

University social responsibility and promotion of the quality of life

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Abstract

There are many issues confronting the contemporary world that adversely affect the quality of life of human beings, living creatures and the environment. With reference to these problems and the notion of “corporate social responsibility”, it is argued that universities have to develop the culture of “university social responsibility” (USR) to tackle these problems to promote the quality of life. In this chapter, it is argued that universities should engage in USR activities through teaching, research and services. Issues surrounding the role of USR in the promotion of the quality of life are discussed.

Keywords: University social responsibility (USR), USE Network, teaching, research, service, quality of life (QOL)

Introduction

The traditional image of a university is to generate advanced knowledge of complex nature. The term “higher” education clearly describes this point. Hence, the traditional image of a university is also an “ivory tower” where there is a wide abyss between “ordinary” people and “learned” intellectuals in the university. However, there are more people including academics arguing that the role of the university and academic pursuits is not just conducting intellectual exercises, such as asking the question of what “truth” is. The community is asking how academic knowledge can promote the quality of life for human beings, living organisms, communities, countries, regions, and the global world.

In the good old days when few people studied at universities, getting “good jobs” after graduation was not a problem. However, with more young people going to university and competition for jobs becoming more intense, some universities have changed to vocational training “factories” to equip students with

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vocational skills. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, over-emphasis on job preparation would necessarily constrain the mindset of students to form a narrow conception about the social responsibilities of university students. Besides, university students might become more egocentric focusing on tangible outcomes of university education. Hence, there are views arguing against such over-emphasis on the job preparation function of universities.

It is not uncommon to see that universities focus on the promotion of the quality of life as a vision and/or mission of universities. As shown in Table 1, many universities throughout the world attach great importance to the promotion of the quality of life as part of the duty of a university. While these are noble

statements, how can universities promote the quality of life of human beings, living creatures and the environment? In this chapter, we will discuss how universities can possibly promote the quality of life through teaching, research and service. We will also identify issues surrounding university's role in the promotion of the quality of life. According to Shek and Lee (1), the quality of life (QOL) is a multidimensional approach incorporating material well-being (e.g., income, living quality), physical well-being (e.g., health, fitness, personal safety), social well-being (e.g., personal relationships, community engagement), emotional well-being (e.g., mental health, life satisfaction, self-esteem), and productive well-being (e.g., competence, productivity).

Table 1. Promotion of quality of life focus in the vision and mission statements in different universities

University	Promotion of quality of life focus
1 California Institute of Technology	"To expand human knowledge and benefit society through research integrated with education." (http://www.caltech.edu/content/caltech-glance)
2 University of Oxford	"We seek to do this in ways which benefit society on a national and a global scale." (https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/strategic-plan?wssl=1)
3 University of Cambridge	"To contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence." (https://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/how-the-university-and-colleges-work/the-universitys-mission-and-core-values)
4 Massachusetts Institute of Technology	"To advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century." (http://web.mit.edu/facts/mission.html)
5 Harvard University	"To educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society." (https://college.harvard.edu/about/history)
6 Princeton University	"With a pervasive commitment to serve the nation and the world." (https://www.princeton.edu/main/about/mission/)
7 Yale University	"To improving the world today and for future generations." (http://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement)
8 University College London	"To transform how the world is understood, how knowledge is created and shared and the way that global problems are solved." (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-2034)
9 Columbia University	"To support research and teaching on global issues." (http://www.columbia.edu/content/mission-statement.html)
10 University of California, Los Angeles	"The creation, dissemination, preservation and application of knowledge for the betterment of our global society." (http://www.ucla.edu/about/mission-and-values)
11 University of Toronto	"With vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice." https://www.utoronto.ca/about-u-of-t/mission

University		Promotion of quality of life focus
12	Duke University	“To contribute in diverse ways to the local community, the state, the nation and the world” (https://trustees.duke.edu/governing-documents/mission-statement)
13	University of Edinburgh	“Make a significant, sustainable and socially responsible contribution to Scotland, the UK and the world, promoting health and economic and cultural wellbeing.” (http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/mission-governance/mission)
14	University of Melbourne	“Contributing to society in ways that enrich and transform lives.” (http://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1462065/11364-GROWING-ESTEEM-2015-FA-WEB.pdf)
15	University of British Columbia	“Supports outstanding research to serve the people of British Columbia, Canada and the world.” (http://strategicplan.ubc.ca/the-plan/vision-statement/)
16	The University of Tokyo	“Aims to expand the boundaries of human knowledge in partnership with society.” (http://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/about/mission.html)
17	The University of Hong Kong	“To attract and nurture outstanding scholars from around the world through excellence and innovation in teaching and learning, research and knowledge exchange, contributing to the advancement of society.” (http://www.hku.hk/about/vision.html)
18	Washington University in St Louis	“Strive to enhance the lives and livelihoods of students, the people of the greater St. Louis community, the country and the world.” (https://wustl.edu/about/mission-statement/)
19	Brown University	“To serve the community, the nation, and the world by discovering, communicating, and preserving knowledge.” (https://www.brown.edu/about/mission)
20	University of Sydney	“Leading to improve the world around us” (http://sydney.edu.au/about-us/vision-and-values.html)
21	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	“To contribute to the economic and social development of the nation as a leading University in China.” (http://www.ust.hk/about-hkust/hkust-at-a-glance/mission-vision/)
22	University of Southern California	“The development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit.” (https://about.usc.edu/files/2011/07/USCRole_and_Mission_Statement_1993.pdf)
23	University of Glasgow	“We should use our work to benefit and enhance Glasgow, the West of Scotland and the global community wherever possible.” (http://www.gla.ac.uk/about/strategy/visionandmission/values/)
24	Kyoto University	“To sustain and develop its historical commitment to academic freedom and to pursue harmonious coexistence within the human and ecological community on this planet.” (http://www.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/about/profile/ideals/mission.html)
25	University of Wisconsin-Madison	“Transmit the knowledge, wisdom and values that will help ensure the survival of this and future generations and improve the quality of life for all.”(http://www.wisc.edu/about/mission/)
26	Tsinghua University	“Dedicated to the well-being of Chinese society and to world development.” (http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/newthuen/newthuen_cnt/about-th/about-1.html)
27	University of Texas at Austin	“To transform lives for the benefit of society.” (http://www.utexas.edu/about/mission-and-values)
28	Boston University	“Committed to generating new knowledge to benefit society.” (http://www.bu.edu/info/about/mission-statement/)
29	University of Minnesota	“To engage our students, faculty, and staff in addressing society's most pressing issues.” (https://twin-cities.umn.edu/about-us)
30	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	“To learn and to apply, for the benefit of mankind” (http://www.polyu.edu.hk/web/en/about_polyu/motto_vision_mission/index.html)

Problems confronting the world

There are many problems confronting the world which adversely affect the quality of life for human beings, living creatures and the environment. Based on an extensive review of the literature (2-6), there are ten key global challenges which are faced by the human race. The first challenge is abrupt climate change. There is a growing body of evidence that human activity since the industrial revolution has significantly increased the production of greenhouse gasses (7) which has led to a warmer Earth. Extreme high temperature does not only kill people, it also adversely affects agriculture and infrastructure (8). The second global challenge is food security which occurs as a result of the rise in population size and catastrophic climate change. Searchinger et al. (9) pointed out that food production needs to be increased by 50-100% in order to meet the demand. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (10) of the United Nations, there are still 795 million people undernourished, although the prevalence rate of undernourishment has decreased globally from 18.6% in 1990-92 to 10.9% in 2014-16. The third global challenge is related to water and sanitation which are recognized as a basic human right by the United Nations General Assembly (11). Around 9% of the global population does not have access to an improved source of drinking water (12). Regarding sanitation, around 50% of people in rural areas lack improved sanitation facilities, while only 18% of people in urban areas lack them.

The fourth global challenge is population growth and aging. According to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (13), the global population reached 7.3 billion in mid-2015, and will reach 9 billion by 2043 and 10 billion by 2083. Obviously, population growth imposes high demands on the Earth's resources. In addition, because of low mortality and low fertility rate, the global share of older people aged 60 years or older has already increased from 9.2% in 1990 to 11.7% in 2013. The rate is expected to grow continuously and reached 21.2% by 2050 (14). This continuous growth of the general population and the aging population give tremendous pressure to the social and economic system. The high dependency ratio will create a huge

pressure on social security as well as health care demands.

The fifth global challenge is gender inequality. Despite the increased awareness of gender equality and the related effort to improve the status of women in recent decades, a huge gender gap in economic participation, political empowerment, health access and educational attainment still exist across the world (15). It is estimated that the gap in economic opportunity between women and men will only close until 2133, which will take 118 years to complete. Besides economic inequality between men and women, violence against women is a serious problem globally (16). Furthermore, according to United Nations Children's Fund (17), in 2050 more than 700 million females were still married as children and they were often vulnerable to early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The sixth global challenge is inequalities in economic growth. Despite the existence of poverty reduction (18), there is a rise in income inequality around the world. As shown in the report published by Credit Suisse (19), the richest 1% of people have accumulated more wealth than the rest of the people of the world altogether. The Oxfam also found that the inequality has been getting worse in the recent years (20). Obviously, the widening of income inequality leads to many serious economic and social problems (21). The seventh global issue is unemployment. Actually, since the financial tsunami in 2008, the world economy has not fully recovered. According to the International Labour Organization (22), the global employment outlook will decline in the next five years. In 2015, over 197 million people were unemployed around the world, 27 million more than the pre-crisis levels. In particular, unemployment is very serious among young people. In 2015, there were around 74 million young job seekers in the world. Finally, poor job quality remains as a global challenge. Workers in vulnerable employment have increased by more than 27 million since 2012 and reached 1.5 billion people worldwide.

The eighth global issue is new emerging diseases, such as H5N1 avian influenza. Since 2003, 584 confirmed cases of H5N1 avian influenza have led to 345 deaths (23). If H5N1 would transmit easily between humans, the estimated death toll of an H5N1 pandemic could reach 1.7 billion fatalities (2).

Recently, Ebola and Zika viruses have also created a great challenge for the world. The ninth global challenge is war and conflict. While emergent diseases are typically beyond human control, war and regional conflicts are largely man-made. According to the Global Peace Index (GPI) by the Institute for Economics and Peace (24), the world has become less peaceful since 2008, in 2015, there were only ten countries in the whole world which could be considered free from conflicts. Besides, terrorism has grown over the past years. The recent incidents in Western Europe have created much psychological trauma for people around the world. Finally, wars and regional conflicts have created the tenth global challenge – refugees. According to the United Nations (12), every day, 42,000 people are displaced and forced to seek protection due to conflicts (12). Among all the displaced people, 21.3 million people were recognized as refugees. As a result of the prolonged nature of conflicts, many of them have been exiled for decades and have little hope of returning home.

Promotion of the quality of life through teaching

Primarily, university education should focus on nurturing students who have a sense of social responsibility to promote the quality of life among human beings, living creatures and the environment. Nevertheless, there are growing criticisms about the mission of universities. Sax (25) commented that “higher education was not effectively meeting the challenge of nurturing students’ sense of civic responsibility.” Bringle and Hatcher (26) remarked that Boyer challenges higher education “to reconsider its mission to be that of educating students for a life as responsible citizens, rather than educating students solely for a career.” Similarly, Lewis (27) stated that “over the decades I have heard many academic discussions about teaching, about the curriculum, about grading, about athletics, and about responding to student misdeeds. I have almost never heard discussions among professors about making students better people.” Finally, Lewis (28) also maintained that universities “will not have fulfilled their public obligations simply by adding to the national stock of human capital, no matter how well they achieve that

goal. They must recognize a direct responsibility for the civic learning of their students, spread across the curriculum.”

How can we nurture a sense of social responsibility and the importance of promoting the quality of life in students? Basically, there are three ways of doing this. First, messages about the needs of people, living organisms and the world are directly taught in the formal curriculum. For example, students learn about global warming, inequality, vulnerable groups, conservation issues and even animal rights in their major study and general education exposure. Some subjects such as Service-Learning are vehicles to promote social responsibility and related awareness in students. Second, through co-curricular activities such as community service and conservation projects, students know more about the needs of people and the environment. Third, besides directly teaching students about social issues and indirectly exposing students to the needs of the world, universities should also nurture students’ moral values (e.g., not greedy) and a sense of care for other people.

Indeed, cultivating caring beliefs and moral values of students are very important. Crosby (29) asked, “What is the most important course in the university?” He argued that while economics, business, mathematics, computer sciences and English were important, the course about “each student’s own life” is the most important course. As he argued, “development of moral character in students is not an appendage, afterthought, or mere by-product of the process of liberal education, but something that lies at its very heart. Proper development of a student’s character can enable that student to see beyond education merely as certification and preparation for a job to the critical awareness of the importance and value of a life that is lived well in all of its dimensions, a life that continues throughout its course to develop and sustain a sense of purpose and fulfillment in oneself and the satisfaction of contributing responsibly and effectively to the well-being of others” (p. 1). However, focus on the moral character of the students is more a lip service than reality in the higher education sector.

In response to the comment of Chickering (30) that universities “have generally ignored outcomes related to moral and ethical development as well as other dimensions of personal development” and “have

failed to graduate citizens who can function at the levels of cognitive and moral, intellectual, and ethical development that our complex national and global problems require,” universities should reflect on how we can nurture students’ passion and compassion about people, and sensitivity about issues surrounding how university students and graduates can promote the quality of life.

Promotion of the quality of life through research

Besides teaching, generation of knowledge through research is another basic duty of universities. Fundamentally, universities generate knowledge which changes our conceptions of many issues, which eventually promote the quality of life of human beings, living creatures and the world. For example, through gender studies, we understand that women are oppressed in many parts of the world. Based on poverty studies, we understand that people tend to blame poor people for their laziness and ignore how exploitation and lack of opportunities may contribute to poverty. In addition, conservation studies tell us that resources on the planets will be depleted if the consumption culture continues. Finally, studies on animals change our views on animal rights and protection of animals. In short, university research generates new knowledge, which changes our views of many things, which would eventually promote the quality of life not just in human beings, but also living things as well as the environment.

Besides transforming our views about things, research in the university also generates practical solutions to human problems that promote the quality of life in people. For example, biomedical research is conducted to investigate the causes of diseases and has made tremendous contributions to generate new ways to improve human health and extend human lives (31, 32). Advances in biomedical research allow doctors to have a better understanding of the genetic basis of many diseases (33), such as how different combinations of mutated cancer genes could be identified (34). Research attempting to identify genes of new intellectual disability has also been conducted, which can help to identify developmental disorders as early as possible (35). Using genetic engineering

techniques, bacteria that produces human insulin could be made (36). Besides, using functional magnetic resonance imaging has decreased the risk for diseases in some heritable disorders (37).

In the areas of engineering and applied sciences (such as applied biology, civil engineering, information engineering), there are numerous examples on how related research can promote the quality of life. For example, the use of optical fiber communication has improved human communication and transport safety through the use of sensors (38, 39). The application of nanotechnology has produced better clothing and medical treatment procedures (40). Regarding renewable energy, engineering research has produced solar panels, the wind electricity generators and hydroelectric power generators (41). Engineering research can also lead to a better irrigation system and crop harvest technology. Finally, urban renewal research has helped policymakers to identify the needs of the community and provide pointers to the details of the renewal process.

In the field of education, research showed that education could promote economic growth in Africa (42) and reduce poverty in Uganda and Costa Rica (43, 44). Besides, education promotes emotional well-being by improving psychosocial competence such as resilience, self-efficacy and emotional competence. For instance, the Head Start Program in the United States demonstrated that participants had improved in the cognitive, health, and behavioral functioning (45). In Hong Kong, multiple evaluation results revealed that Project P.A.T.H.S. could enhance the well-being of adolescents by reducing risk-taking behavior and other negative outcomes (46).

Social science research also has substantial contributions to the quality of life in human beings. For example, social science research helps to understand the effectiveness of a specific program or policy. Social science research can give sound evidence for a positive psychology intervention to be judged viable (47). Graham (48) remarked that happiness studies can be an effective tool for tracking the quality of life, welfare, and other well-being measures. Furthermore, research findings can influence the policy-making of government as a useful reference. For example, the concepts of the quality of life are regarded as the backbone policies in

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the UN Millennium Development Goals. In ASEAN's (49) regional action plan on Healthy ASEAN Lifestyles, it establishes the quality of life in the key policies, such as the 'promotion of social participation', 'minimizing of discrimination', and 'enhancement of economic opportunities'. The plan further incorporated into the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint (50), which means that subjective quality of life has been increased.

Finally, research in humanities (such as history, literature, music) also promotes the quality of life in human beings. For example, some novels (e.g., *Man search for meaning* by Victor Frankl) have provided hope for people in distress. Some literature also helps us appreciate human potentials and strengths (e.g., *Chicken soup for the soul* series) are also empowering. Some musical pieces are composed to empower people or celebrate human achievement. People can also change through music therapy (51). Through historical research, we can learn the good practices from different cultures and countries, which would eventually promote the quality of life (52). Finally, arts also promote the quality of life (53).

Promotion of the quality of life through service

Obviously, one direct way to promote the quality of life of other people is to serve them. In many universities, there are community service projects serving the needy driven by volunteerism and support from the university administration. Besides students, employees and alumni are also involved. In this book, there are many outstanding projects undertaken by colleagues in different universities, such as those undertaken by the University of Manchester and University of New South Wales.

In fact, having service to promote the quality of life of others is just an outcome. What is more important is the serving mindset. First, similar to the notion of "corporate social responsibility" (CSR), academics should also emphasize the importance of "university social responsibility" (USR). In fact, academics must see that serving others and promotion of the quality of others as their duties. Without such a paradigm shift, it would be difficult to talk about

university social responsibility. Second, we must have a service culture which is treasured by members within the university community.

Issues for consideration

There are several issues we have to resolve when we propose that promotion of the quality of life is one of the core businesses of universities. Primarily, we have to reconsider the vision and mission of universities. Obviously, universities should not be "ivory towers" or "job training places". While searching for answers to very academic issues and training students to get better jobs are legitimate, university education without consideration of the needs of the living creatures and the environment is a serious missing.

The second issue is how we should incorporate concepts of USR and QOL in the formal curriculum. Obviously, these concepts are foreign to many teachers with a PhD degree where they conduct in-depth study in their disciplines without really making reference to the promotion of quality of life in people. Hence, there is a need to develop curriculum on how such elements can be incorporated into the formal curriculum, particularly in an indirect way. Innovative pedagogies should also be explored. Regarding intended learning outcomes, it is not just improvement in knowledge about social issues in the world but also the development of positive attitudes towards serving and readiness to promoting the quality of life through serving and contributing to the society.

The third issue is to research on the role of research in the promotion of the quality of life. While it is perfectly legitimate to conduct research for pure academic interests, it is equally important to conduct research that has applied relevance to the quality of life. When universities are driven by ranking, academics may produce work that has no direct relevance to ordinary people in reality. Hence, when we look at "impact factor", we should seriously look at "social impact factor" as well – how the research may promote the quality of life of other people, living creatures and the environment. Furthermore, while research leads to enhanced understanding of certain phenomena, we should also realize the "dark side" of research. For example, while the Internet promotes human communication, it also adversely affects work-

life balance. Similarly, the technological advance may lead to more comfortable life but such developments may also bring about pollution and conservation crises.

Finally, when we attempt to promote the quality of life through service, service culture is again another issue we should consider. For example, are colleagues aware of the significance of university social responsibility? Are related initiatives authentic attempts or just window-dressing in nature? Is such work incentivized? Do we have enough funding to support the related attempts? Are human resources processes linked to the related services? These are some of the critical issues that should be considered when we attempt to promote the quality of life through service related to USR.

Conclusion

As a corporation, the notion of “corporate social responsibility” is relevant to a university. However, as intellectuals who are usually regarded as the “social conscience” of the society, universities can be regarded as a special type of organizations which have “university social responsibility.” It is argued that universities can carry out university social responsibility through the promotion of the quality of life via teaching, research and service, although there are related issues that should be addressed.

Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions’ research ethics guidelines.

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