

# **Social Impact, Organizations and Society**

The Contemporary Role  
of Corporate Social Responsibility

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## **Areas of social impact of top-listed universities worldwide**

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# 11 Areas of social impact of top-listed universities worldwide

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## Introduction

Universities have historically played a key role in the development of societies, but their role has undergone some changes over the centuries. The core activities of European universities usually include two key missions: teaching and research. In recent years, a third mission has been added, namely activities that will facilitate the building and fostering of relationships with the local community and the business sector. The term “third mission” is not explicitly defined in the literature on the subject. In Europe and the United States, the “third mission” is usually understood as “all activities concerned with the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments” (Carrión et al., 2012). In Latin American countries, on the other hand, the concept of a “Triple Helix” model of university-industry-government relations is well-known and widespread (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1996). The third-mission activities of universities can be clarified through analogy with the following social roles (Betts & Lee, 2005; Rubens et al., 2017):

- Trainer – providing to the local economy an ample supply of skilled young graduates;
- Innovator – delivering and commercializing academic knowledge;
- Partner – providing technical know-how;
- Regional talent magnet – making the region more attractive by using the presence of a university to attract talented academics, entrepreneurs, and engineers;
- Facilitator – facilitating networking between the private and public sectors.

This list does not exhaust the possible social roles of the university but gives a rough idea of its potential involvement.

Interest in the concept of “university social responsibility” has been growing, especially over the past ten years (Jorge & Peña, 2017; Meseguer-Sánchez

et al., 2020). In the literature, there are four main areas of interest that comprise this concept (Chen & Vanclay, 2021). The first area concerns the fundamental purpose of universities (Boyer, 1996; Vasilescu et al., 2010). Another is studies related to the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the idea that CSR, human rights, and international ESG standards apply to all organizations, including public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit (Brdulak et al., 2020; Nejati et al., 2011; Vanclay & Hanna, 2019; United Nations, 2011). A third area relates to the concept of campus sustainability, eco-campuses, and green universities (Posner & Stuart, 2013). The final area involves studies related to the notion that universities should participate in and contribute to the communities in which they are located (Chile & Black, 2015; Mtawa et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2006).

When explaining the concept of “sustainability in higher education,” it should be made clear that the idea does not just involve integrating environmental issues into the university’s operations by, for example, having environmentally friendly facilities, campus greening, or teaching about sustainability (Lozano et al., 2013; Shriberg, 2002). Other important issues include a good relationship with local residents (Chen & Vanclay, 2020), ensuring human rights in supply chains (Vanclay & Hanna, 2019), and contributing to community development (Mbah, 2019) and community engagement (Chile & Black, 2015). Like many other organizations, universities are expected to meet various international standards and to contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Filho, 2020). Some researchers believe HEIs have a moral responsibility to support social missions in their communities (Maurrasse, 2001). To do this, universities need to build upon traditional knowledge production activities to deliver social impact education, engage diverse learners, and provide space for other members of society (including local organizations and community members) to come together to achieve shared goals for their place (Urquilla, 2016). Universities and their campuses influence the economy both indirectly and directly, through retail growth, providing skilled workers to the job market, and creating new communities of student housing and consumers in a specific place.

To summarize the discussion so far, it is important to note the evolution of the role of modern universities, which was initiated by the desire to incorporate the third mission, and which continues today with the application/implementation of the concept of social impact. The definition of social impact (referred to here as university social impact) was defined and presented in Chapter 1 of this monograph. Thus, the social impact of a university is

The consequences for human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society. The term also includes cultural impacts involving changes to the norms, values, and beliefs that guide and rationalize their cognition of themselves and their society.

(Guidelines and Principles For Social Impact Assessment, 1994)

The social impact that universities have or can have must be considered in terms of the outcomes that contribute to improving various aspects of a community's life but can also cause adverse repercussions. The assessment of social impact depends on the broader context, such as the demographic and health characteristics of the community, the degree of economic, legal, and institutional development, or the geographic features of the area inhabited by the community.

## **Materials and methods**

In order to answer the research questions, we used an exploratory approach. The study described in this chapter falls into the category of secondary, descriptive, and quantitative research. The analysis uses the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, which report on the performance of universities in meeting the United Nations' SDGs. The rankings are open to any university that completes a survey on each of the 17 SDGs and provides evidence of real commitment to the goals. For a particular university to be listed in the overall ranking, data must be provided for at least four goals, one of which must be Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). If this condition is not fulfilled, the university will not be included in the ranking, but its data will be displayed in the summary of university achievements for the specific goal.

The first report was compiled in 2019, but because the scope of the data provided was limited and it was therefore impossible to make comparisons with data from subsequent years, the 2019 data were not included in this study. Consequently, the subject of the secondary analysis is the data from 2020 to 2023. The analysis was based on the published reports for the four years, downloaded from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings>. The breakdowns and calculations in the following section (the average of the scoring results and the number of sets) were carried out using MS Excel spreadsheet tools (pivot table).

The chapter aims to introduce the key areas of universities' social impact out of the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings. We analyze the top 10 universities, starting from 2020. In the ranking, the universities' impact is assessed by its achievements in the Sustainable Development Goals. To reach the aim, we adopted detailed research questions: (1) Is there a leading university that has maintained a high position since it first appeared in the ranking? (2) In which countries are the top 10 universities located? (3) Which goals are least often indicated by the top 10 universities? (4) In which SDGs did the top 10 universities achieve the highest score?

## **Results**

The analysis of the figures in the reports revealed that the number of universities participating in the ranking, and thus the number of countries where the universities are based, is steadily rising. In 2020, 768 universities from 85 countries

took part in the ranking, while in 2021, there were 1,118 universities from 94 countries. Thus, there was a year-on-year (YOY) increase in both the number of universities (by more than 45%) and the number of countries covered by the ranking (a 10% increase). In the following year (2022), 1,406 universities (a 25% YOY increase) from 106 countries (a 12% YOY increase) entered the ranking; in 2023, there was a total of 1,705 universities (a 21% YOY increase) from 116 countries (a 9% YOY increase). Thus, we can note a steady upward trend in the number of universities joining the ranking and of the countries in which they are located during the study period.

In each of the four years covered by the survey, the top 10 applicants with the highest rate of achievement of the SDGs overall were qualified for the analysis. The only exception is the year 2023, in which 11 universities were qualified, as the final indicator for achieving the SDGs had the same value. In the end, 22 institutions based in 11 countries were analyzed (Table 11.1).

Considering whether a given university participated in successive editions of the ranking and how many goals it submitted for review, we can see that only

*Table 11.1* Institutions analyzed and the number of goals, 2020–2023

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of goals reported in the year</i>			
		<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Aalborg University	Denmark		17		17
Arizona State University (Tempe)	United States	17	17	17	17
Hokkaido University	Japan			12	
King Abdulaziz University	Saudi Arabia			17	
King's College London	United Kingdom	17			
La Trobe University	Australia	11	14		
Newcastle University	United Kingdom			17	
Queen's University	Canada		17	17	17
RMIT University	Australia	8	8		9
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Malaysia			17	17
University College Cork	Ireland		15		
University of Alberta	Canada				17
University of Auckland	New Zealand	15	17	17	
University of Bologna	Italy	10			
University of British Columbia	Canada	17			
University of Manchester	United Kingdom	17	17	17	17
University of Sydney	Australia	13	14		
University of Tasmania	Australia				17
University of Victoria	Canada				17
University of Wollongong	Australia		16		
Western Sydney University	Australia	17		17	17
Western University	Canada			17	17

*Source:* Own elaboration.

two universities participated in the ranking in each year under review and reported data for all 17 Sustainability Goals. These were Arizona State University (Tempe) and the University of Manchester. However, if we take into account the overall SDGs achievement index, which ranks universities according to the highest number of points earned (data shown on [www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings)), Western Sydney University most often ranked first (twice, in 2022 and 2023).

As for the second research question, the two countries that dominated the ranking were Australia and Canada. Between 2020 and 2023, there were six universities from Australia and five from Canada, which demonstrates that universities located in these countries attach great importance to achieving the SDGs and fulfilling the third mission. The UK came next with three universities; the other leading universities in the top 10 were from Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, and the USA (one each).

Answering the third research question on the Sustainability Goals that were least frequently reported by the participating universities and taking into account data from all four years considered for the study, we can say that the least frequently reported goal was no. 2, namely zero hunger (Table 11.2).

Table 11.2 shows the number of institutions that reported a specific sustainability goal for the ranking in a given year. By arranging the results in order from least to most frequently reported, we obtained a hierarchy of the frequency of reporting Sustainability Goals. Looking at the overall picture, based on data from 2020 to 2023, we can see that goals no. 1 (no poverty), no. 14 (life below water), and no. 7 (affordable and clean energy) were the least frequently reported by universities in the THE Impact Ranking.

The summary in Table 11.3 makes it possible to answer the fourth research question: In which SDGs did the top 10 universities achieve the highest score? The order of the goals in the table is based on the number of points obtained by each SDG, calculated as a simple arithmetic average (those goals that were not submitted by the institutions were eliminated, which reduced the divisor in calculating the given average accordingly). Number 1 in the first column on the left indicates the highest position in the hierarchy.

From 2000 to 2023, the highest ranked goals (except for no. 17) were, respectively, no. 11 (sustainable cities and communities), no. 15 (life on the land), and no. 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). Surprisingly, goal no. 4 (quality education) ranked lowest among all goals reported by the higher education institutions.

## **Discussion**

When looking at the activities of the world's leading universities, one gets the impression that enacting the third mission is becoming a key task for higher education institutions. This is because social impact is the cornerstone for carrying

*Table 11.2* Hierarchy of Sustainable Development Goals according to their implementation by the institutions

2020		2021		2022		2023		<i>Total number of times the goal was reported between 2020 and 2023</i>	
<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Number of universities reporting the goal</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Number of universities reporting the goal</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Number of universities reporting the goal</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Number of universities reporting the goal</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Number of universities reporting the goal</i>
6	7	2	7	5	9	9	10	<b>2</b>	<b>34</b>
14	7	5	8	10	9	1	10	<b>1</b>	<b>35</b>
7	7	7	8	8	9	2	10	<b>14</b>	<b>35</b>
2	7	14	8	4	9	3	10	<b>7</b>	<b>36</b>
13	7	1	8	1	9	4	10	9	37
9	8	9	9	9	10	14	10	16	37
12	8	10	9	12	10	16	10	15	37
1	8	4	9	7	10	15	10	4	37
16	8	3	9	13	10	10	11	5	37
15	8	13	9	3	10	13	11	13	37
4	9	16	9	14	10	7	11	6	38
3	9	15	9	11	10	11	11	3	38
5	9	12	10	15	10	8	11	10	39
10	10	8	10	6	10	6	11	12	39
11	10	11	10	16	10	5	11	8	40
8	10	6	10	2	10	12	11	11	41
17	10	17	10	17	10	17	11	17	41

*Source:* Own elaboration.

Table 11.3 Hierarchy of Sustainable Development Goals by average number of points scored in each goal, 2020–2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023	On average between 2020 and 2023
<i>Hierarchy of goals</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>	<i>Goal no.</i>
I	17	17	17	17	17
II	15	9	11	11	11
III	3	11	16	14	15
IV	16	16	1	15	16
V	11	15	12	12	12
VI	12	8	5	16	14
VII	5	12	15	6	3
VIII	14	1	3	3	1
IX	7	6	14	8	8
X	9	14	2	2	6
XI	1	3	6	5	5
XII	10	10	8	10	9
XIII	8	2	9	7	2
XIV	2	7	13	1	10
XV	6	5	10	13	7
XVI	4	4	7	9	13
XVII	13	13	4	4	4

Source: Own elaboration.

out research, educating students, and influencing the university community. Researchers incorporate elements related to SDGs into their studies, their lectures, and student assignments, and serving society is becoming a natural university activity. Many universities have introduced elements of SDGs into their missions, by promoting sustainable development, training responsible leaders, or developing green campuses. These activities are echoed in the rankings of the universities from different parts of the world that together want to change the environment in which they operate. The steadily growing number of universities in the THE Impact Ranking shows that meeting SDGs is gaining in importance. It is safe to assume that this trend will continue in the future, as the role of universities has long since moved beyond doing research and educating professionals.

The findings we presented in this chapter suggest that leading global universities are striving to achieve all or a significant number of SDGs. This is an ambitious task, but one that is difficult to accomplish because both universities and SDGs can be highly diverse. As a result, some goals are met to a significant degree, while others are met only at a basic level. It seems desirable, therefore, that individual universities should specialize in SDGs that can be fulfilled to a considerable degree. If individual universities choose the SDGs consciously when they are defining their missions and values, they will be able to carry out

these activities purposefully and increase social impact in selected aspects. Setting a limited number of only three or four goals may bring more benefits to the local area, as the restricted financial resources available to universities regardless of their location will then be used more efficiently. Universities will also be able to enter into collaboration with partners, especially NGOs, to jointly realize their mission and goals and to carry out prosocial activities. It should be reiterated that such activities prevent social exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, and other negative social phenomena. They will also help a given academic community to engage in and concentrate on collectively selected activities. It is crucial to involve students in the university's implementation of the SDGs, as development that is in line with the idea of social impact will contribute to promoting these values in everyday life, raise the students' level of satisfaction, and shape appropriate work standards in the future. Specialization, however, may entail new rankings based only on individual SDGs, as opposed to rankings of all goals combined.

An analysis of the THE Impact Ranking and the Top 10 survey has led to some surprising conclusions. The first one is the low position of goal no. 4 (quality education). Pursuing this very goal seems natural for higher education institutions, whose "first" mission is to educate future professionals to the highest standards. Another surprising fact is the low number of American universities featured in the ranking. The data in Table 11.1 shows that only one US university received a rating as a leader in achieving the SDGs (Arizona State University, Tempe). Social impact is one of the factors reviewed by bodies accrediting US universities (e.g., AACSB), so the absence of leading US universities from the ranking may be surprising and is likely to be corrected in future years. Although there were 50 American universities in the 2023 ranking, the vast majority of them (34 universities) were placed in the 200+ positions in the 2023 ranking. We must conclude that, at present, the universities from Australia and Canada are clearly leading the way for global universities in achieving the SDGs.

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