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University Social Responsibility (USR) programs and the transformation of Taiwan's higher education: pathways to sustainability and local engagement

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1 Introduction

Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has witnessed a growing emphasis on higher education institutions (HEIs) as key agents of social development. In response to government-mandated University Social Responsibility (USR) policies, HEIs are now required to integrate social responsibility into their institutional missions and to demonstrate tangible outcomes, including contributions to local communities, sustainable development, and societal wellbeing. This paper examines how these mandated USR initiatives can be systematically assessed and operationalized, highlighting both the challenges of institutional transformation and the strategies through which HEIs can measure and enhance the impact of their socially responsible practices. In fact, universities occupy a vital position in society, functioning not only as centers for cultivating human talent and advancing academic research but also as catalysts for cultural enrichment. Taiwan currently has 149 universities, representing a diverse higher education system that encompasses public, private, and specialized institutions, each contributing to national development, social mobility, and the advancement of knowledge. Beyond these traditional roles, universities are increasingly expected to assume broader responsibilities toward society. In this context, the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) has emerged as a crucial dimension of higher education's engagement with societal needs. USR encourages universities to move beyond the conventional missions of teaching and research by actively promoting societal wellbeing, sustainable development, and solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges. It underscores the university's role as a socially accountable institution that embeds ethical, civic, and community-oriented responsibilities into its core operations, thereby fostering both societal progress and the holistic development of students (Center for University Social Responsibility, 2025; El-Kassar et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, 2025; Zou et al., 2025).

As universities seek to align their academic functions with public needs, a central challenge lies in how to translate knowledge and values into direct contributions that benefit local communities and promote sustainable development. In Taiwan, the Ministry of Education (MOE) initiated the USR Project in 2018 to encourage universities to actively participate in local development and become strategic partners in regional revitalization. The USR framework emphasizes three major dimensions—local engagement, talent cultivation, and international collaboration—while addressing a wide range of thematic issues. Through this initiative, universities are encouraged to leverage their professional expertise and creative capacity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, foster local identity, and contribute to both local sustainability and global connectivity. The first phase of the project (2018–2019) yielded preliminary achievements, followed by the second phase (2020–2022), which produced substantial outcomes in strengthening university–community partnerships. The third phase (2023–2024) further integrates the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into institutional governance, aiming to embed social responsibility as a core value of university operations. Grounded in a human-centered approach, universities are encouraged to identify and respond to local needs through the integration of humanistic concern and technological innovation, thereby addressing regional challenges and fulfilling their social commitments in a sustainable manner. To ensure coherent implementation and long-term impact, the MOE established the University Social Responsibility Promotion Center as a national platform to coordinate and support USR initiatives across institutions. The Center collaborates with universities and project teams to realize USR goals, strengthen their societal impact, and enhance the visibility of higher education's contribution to sustainable development. Ultimately, the USR initiative aspires to enable universities to act as agents of transformation—advancing environmental stewardship, social inclusion, and economic resilience within both local and global contexts (Center for University Social Responsibility, 2025; Feng, 2025). This article first examines the core principles and practical directions of University Social Responsibility (USR). It then discusses the rationale for why university students should have a comprehensive understanding of USR. Finally, it provides a more detailed elaboration on the core principles and practical applications of USR, highlighting key areas of transformation in Taiwan's higher education and exploring pathways toward sustainable development and enhanced local community engagement to achieve competitiveness in their higher educational markets (Makki and El-Kassar, 2021).

2 The core principles and directions of practice in USR

Education is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, providing individuals with knowledge, skills, and opportunities for personal growth and socioeconomic advancement. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in addressing global sustainability challenges by fostering transformative change in education, research, and societal engagement. Nevertheless, the integration of sustainability into higher education remains

fraught with difficulties, including institutional resistance, limited resources, and insufficient interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly in relation to the integration of diverse fields of knowledge. In response to these challenges, Taiwan's Ministry of Education launched the University Social Responsibility (USR) Program in 2017 as one of the major sub-initiatives under the Higher Education Sprout Project. The program seeks to support local revitalization and regional development, encourage faculty and student engagement in social care and sustainable action, establish a human-centered value framework grounded in collective wellbeing, and promote interdisciplinary collaboration and the socialization of knowledge. Together, these objectives shape the core principles and implementation directions of USR initiatives (Department of Technological and Vocational Education, Ministry of Education, 2025; Huang et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Shih et al., 2025). Specifically, the USR framework advances three major developmental directions. First, Local Engagement emphasizes the integration of local issues into institutional missions and the establishment of community-based partnerships—for example, initiatives related to rural revitalization, cultural preservation, and environmental governance—to deepen universities' regional social impact. Second, Talent Cultivation embeds social responsibility within curriculum design and learning pathways, enabling students to develop problem-solving capacities and civic engagement abilities through service-learning, action research, and place-based experiential learning. Third, Global Vision promotes international exchange and aligns institutional practices with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby fostering transnational collaboration and helping students understand the interconnections between global challenges and local actions (Department of Technological and Vocational Education, Ministry of Education, 2025).

3 Why university students should understand USR

University Social Responsibility (USR) is not only a driving force within Taiwanese society but also an important bridge connecting Taiwan to the international community, enabling the world to better recognize and understand Taiwan. University students, as future societal leaders, must cultivate a strong sense of civic responsibility. Understanding the principles of USR encourages students to shift their focus from individual achievement to the pursuit of the common good, aligning with the broader notion of civic engagement in higher education. Empirical studies have demonstrated that participation in socially responsible initiatives enhances students' civic awareness, strengthens their willingness to contribute to community development, and nurtures moral capacities such as empathy, compassion, and care for others (Astin et al., 2025; Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Lin and Shih, 2024; Shih et al., 2025). Moreover, USR emphasizes learning through action, providing students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges. This experiential learning approach not only enhances practical competencies but also promotes interdisciplinary integration while fostering critical thinking and collaborative

abilities (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Kolb, 2014). For instance, service-learning initiatives implemented under the USR framework have enabled students to engage in rural revitalization, environmental governance, and social innovation projects, thereby strengthening academic learning while simultaneously generating meaningful social impact (Shih et al., 2025).

4 Pathways to sustainability and local engagement

University Social Responsibility (USR) represents an important framework through which higher education institutions respond to societal expectations. Its development should encompass three key directions: establishing long-term partnerships, integrating social practice into curricula, and constructing knowledge co-creation platforms.

4.1 Establishing long-term partnerships (university–community partnership)

In practicing USR, universities should establish stable and enduring collaborations with local communities, deepening mutual understanding and trust through two-way interactions while jointly addressing local issues. The essence of long-term partnerships lies in reciprocity, shared resources, and mutual commitment, rather than unidirectional knowledge transfer or short-term service projects. For instance, many North American universities have implemented community engagement programs in collaboration with local non-profit organizations and government agencies to support sustained community development. These initiatives not only cultivate students' civic responsibility through active participation but also generate tangible benefits for communities (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Kezar and Rhoads, 2001). In Taiwan, Minghsin University of Science and Technology provides a representative example of a private, regionally embedded university that has proactively responded to the government-mandated USR policy. Rather than being randomly selected, this institution was chosen because it exemplifies how mid-sized Taiwanese universities integrate USR into teaching, research, and community practice. Through its USR projects, Minghsin University has incorporated locally relevant themes—such as regional history and culture, environmental sustainability, industrial collaboration and economic development, as well as health promotion and food safety—into its curriculum. Faculty and students engage deeply with local communities, identify regional characteristics, design problem-oriented proposals, and assist local industries in advancing sustainable development (Tsao, 2025). A further example can be seen in National Taiwan University's (NTU) response to the Ministry of Education's USR initiative through its long-term “Hand in Hand with Yunlin” project. Beyond general community engagement, NTU has strengthened partnerships with Yunlin by supporting agricultural and livestock industries, including organizing on-campus exhibitions and sales to promote local products. According to the university, the initiative will continue to advance through two primary directions—plant health and veterinary care—with

plans to establish a plant and animal diagnostic center and relocate related practicum activities to Yunlin. Over several years, the College of Bioresources and Agriculture has led these efforts, using “plant doctors” and “animal doctors” as focal strategies. Through localized learning, service, and care, these initiatives have enhanced agricultural capacity, strengthened community resilience, and created greater social and industrial value (Yang, 2023).

4.2 Curricular integration of USR

To integrate University Social Responsibility (USR) into the core of higher education, universities should institutionalize social practice activities within the curriculum, ensuring that USR is not merely an extracurricular or volunteer activity but an integral part of academic learning. Curricular USR typically includes service learning, action research, and local engagement projects, which combine theory and practice to enable students to transform academic knowledge into social action while developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and civic awareness (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Saltmarsh, 2005). For example, in the early childhood education program, students participate in English drama performances at rural preschools under faculty guidance. This approach not only applies language knowledge in educational practice but also fosters meaningful interaction with the community, cultivating students' humanistic care, social responsibility, and cross-cultural communication skills. This case illustrates the practical integration of USR into the curriculum: embedding social responsibility into learning objectives, providing authentic community engagement experiences, and balancing academic learning with social impact.

4.3 Constructing knowledge co-creation platforms

The deepening of USR also requires constructing knowledge co-creation platforms, allowing universities and various societal stakeholders to become mutual learners and collaboratively generate new knowledge (Etzkowitz, 2003). Such platforms not only facilitate knowledge flow and two-way learning but also respect local expertise and enhance the societal impact of academic research. In practice, some universities have formed interdisciplinary faculty-student teams in collaboration with community organizations and civil society groups to design and implement local innovation projects, such as intergenerational arts education or community sustainability initiatives. Through dialogue, joint planning, and implementation, these efforts realize knowledge co-creation between universities and society (Bason, 2010). In this model, universities are no longer unilateral knowledge providers but partners in community development and academic research, achieving educational, social, and cultural objectives simultaneously. For example, National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) has integrated local engagement with international learning in its University Social Responsibility (USR) initiatives,

and constructed knowledge co-creation platforms. The USR team visited Kochi and Tokushima prefectures in Japan to observe how local communities integrate engineering monitoring, community collaboration, and post-disaster reconstruction into comprehensive disaster management strategies. Insights gained from these Japanese mountain regions' responses to extreme rainfall events have provided valuable reference points for disaster management along the nearby Zengwen River in Taiwan. NCKU's USR project is not merely a disaster prevention or industrial development initiative; rather, it represents a deliberate effort to re-establish connections with the land. Under this initiative, the Zengwen River is no longer simply a blue line on a map—it has become a living river that records the resilience of local communities. As the project emphasizes, “Engineering is built brick by brick, but the future of a watershed must be shaped together with the local community” (Tsai, 2025).

In addition, the USR project team at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology has actively engaged with rural communities in areas such as Guanshan, Taitung, implementing technology-driven initiatives with a focus on urban–rural exchange. The project aims to establish a practical platform for two-way knowledge flow between urban and rural areas, realizing the vision of “from rural to urban, and from urban to rural.” Key objectives include strengthening rural communities' access to information, enhancing diverse professional competencies, and fostering connections to social dynamics. Through a combination of on-site engagement and remote collaboration, the team has built regular cooperative networks with local industries, government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs, introducing third-party resources to support activities while enhancing partners' mobility and cross-disciplinary integration capabilities. By leveraging diversified collaborations, the project has developed knowledge-sharing platforms to support rural development while simultaneously promoting social practice. Regular remote teaching, urban–rural mobility programs, and holiday camps have been implemented to advance digital education, assisting rural students in acquiring new knowledge and enabling the elderly to access health-related information. Through interpersonal networks, the project identifies talented children and disadvantaged groups, providing customized mentorship programs to address the needs of diverse populations. Moreover, through spatial planning, community transformation projects, and thematic exhibitions, the initiative strengthens local residents' diverse professional competencies and social engagement. Collaborative partners include schools at various levels, cultural and social welfare organizations, artisans, and industry associations, collectively contributing to the sustainable development and resilience of rural communities (National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Office for Social Practice Promotion, 2022).

In sum, University Social Responsibility (USR) represents a critical framework through which higher education institutions respond to societal expectations and contribute to social transformation. In this paper, three key dimensions are proposed to characterize such transformation and to provide evidence of meaningful USR engagement: (1) establishing long-term university–community partnerships, (2) integrating USR into

the curriculum, and (3) constructing platforms for knowledge co-creation. Each of these dimensions highlights how universities can move beyond symbolic participation toward sustained social commitment and structural change.

5 Conclusion

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a widely accepted framework for promoting sustainable development. SDG4 goal 4.7 pursues the “sustainability” of education to promote sustainable development for country. Higher education is crucial to sustainable development for country. The implementation of higher education affects a country's development and success, and the success and sustainability of organizations, particularly universities, rely on various factors, with one of the most significant being student identification with the institution. This identification has a profound influence on a university's long-term viability. When students hold favorable opinions of a university, it tends to increase the institution's desirability and demand among prospective students. Recently, social responsibility has emerged as an effective marketing tool for universities (Sánchez-Carracedo et al., 2021; Wang and Shih, 2022, 2023; Yakut et al., 2025).

In sum, university social responsibility (USR) is important for universities, and is initiatives as an excellent tool to attain sustainability and enhance university performance worldwide (El-Kassar et al., 2023; Huang and Do, 2021). The three strategic dimensions of long-term university–community partnerships, curriculum-integrated social engagement, and knowledge co-creation form a coherent framework for advancing University Social Responsibility (USR). When these elements are systematically institutionalized, USR can evolve from isolated activities into a sustained structural commitment that reshapes the university's core missions. Furthermore, through such a holistic framework, USR enables universities to integrate talent cultivation, community engagement, and knowledge production in ways that produce long-term social impact. Beyond domestic contributions, USR in Taiwan also plays a crucial role in enhancing global visibility by demonstrating the country's commitment to social innovation, sustainability, and cultural diversity (Center for University Social Responsibility, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2025). As USR continues to mature, its effectiveness will depend on universities' capacity to cultivate reciprocal partnerships, design socially responsive curricula, and foster collaborative knowledge production that contributes to more just and sustainable futures.

In this paper, four Taiwanese universities—National Taiwan University, National Cheng Kung University, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, and Minghsin University of Science and Technology—are presented as representative exemplar cases. These institutions include national, private, and regionally embedded universities that have actively responded to government-mandated University Social Responsibility (USR) policies, implementing concrete local development and community engagement initiatives. Despite policy mandates,

HEIs face common challenges in operationalizing USR, including navigating administrative systems, evaluation mechanisms, resource allocation, and measuring the impact of transformative initiatives. The critical question remains: how can mandated USR actions be translated into meaningful societal impact? By situating these institutional examples within the broader discussion, this study explores how USR can be effectively enacted at the intersection of policy and practice. The cases provide insights into strategies for co-creating knowledge with societal partners and offer lessons that may guide other HEIs in enhancing the implementation and effectiveness of social responsibility initiatives (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Shih et al., 2025).

Author contributions

R-JW: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. C-MH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft. W-WC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Y-HS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JL: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing. PP: Conceptualization, Software, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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