

THE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The paper is aimed to investigate the students' opinion about the social responsibility carried out by higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine. Nowadays social responsibility has become one of the key characteristics of modern HEIs. Ukrainian universities are trying to become 'civic universities', i.e., institutions which contribute to the development of the local community. The students, as key stakeholders of the university activities, also take part in this process.

Methods. To investigate the social responsibility of the Ukrainian HEIs, the case study method is used in the present paper: the case of Mariupol State University and its social functions within the city are highlighted. The online survey was applied to investigate the level of students' awareness of the university social functions and the role played by the university in the local community. Materials published by the university and the results of the survey have been analysed to test the hypothesis that students consider Mariupol State University to be a socially responsible university which cooperates with the local community.

Results. The students' opinion on the social functions carried out by Mariupol State University is that this local university has strong ties with the local community and authorities and perform its social mission. However, the social functions of the university, according to the students, are limited by teaching and research activities. Few students consider social responsibility of the university in a wider context.

Conclusion. On the example of the MSU the paper shows that modern universities in Ukraine perform social functions and try to become truly civic universities to contribute to the development of the local communities in cooperation with different stakeholders. Nevertheless, students as a key stakeholder of the university activities still consider social responsibility of the university primarily aimed at teaching and research.

Key words: higher education institutions, non-state actors, non-governmental organisations, civic university, social responsibility



INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates the social role of higher education and intends to highlight how the functions of higher education institutions (HEIs) have changed under the influence of societal transformation. In the context of a deep and sustained, nonlinear systemic change of the society, the universities and their role in producing knowledge as well as in their distribution has become a driver for the social-economic development of each nation. Therefore, modern universities which provide not only standard learning service but also carry out researches and share the results of these researches within the society are considered to be "centres where knowledge is generated, accumulated, disseminated and applied" (Towards Knowledge Societies, 2019).

What is central to the entire understanding of modern universities is the concept of a proper level of university freedom to meet the point that university teachers and researchers are free in choosing the subject of their educational and research activities and that they have some flexibility in considering the information they deliver during the lecture, arrangements with students and university management and other matters (Huber, 2016). However, because of societal transformation and the appearance of a knowledge society, the modern mission of the XXI university is to contribute to the public good and does not include only teaching and research.

The social responsibility which is carried out by the present-day HEIs has strong ties with the theory of the welfare state: the state supports higher education but the market economy provides a strong impetus for the universities to become its independent and powerful participants (Kwiek, 2003). Modern universities have changed their agenda enhancing their social mission especially on the local level: "HEIs become centres of community initiatives, drivers of social-economic development, problem-solving hubs capable to generate solutions to respond to societal challenges" (Orzhel & Tryma, 2020).

However, questions have been raised about the essence of the social responsibility carried out by HEIs and the role of other important social actors, such as non-governmental organisations. The description of the social functions of each type of organisation is presented in the international documents. The international standard, ISO 26000 on social responsibility, was adopted in 2010 to specify the key elements of social responsibility to describe the characteristics of profitable enterprises, non-governmental organisations and various other public actors. Accountability and transparency, ethical code of behaviour, respect for the stakeholders' interests as well as the principle of the rule of law, the principle of human rights and compliance with international standards are the key characteristics of social responsibility specified by ISO 26000. The document specifies main spheres in which the social responsibility can be carried out by organisation of any type. They are: social development and civic participation; human rights; employer-employee relationship; the natural environment; fair working arrangements; consumer rights (ISO 26000: 2010 social responsibility, 2020).

In accordance with the abovementioned characteristics, modern HEIs as organisations are close to the traditional understanding of social actors: they operate in the society, perform labour relations, follow human rights and orient to the needs of the consumers of educational services. Moreover, the universities take part in local initiatives and development which, especially for Ukrainian HEIs, is a principally new tendency. Thus, the phenomenon of 'university social responsibility' has been established.

In the opinion of Ukrainian academician Olena Orzhel, it is rational to divide all numerous definitions of the term 'university social responsibility' into two large groups. First, there is a strict definition of the university social responsibility which is considered to be the social functions performed by HEI within a local community where this HEI is situated. The comprehensive definition of university social responsibility must include a wider context: the responsibility for everything that takes place in the campus (Orzhel, 2017).

In the present paper the author defines 'university social responsibility' as social functions carried out by the university for its students and staff as well as to the local community in the place where the university is located. Such interpretation of the social responsibility of the university makes it necessary to apply one more term, i.e., 'civic university' which can be described as a "model to capture the mutually beneficial engagement between the community, region or wider world and the university" (Goddard & Kempton, 2016). A civic university is closer to the local community to "provide opportunities for the society of which it is part" including individual learners, businesses, public institutions (Goddard & Vallance, 2012). Knowledge that HEIs generate, accumulate and disseminate is seen "as a key factor in urban or regional development clusters and sectors" (Goddard & Vallance, 2012).

Under the societal changes the modern society agrees that HEIs have to use new ways and methods of work performing their social mission. Modern universities are turning from 'ivory towers' into the centres of initiatives and drivers for social-economic development: the university has to demonstrate its usefulness to the modern society, and cooperate with all beneficiaries of the services which the university provides them with (Kobylarek, 2017). Therefore, one could consider the following characteristics of a socially responsible university: cooperation with business and civil society, promotion of social innovations and multi-disciplinary researches, transparent and accountable activities to meet the expectation of the society.

The NGOs plays a crucial role in the realisation of the model of civic universities. Being public actors, whose social role is aimed at the rights and needs of their members or rights and needs of the society, non-governmental or public organisations are able to form strong cooperation with the government, business and universities to drive societal changes and to direct the further development of education and research (Curley, 2015).

Ukrainian society is being transformed: all social actors in the country face the challenges and risks of development under the conditions of a knowledge society. Therefore, Ukrainian universities cannot avoid the following inequality: there is a big disproportion in functioning and development of the universities located in the large cities and those on the periphery. The HEIs located in the big cities try to recruit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Ukraine traditionally this work is carried out within an admission campaign. In their turn, universities located on the periphery are expected to deliver better services to the local population, starting from good educational services given at the local level. Also, they have the potential to provide social innovation. In the Ukrainian society, it is possible to carry out such model of cooperation between HEIs and local communities using not only direct agreements between local authorities (which can be long and bureaucratic) but also using such a tool as a means of cooperation with NGOs. Ukrainian NGOs can articulate the social expectations of the community at the request of local authorities and engage local HEIs to respond to the needs of the local population through the fulfilment of projects for the local community and contracts for local authorities.

To investigate the social responsibilities of modern Ukrainian universities, the paper examines the case of the Mariupol State University, a Ukrainian university located in the East of Ukraine and its social role within the local community in cooperation with the local NGOs and local authorities (Mariupol State University, 2021). Nowadays this university consists of 5 faculties, and approximately 3200 students study there.

While investigating the case of the Mariupol State University, this research paper aims to examine how the students of the MSU understand the social role of the university and its cooperation with local community as an example of the social responsibility of Ukrainian universities.

The Mariupol State University was chosen as a research object for several reasons:

- This university is integrated into the local community, the social life of Mariupol and Donetsk region;
- The university has experience in the cooperation with local authorities and local NGOs, which is regarded to be a feature of “civic university”;
- This university has several Bachelor and Master programmes in the sphere of humanities, social sciences and public administration;
- MSU staff and students are engaged in many local civic initiatives, and some of them are members and participants of local NGOs.

Mariupol is one of the Ukrainian cities which was attacked from the territory of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” in January 2015 which gave a strong impetus to the development of civil activism in the city (Spot report by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 2015).

The local civil activists, especially after this event, have mobilised and established many active NGOs which meet the needs of the local population and local authorities in a wide range of areas, from ecology to school meals.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature review with further investigation the author intended to highlight how modern HEIs cooperate with NGOs to meet local community needs or wider societal demands. The research hypothesis was that cooperation between HEIs and NGOs makes both social actors capable to respond to serious societal challenges and provide a wider range of community services related to the real needs of the local community. The author is strongly convinced that it is possible to find good examples and practices and to show evidence that the local HEI and local NGOs can effectively cooperate and develop recommendations on how HEIs and NGOs could work together for the public benefit.

The research is based on the use of case study method and online-survey. The case study method was applied to research and describe students' opinion about the Mariupol State University as a civic university, and to present how it cooperates with local Mariupol NGOs as well as the students' participation in the social initiatives of the university.

To examine the students' understanding of the university role in local social life, the author conducted the online-survey "The role of your university in performing social functions" via Google Forms. The total number of the respondents equalled 80 students of different specialities. The survey was hold in November 2020. The age of the respondents was 17 to 21. The initial hypotesis was that students are aware of the social responsibility of the university and about the idea of a 'civic university' and the forms of university social responsibility and that they actively participate in its fulfilment.

The questionnaire included the following open-ended questions:

- age;
- course and Speciality;
- What social function does the modern university perform?
- What social initiatives does your university perform? Do you take part in them?
- Does your university cooperate with local NGOs?
- In what spheres is this cooperation carried out?
- Do you take part in activities of local NGOs? If yes, describe them.
- Have the social functions of your university changed during the pandemic?
- What social functions must be carried out by the modern university?

Low number of respondents can be justified based the following reasons. Firstly, the survey was conducted during the period of lockdown (part of the students went home and did not have the Internet access) and secondly, the author shared the link on the online-survey within 3 informal students' Telegram channels: Telegram channel of the students of MSU Faculty of History (116 subscribers), MSU Faculty of Philology and Mass Communications (267 subscribers), MSU Faculty of Foreign Languages Department (109 subscribers) to receive data given directly by students. The informal students' Telegram channel was used to receive unprejudiced students' answers without univer-

sity management support which could influence the number of respondents as well as the objectivity of answers given by the students.

The choice of the students of humanitarian specialities was determined, on the one hand, by their professional engagement to the social sphere and on the other hand, the students' experience in civic work through NGOs and university activities. Some respondents participated in international projects and had the experience of social responsibility carried out by the universities abroad.

In the course of the research, the author faced the following inadequacy: while informal students' channels in Telegram have 492 subscribers, only 80 students (20%) took part in the survey. Typically, the students who participated in the study were civic activists and took part in social life of the local community. According to the discussion and questions in the channels during the data collection the part of the students have never thought about the social responsibility of the university and have no idea about the concept of a 'civic university' and asked each other about this term; some of students lack a description of the forms of social responsibility of the university.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF MARIUPOL STATE UNIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

Mariupol State University is a relatively new Ukrainian HEI: it was established in 1991 and nowadays its structure consists of 5 faculties, with 3200 students. The university academic staff is more than 250 teachers grouped into 21 departments, which provide 40 Bachelor and 32 Master Programmes (Mariupol State University, 2021).

The analysis of the university statutory documents, institutional by-laws has not revealed reference to the status of civic university, social responsibility and engagement of the university into the local community and the like. According to the university website, the HEI has a rich cultural-social life and regularly holds cultural, social, educational activities for students and partly for potential students.

According to the information on the site and news on the university FB-account, the MSU is a partner to local self-government and a host of public fora, round tables, conferences of different level, etc. The university is the host of the event mainly because the city itself is the largest in the Donetsk region and the only regional centre capable to host big regional or national events, such as the national forum "Donbass Recovery and Development", All-Ukrainian Youth Forum, East-Ukrainian Forum "Recovery through Dialogue" etc.

The interviews with civil activists revealed that the MSU academicians are commissioned by local and regional authorities to provide advisory or consultative services and short educational programmes. For example, for the current officials, it is necessary to have a special language certificate in Ukrainian: the university suggests courses, and there is a certification centre where local officials can pass the language examination.

Some academicians take part in the programs held by local and regional TV stations, provide the materials to the local printed and electronic media to comment on the situation in the city and neighbourhood. For many reasons, the cooperation between local NGOs, separate activists as well as separate MSU academicians are not publicised in local newspapers, TV channels or university web-site, Facebook accounts etc. The situation has not changed since 2019, when a university department, specifically the Department of History, was under consideration: the evidence of academic staff cooperating with NGOs was found but this information was not publicised. Nevertheless, the data presented in Table 1 show that there is a tendency for cooperation between local NGOs, civic activists and academicians.

Table

Academic staff participating in local media in 2017, 2018, 2019

	2017	2018	2019
Invitation to local	11 scholars	11 scholars	13 scholars
TV and radio	20 broadcasts	27 broadcasts	32 broadcasts
Contribution to printed and electronic media	58 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews	46 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews	49 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews

Source: Orzhel & Tryma, 2020

The university is active not only at the local level; it performs functions of a specific social platform on which the international activities take place through the following organisations: local European Union Information Centre, "Window to America" Information and Resource Centre, the Baltic-Black Sea Regional Studies Centre, the Institute of Ukrainian-Greek Friendship and Hellenistic Studies, UNDP Centre for Research and Development, Italian and Polish Cultural Centres, but there is no information on the site if these organisations perform like independent legal entities.

The interviews revealed that the MSU as a cultural hub and academic centre of the community, is not freely available for small local civic initiatives due to excessive bureaucratic procedures. But MSU supports cultural initiatives of staff and students (e.g., National Culture Days celebrated by foreign and Ukrainian students).

The representatives of academic staff, as well as civic activists, confirm that the MSU is a formal education and cultural centre of the community. However, it is difficult to initiate joint projects in the spheres which would interest local NGOs because all city-level initiatives must be approved by local authorities and the university staff does not want to perform additional functions providing communicational process between NGO, university management and local authorities. Thus, MSU is a formal platform used to unite, educate and entertain the Mariupol community. The civic activists consider bureaucratic procedures to be usual things for the Ukrainian HEIs.

STUDENTS' OPINIONS REGARDING THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MARIUPOL STATE UNIVERSITY

The results obtained from the students' survey revealed that students are not aware of the social mission of the modern university. Another finding is that 72% of the interviewed students are strongly convinced that university must perform social responsibilities, but for them it was difficult to identify how the university can contribute to the public welfare. 23% of the interviewees consider that the social function of the university should include starting employment assistance programmes, establishing a special scholarship for local students in case of difficult circumstances, and investing in better accommodation. 18% of the respondents consider that modern HEIs must be engaged in the local community, for example, to create special training programmes and refresher courses for the local inhabitants, to participate in ecological programmes through the support of the public lectures and students' initiatives, to organise clubs and leisure centres for the city youth. 32% of respondents think that for the local universities it is crucial to carry out the researches which would take in consideration the specificity of the region, and which are also relevant and necessary for the local communities.

2% of interviewed students believe that the main social task of the Ukrainian universities is the studying process and providing knowledge, whereas university's contribution to the community development is wasting of the resources. Among the respondents there were 7% of those students who have established local non-governmental organisation or participated actively in the local and national activities of NGOs. These respondents noted that the modern Ukrainian universities are over-involved in providing researches but the academicians have no experience of practical work; therefore, their expertise can be useless to work in practice.

Data collection and analysis showed that the fourth-year students were more critical in comparison with the first-year students. According to the author, such inadequacy was caused by the fact that undergraduate students usually are more engaged in social life, that they participate in civic initiatives and have their first employment. Therefore, they are more socially involved and responsible.

This disproportion is explainable because there is a stable cooperation among the local authorities, university and NGOs civil organisations. When university staff and students demonstrate a high level of civic activism, the university management takes key decisions and sign official agreements with the local authorities and NGOs. However, in their responses students highlight that for them to form their initiative on the behalf of the university and contribute to local civic initiatives organisationally is more difficult and takes more time rather than becoming a volunteer of a local NGO or establishing their own NGO. According to the students, the university management prefers to cooperate only with their preferred NGOs.

The respondents answered that they did not participate in the social activities of their university (63%). 9% of respondents did not give the answer to this

question; only 14% respondents were able to name the social projects in which they take part regularly: charity fundraising, collecting clothes and toys for children from orphan houses, performances or concerts for charity, participation in eco-meetings and local clean-ups, mainly on the territory of the campus.

The survey also demonstrated that the respondents are not sure about the term “social responsibility” and what can be an example of it. Respondents describe the university social responsibility as activities aimed for charity and entertainment.

Some respondents (38%) noted that they have understood the new social functions gained by the university during the pandemic and regular lockdowns in the country. On the one hand, the university has gained a higher level of trust because of the quick and chaotic flow of information in the media. Therefore, 38% of students used to ask about the information and recommendations under the conditions of pandemic given in their university in the form of private meetings, e-sessions or workshops or chatting in messengers, etc.

According to the students’ answers, the social functions of the modern university which is socially responsible, include: establishing new knowledge and training critical thinking; training professionals; carrying out beneficial and innovative research; assisting talented in art and sport; carrying out the function of “agents of social mobility,” creating equal opportunities for all students regardless of gender, age or origin; contributing to the development of the local community through various activities, e.g., computer courses for older people; developing comfortable and modern infrastructure; providing social dialogue, especially as for giving trustful and reliable information on urgent social questions like a pandemic or new laws, etc.; performing the function of social arbitrators while managing controversial social questions (sexual orientation, historical events, etc.) for the Ukrainian society.

A mention should be made about the quality characteristics of the social functions specified by the students within the survey. The idea of social responsibility described by the students of the Mariupol State University is close to the hypothesis worked out by Erik Porfeli and Bora Lee. According to the researches, modern students include the social responsibility of the university parameters which are important for their professional socialisation and personal comfortability. Strictly speaking, the students who took part in the survey consider the location of the HEI, the conditions of accommodation, the developed infrastructure of the campus which includes sport gyms and outdoor grounds, libraries, cafes, university shops to be of greater importance than the engagement into the local social process. These conveniences are considered by the students to be the social responsibility of the university.

As for the social responsibility of the Mariupol State University, the students highlight the following activities of the HEI in this sphere: starting new research and sharing the results with the students; engaging students in research with the academic staff and publishing papers with the research advisors; training soft skills necessary for a potential employer; supporting the students in art, sport and culture.

Producing new knowledge and training critical thinking can be also regarded as social roles of the university according to the students. Most respondents agreed on this position – 83%. Nevertheless, considering social functions of the university caused by the pandemic and lockdowns, the functions of the university which can be regarded as its social responsibility, was expanded to the following positions:

- The university must perform not only theoretical research, it should update the topics of students works and graduation thesis and share the results of research work through public lectures or short courses for the local community;
- The university can start local enterprises where students can have practical training and get first employment;
- The HEIs have to establish their unique identity – symbols, anthem, motto;
- The universities can initiate and carry out innovations through the establishment of the local research programmes to meet the needs of the local community, e.g., to create special software, to experiment with waste utilisation, to create models of new urban forms, etc.;
- Some students who have taken part in the international projects or international internships admit that accountability and transparency are features of modern socially responsible university;
- Socially responsible university should regularly share its position on important issues for the community in local media to be in touch with local inhabitants.

The students specified these features and admitted that now MSU partly performs the functions essential for the social responsibility of the university. Nevertheless, students understand that the university is important for the development of the neighbourhood. The reasons why the university cannot realise its potential in the sphere of social responsibility is that the Ukrainian society is, in general, in a transitive mode. Therefore, for the HEIs as well as for the local authorities, the question of more effective cooperation is not on the agenda.

Summing up the results of the conducted survey among the students of the MSU, the following conclusion can be made: most respondents understand the idea of the social responsibility of university but they are sceptical about its practical realisation. The students were more confident in the teaching activities of the university and its initiatives connected with the development of the infrastructure of the HEI.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research shows that students of the MSU are sure that this HEI is performing its social mission and activities to influence the societal changes of the Ukrainian society in general, and of the local community in particular. Based on the public materials and the results of the online survey, it should be

noted that the university has strong community ties and a reputation as a civic university because, according to the students' answers, this HEI responds to the growing demand for expertise and knowledge services of the local authorities and local population. It was verified in the course of research that the situation in the city and in the region created a fruitful background for the social dimension of the university activities and students' participation in them.

In the present study, the students' awareness on the social responsibility of the university was testified. Nevertheless, the results of the survey demonstrate that, on the one hand, considering the MSU as a 'civic university' which performs a list of social functions, the students have no clear understanding of what is 'social responsibility of the university' and what is a 'civic university'. According to their answers social responsibility of the university is mainly aimed at providing educational service as a direct function of the HEIs: the university provides offline learning and distance learning, contributes to the enlargement and comfortability of university infrastructure and promotes the development of sport and art among the students. Thus, it can be concluded that students are not aware about the wider context of the university social responsibility.

According to the studied materials and online survey, some students, mainly engaged in local NGOs and civic activism, confirm that the university performs social functions, specifically: providing expertise and analytical reporting; organising local refresher courses for the local inhabitants and local officials; participating in cultural and sport events at the city level; contributing to the museum of history on the base of the university; giving its premises for regional, national, and international events. All these activities give benefits for both the HEI and its partners.

However, students are sceptical about the further development of the social responsibility of the university. The students think that the university does not promote the extension of its social initiatives, narrowing its effort to the basic functions of each university because this is not considered beneficial. Thus, according to the students' opinions, the impact of the MSU on social capital formation in the city is relatively low.

Much more important is the fact that students understand the potential of the university not only in teaching and research. Active and socially engaged MSU students are ready to provide various services to the local community, cooperate with media and NGOs. In other words, the students are aware of the growing social role of the universities but they think that MSU management is aimed at performing only basic responsibilities of the university: teaching and research.

The study of Mariupol State University and MSU students has shown that the HEI cooperates with other community actors. Nevertheless, the results of the survey have convinced that there is still a big obstacle while contributing to social capital development because the university is more concentrated on delivering teaching service rather than acting like a proactive and flexible social actor with a broader list of services. One more obstacle involves exces-

sive bureaucratic procedures for cooperation which makes it organisationally more complicated for students who are civic activists to initiate social activities within the university.

To overcome this gravity of isolationism, it is necessary to reconsider the contribution of HEIs in the societal development of the local community and the organisational forms of cooperation between academia, local authorities and local inhabitants which can make a win-win effect for each social actor.

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