizens actually helps USR
3. The USP of a University could be USR.

Question 1: Would the Internal and External Stakeholders grant USR the required importance? Hence the importance given by Stakeholders to USR also has a huge role to play in the importance that the USR would be given.

Question 2: How can USR contribute to the Universities Brand Image?

As was seen in a case in Cape Coast, though many students desire to perform for social cause, the same does not bear any remuneration, and hence the students’ involvement may be very less (Plungpongpan et al., 2014). But that could also mean that in case the stakeholders (especially Recruiters and Government) could give importance to USR, the same would gain importance even for students. Further it is felt that if USR can be a criteria that improves a University’s ranking in India, the same may be enforced by the University authorities. Then Universities may strive to highlight the same in its brand image. The credibility of the brand has a very important role to play and hence if the University plans to place USR as part of its brand image they would put in efforts to ensure that the employees help enhance the brand as real examples.

What is not measured is not monitored

- If USR can be a criteria that improves a University’s ranking, it may be enforced by the HEIs.
- If Stakeholders (Recruiters) find USR important and if Stakeholders (UGC) insist on enforcing the same, to have trained and responsible employees, USR would be appreciated, introduced and practiced by the Management and Students (Internal Stakeholders). Credibility of Brand Image requires involvement of Employees to live the examples (Strandberg, 2009) thus improving the ethics of the staff and students (Internal Stakeholders).
- If the USR is important to Stakeholders – it may form part of the Brand Image. Universities would strive to highlight the same in its brand image and incorporate it into the organization.

Directions for Research

i) An analysis of the websites of the Top 10 Universities of the World and of India.
ii) An analysis of the importance given to USR by prospective Recruiters and by ranking agencies may help analyse the importance of USR.
iii) We can then analyse if USR can be a part of Brand Image.

Albert Einstein said,” Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school.”

What is taught and practiced in Educational Institutions should be able to shape the students into well-educated and socially responsible citizens.

REFERENCES