

## Basic Research of the Perception of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Academic Environment

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### ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has traditionally been associated with the private sector, focusing on ethical business practices, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. Despite its growing importance, CSR in academia remains underexplored, lacking comprehensive methodologies for measuring and evaluating its impact. This research investigates the perception and implementation of CSR in the academic environment, aiming to propose a framework model for its strategic integration into universities. The research incorporates quantitative data from questionnaire surveys conducted at selected European universities and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with university management, faculty, and administrative staff. The findings indicate that while awareness of CSR is relatively high, there is a significant gap between knowledge and implementation. A four-step CSR implementation model is proposed to address these challenges, emphasising strategic management, financial sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation. Future research should focus on developing standardised CSR metrics and assessing the long-term effects of CSR in academia.

### Keywords:

Corporate Social Responsibility; academic institutions; sustainability; social inclusion; ethical governance; higher education.

### INTRODUCTION

In the modern social context, academic institutions have a research and educational function and a responsibility towards the society that surrounds them. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was originally formed in the private sector and focused on ethical business, environmental sustainability and community support. However, this concept has also spread to public and academic institutions in recent decades, where it has acquired unique specificities and significance.

In the academic environment, CSR can include various dimensions, including research ethics, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and student support. These areas represent key aspects that define the scope and quality of academic social responsibility. Despite the growing importance of this topic, research on CSR in the academic context is still relatively limited, and a comprehensive methodology for its measurement and evaluation is lacking.

Research ethics is one of the pillars of academic responsibility, as academic institutions are key actors in shaping scientific knowledge and innovation processes. Ensuring transparency, objectivity and integrity of research is essential to maintaining the credibility of academia and its performance. In this context, CSR manifests itself, for example, in the form of policies on academic honesty, protection of intellectual property and promotion of open science.

Environmental sustainability is another essential dimension of CSR in academia, as universities and research centres are critical consumers of resources and producers of waste. Implementing green measures such as reducing the carbon footprint, energy efficiency, recycling and promoting sustainable transport solutions can significantly impact the overall ecological footprint of academic institutions.

Social inclusion in academia involves promoting diversity, equality and justice. Universities should ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their social, economic or ethnic background. Initiatives to support students with special needs, disadvantaged groups, or women in science are among the concrete measures that can strengthen academic accountability.

Supporting students is essential not only for their academic development but also for their overall well-being. Universities are responsible for creating conditions in which students feel safe, motivated and supported. This includes the availability of psychological services, financial scholarships, career development programmes and mentoring.

### **Literature Review**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept that has gradually developed as an important area of research and practice within academia. The meaning of CSR in academic institutions is not limited to ethical business or philanthropy but encompasses a series of initiatives that promote the sustainable development of society (Carroll, 1999). In the academic context, this concept is extended to include the involvement of students, teachers and university staff in activities that positively impact society and the environment (Matten & Moon, 2008).

#### **1. Definition and development of the concept of CSR**

CSR has historically developed as a response to the responsibility of businesses towards society and the environment (Dahlsrud, 2008). In academia, this concept takes on a broader dimension, where universities are dedicated to research and education and actively involved in social and ecological initiatives (UNESCO, 2017).

According to Schwartz and Carroll (2003), CSR is divided into three main dimensions: economic, ethical and philanthropic. These dimensions are applied in the academic environment through policies and practices that promote transparency, social justice and environmental protection (Freeman, 2010).

#### **2. Models of CSR in the academic environment**

There are several models of CSR implementation in the academic environment. According to Bondy, Moon and Matten (2012), the CSR model must reflect the needs and values of the university. Some research works emphasise the need for a participatory approach in which students, teachers and administrative staff play an essential role (Kolk, 2016).

One model is the so-called stakeholder approach, which assumes the university should involve all stakeholders in decision-making processes (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). This model supports interaction between the university, students, businesses and local communities to create a sustainable learning environment (Ubresiova, Sokil & Lancaric, 2022).

#### **3. The role of students in implementing CSR**

Students play a key role in university CSR (Licandro et al., 2005). According to Astin and Sax (1998), students who are actively involved in volunteer and community projects show greater commitment to social issues after graduation. Therefore, CSR initiatives at universities should include opportunities for students to volunteer, engage in local communities, and support startups with sustainable impact (Chambers & Kymlicka, 2017).

#### **4. Pedagogical approach and CSR**

The integration of CSR into teaching is another crucial aspect. Several studies highlight that teaching CSR in an academic setting improves students' ethical decision-making and ability to identify social and environmental issues in practice (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

CSR can be implemented into the curriculum through project-based learning (Ásványi, Matolay & Frigyi, 2025), where students solve real-world societal problems, or through collaboration with organisations committed to social responsibility (Godfrey, Merrill & Hansen, 2009).

#### **5. Impact of CSR on academic institutions**

CSR in academia brings many benefits, including improving the reputation of universities, increasing student spending, and creating sustainable partnerships with businesses and non-profit organisations (Elliott, 2013). Research shows that universities actively engaged in CSR initiatives have a higher degree of international cooperation, and sustainability considerations are more integrated into their strategic management (De la Cruz, 2020).

CSR in academia thus represents an essential tool for improving the quality of education and supporting sustainable development in society. Future research agenda should focus on measuring the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in the academic sector and on a deeper understanding of how individual stakeholders in academia perceive and evaluate CSR practices.

### **METHOD**

A combined methodology, including quantitative and qualitative research methods, was applied to achieve the paper's main aim, which is to propose a framework model for creating and implementing a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy in the academic environment. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue of CSR in the academic sphere while providing a broad-spectrum analysis of the phenomenon under research (Bryman, 2016).

#### **1. Sample selection**

The research was carried out at selected European universities to obtain representative data on the perception of CSR in the academic environment. The sample selection was based on the criteria of geographical distribution, size of universities and their involvement in CSR activities. Ten universities were involved in the research, considering the selection diversification concerning different academic cultures and structures (Saunders et al., 2019).

#### **2. Quantitative method: questionnaire survey**

The quantitative part of the research was conducted through a standardised questionnaire survey distributed among academic staff, students, and university administrative staff. The questionnaire contained both closed and open questions, focusing on areas such as:

- a. awareness of the university's CSR activities,
- b. level of involvement of individual stakeholders in CSR,
- c. perceived benefits and barriers to CSR implementation.

The questionnaire was inspired by previous studies in the field of CSR in an academic environment (Carroll & Shabana, 2010) and validated by preliminary pilot

testing on a small sample of respondents (n=30). After data collection, the responses were analysed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics and factor analysis (Hair et al., 2020).

### **3. Qualitative method: in-depth interviews**

For a deeper analysis of the perception and implementation of CSR in the academic environment, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with university management representatives, CSR coordinators and selected academic staff. The interviews enabled the following:

- a. to identify key motivational factors for CSR implementation,
- b. to analyse challenges and obstacles in current university CSR strategies,
- c. to obtain qualitative data for the design of a CSR model.

Data analysis of the interviews was performed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying key patterns and concepts in the respondents' responses.

### **6. Document analysis**

The third pillar of the research was a content analysis of documents, which included university CSR strategies and annual reports, relevant legislative frameworks and international guidelines regarding CSR in academia. This method provided a context for quantitative and qualitative findings and enabled the identification of examples of good practices and strategic approaches in different university settings (Yin, 2018).

### **7. Data triangulation**

To increase the validity and reliability of the research results, methodological triangulation was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Integrating results from the questionnaire survey, interviews and document analysis enabled a comprehensive view of CSR in the academic environment. They provided a robust basis for the design of a framework model (Denzin, 2012).

### **8. Ethical aspects of the research**

The research was conducted per the ethical principles of social research. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the anonymity of their responses and the possibility to withdraw from participation at any time. All data obtained were processed following the GDPR and the internal guidelines of the participating universities (Flick, 2018).

The chosen methodology provides a broad analytical framework for examining CSR in an academic environment and allows for creating a model that reflects the reality of different university contexts. This research thus contributes to a better understanding of the factors influencing CSR strategies and provides practical recommendations for universities in implementing CSR policies.

## **RESULTS**

The research aimed to examine the perception of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in academic environments and propose a framework model for implementing CSR strategies in universities. The results are based on a combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data obtained through questionnaire studies, in-depth interviews and document analysis at selected European universities.

## 1. Overall awareness of CSR in the academic environment

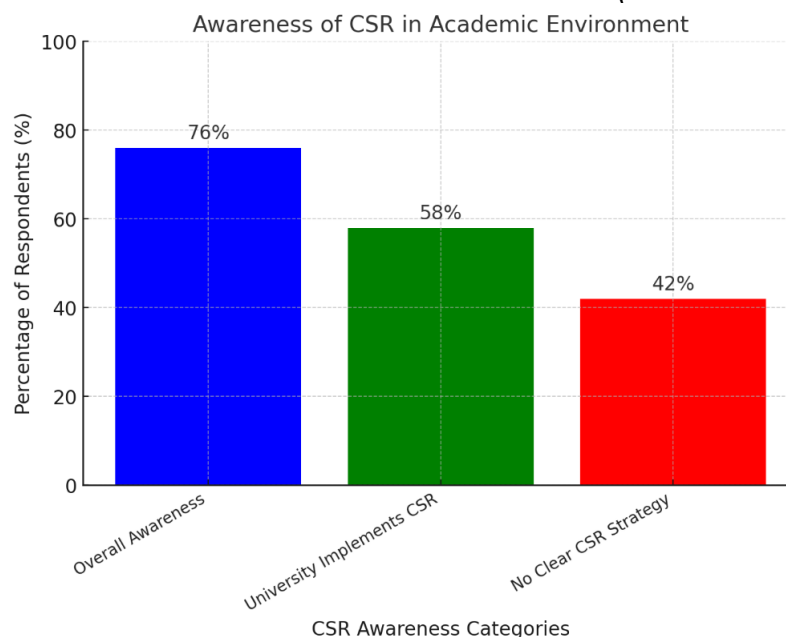
The research results showed that the overall awareness of university corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the academic environment is relatively high. Approximately 76% of respondents know the importance of CSR for universities, with up to 58% stating that their university actively implements CSR initiatives in various areas. Despite the positive perception of CSR, however, up to 42% of respondents declared that their university does not have a clearly defined CSR strategy, indicating gaps between theoretical awareness and practical application of social responsibility in the academic sphere.

A more detailed analysis of the responses revealed specific differences between individual groups of respondents. Students showed the highest awareness of CSR (82%), often reflecting on environmental initiatives such as recycling programs, reducing carbon footprints and green campaigns at universities. Academic staff (72%) perceived CSR more in the context of ethical aspects of teaching, equal opportunities and support for disadvantaged groups. Administrative staff (65%) viewed CSR from the perspective of ethical finance, transparency of university management and cooperation with the community.

Another significant finding is the difference in awareness between universities in different regions of Europe. Western and Northern European universities showed a higher understanding and a systematic approach to CSR. Universities in Central and Eastern Europe implement CSR initiatives, but they are often implemented informally and lack a transparent methodology and long-term strategy.

These findings indicate the need for a stronger link between awareness of CSR and its implementation, emphasising creating a clear strategy communicated and supported by all university stakeholders.

**Figure 1** Awareness of CSR in academic environment (Source: Own research)



## 2. Factors influencing CSR perceptions

Factor analysis identified three dimensions of CSR perceptions in academia: environmental, social and economic responsibility. Each of these dimensions was perceived by different groups of respondents with varying levels of importance,

indicating different expectations from university CSR initiatives.

### 3. Environmental responsibility

This dimension includes recycling, energy efficiency, green initiatives, sustainable construction and reducing the universities' carbon footprint. Environmental aspects of CSR were most positively assessed by students, with up to 68% stating that their university's environmental activities are a key CSR aspect for them. Students often reflected on initiatives such as green campuses, limiting plastic products in university canteens and supporting public transport for students and staff.

### 4. Social responsibility

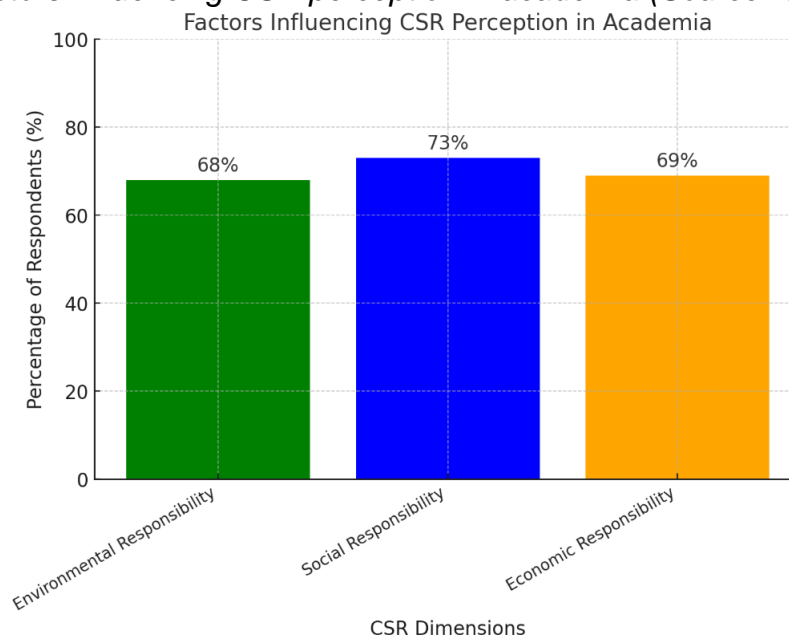
This dimension concerns equal opportunities, support for students with specific needs, diversity, inclusion and ethical behaviour in academia. Academics perceived this area as the most important, with 73% highlighting the need for more substantial university support for socially disadvantaged groups, students with disabilities and programmes to prevent discrimination. Several respondents mentioned that CSR should include ethical behaviour in teaching and scientific research, such as promoting academic integrity and combating plagiarism.

### 5. Economic responsibility

This dimension covers ethical funding of universities, investment in regional development and transparent management. It was most emphasised by administrative staff (69%), who considered the financial stability of universities and their economic impact on the local community as essential factors of CSR. The main initiatives mentioned included grant programmes for socially disadvantaged students, cooperation between universities and local businesses, and support for research projects that had a direct social impact.

These findings suggest that perceptions of CSR in academic settings are multidimensional, and its practical implementation requires a personalised approach for different stakeholder groups.

**Figure 2** Factors influencing CSR perception in academia (Source: Own research)



## **6. Differences between universities**

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences in the implementation of CSR strategies between universities in different European countries. The results indicate that universities in Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland) show a higher degree of systematic implementation of CSR compared to universities in Central and Eastern Europe (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Romania).

Scandinavian universities have well-developed CSR strategies, emphasising environmental sustainability, equal opportunities and transparency in academic governance. Examples include carbon-neutral campuses, ethical funding of university programmes and inclusive policies for students with special needs.

In contrast, universities in Central and Eastern Europe implement CSR initiatives but often lack strategic anchoring. These activities are isolated and depend on individual projects or external funding. Respondents in this region pointed to a lack of funding and low commitment from university leadership as the main obstacles to effective CSR implementation.

These differences indicate the need for outstanding institutional support and a unified approach to CSR policies across European universities.

## **7. Qualitative research results**

To gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of university CSR, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 academics and 20 administrative staff members from selected universities in Europe. The interviews focused on respondents' experiences implementing CSR, identifying key challenges and suggestions for improving CSR strategies in academia.

## **8. Key takeaways on CSR**

Most respondents agreed that universities should be role models in CSR, as they play an important educational, research and societal role. However, many universities do not have a systematic approach to CSR, which often results in patchy and ineffective initiatives.

Selected quotes from respondents:

- a. "Our university supports sustainability, but no specific implementation plan exists."
- b. "We have good diversity initiatives, but employees often do not know how to get involved."
- c. "CSR should be part of the value system of every university."

Some respondents also emphasised that CSR should be a mandatory part of the strategic planning of universities, not just an optional initiative. They believe CSR should be linked to university policy and included in internal evaluation processes and accreditation criteria.

## **9. Identified barriers to CSR implementation**

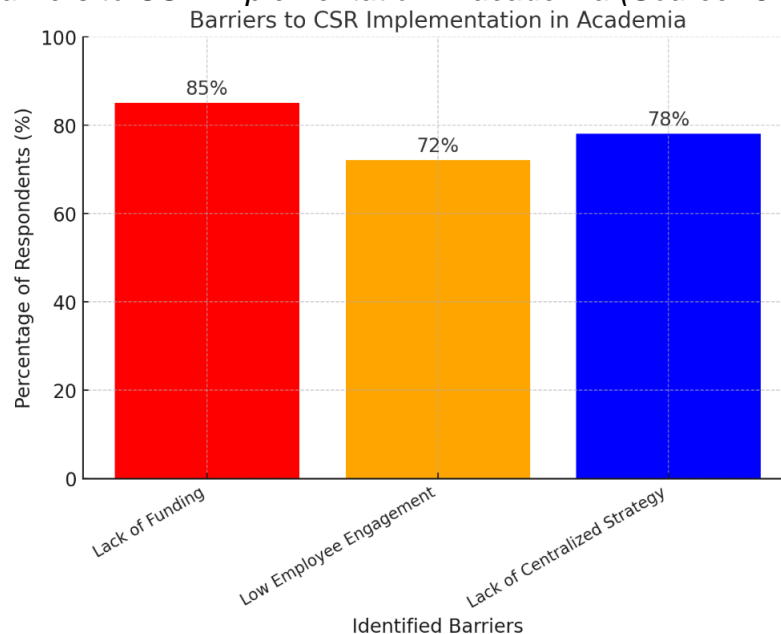
The analysis of the interviews revealed three main barriers that hinder the effective implementation of CSR in universities:

- a. Lack of funding: Most respondents pointed out that CSR activities are often financed only from external grants or individual projects, which means that they are not sustainable in the long term. Universities often do not have a separate budget for CSR, so CSR activities are frequently carried out only to a limited extent.

- b. Low employee engagement: University employees often do not have sufficient awareness of CSR initiatives or do not see direct benefits from their involvement. Therefore, CSR is often perceived as a secondary priority, with academics more focused on research and teaching than the university's social responsibility.
- c. Lack of a centralised strategy: Respondents highlighted that CSR activities are often ad hoc, without explicit coordination and strategic direction. Many universities have no dedicated department or person responsible for CSR, leading to uncoordinated and unsystematic activities.

These barriers suggest that for the effective implementation of CSR in academia, it is necessary to ensure a clear and coherent strategy, sufficient funding and improved staff awareness and engagement.

**Figure 3** Barriers to CSR implementation in academia (Source: Own research)



### **Results of the document analysis**

The document analysis, including university strategies, CSR reports, codes of ethics and official policy documents, provided important information on the formal embedding of university social responsibility. The results showed that only 35% of universities have a clearly defined CSR strategy that is systematically implemented and regularly evaluated.

Most often, university CSR activities are oriented towards environmental sustainability, with the most common initiatives including:

- a. Green campuses – reducing the carbon footprint through efficient use of energy and renewable resources.
- b. Recycling programs – introducing separated waste and supporting sustainable consumption of materials.
- c. Reducing the use of plastics – eliminating single-use plastic products in university canteens and administrative spaces.

Conversely, social and economic aspects of CSR are less represented in university documents. Only 21% of universities have specific measures to promote social inclusion and equal opportunities, such as scholarship programmes for students

from disadvantaged groups or policies to promote diversity.

The economic responsibility of universities is even less emphasised, with only 15% of universities having transparent policies on ethical funding and investments in regional development.

These findings suggest that CSR in universities is primarily oriented towards environmental initiatives, while CSR's social and economic aspects require more attention and systematic embedding in strategic documents.

#### **10. Proposal for a CSR Implementation Model in an Academic Environment**

Based on the research results, a framework model for CSR implementation in universities was proposed, considering current approaches' main identified barriers and shortcomings. This model focuses on a four-step process to ensure effective CSR management in an academic environment.

##### **1) Strategic CSR Management**

Effective CSR implementation requires the creation of a specialised department or CSR coordinator in universities. This department should:

- a) Develop a long-term CSR strategy in line with the university's values.
- b) Link CSR to teaching and research by including CSR topics in the curriculum and scientific projects.
- c) Create partnerships with businesses, government institutions and NGOs to support CSR initiatives.

##### **2) Financial security**

CSR initiatives are often limited by budget, so it is essential to:

- a) Create a separate CSR fund financed from university resources and external grants.
- b) Support fundraising activities and partnerships with companies focused on social responsibility.
- c) Allocate financial resources to long-term projects instead of one-off initiatives.

##### **3) Involvement of all actors**

An effective CSR strategy requires collaboration between students, academics and administration:

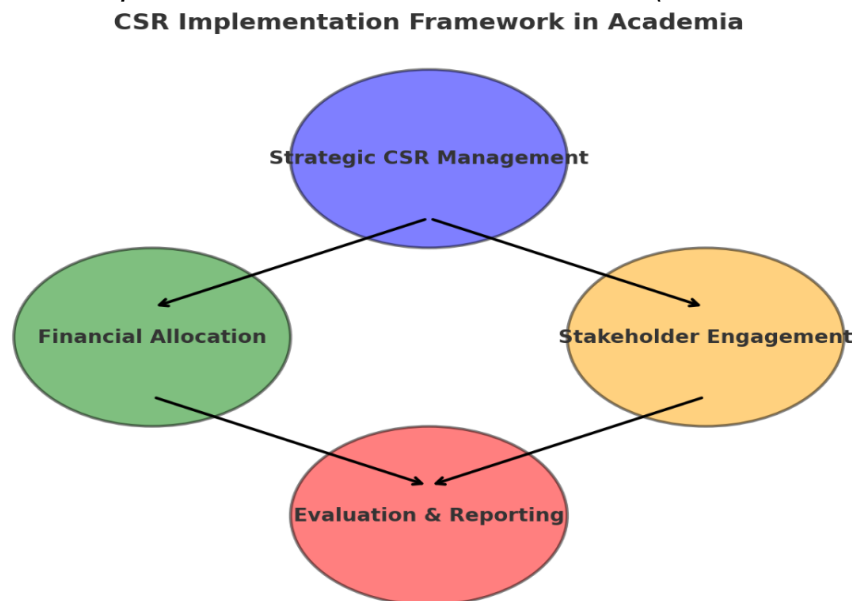
- a) Support volunteer programs and student-led initiatives.
- b) Motivate academics to integrate CSR into teaching and research.
- c) Ensure transparent communication and awareness of CSR activities.

##### **4) Regular evaluation and reporting**

To make the CSR strategy sustainable, universities should:

- a) Create metrics to measure the effectiveness of CSR activities.
- b) Publish CSR reports and inform the public about the results achieved.
- c) Regularly evaluate the CSR policy and adapt it to current societal challenges.

**Figure 4** CSR implementation framework in academia (Source: Own research)



This model offers a systemic approach to CSR implementation and can serve as a basis for universities that want to integrate CSR into their operations effectively.

### Discussion

The research results indicate that CSR in academia is an important concept, but it remains only partially integrated into the strategic management of universities. The different perceptions of CSR among the main stakeholder groups point to the need for a balanced approach to implementing CSR policies.

Students show the highest interest in the environmental aspects of CSR, such as green campuses (Nadanyiova, Gajanova & Majerova, 2020; Vutsova, Arabadzhieva & Yalamov, 2023), recycling and reducing the carbon footprint. This orientation reflects the global trend in which the younger generation emphasises ecological sustainability and climate change. On the other hand, academic staff see CSR as a tool to promote equal opportunities, ethical behaviour and social justice. Administrative staff perceive CSR mainly through the economic stability of universities, emphasising transparent funding and long-term investments in regional development.

Another significant finding is the regional difference in the implementation of CSR. Western European universities have a more systematic approach to CSR, with clearly defined strategies and stable funding. In Central and Eastern Europe, CSR implementation is often patchy and dependent on individual projects and external grants. These differences may be due to different public policies, legislative frameworks and higher education funding levels.

The research results align with Carroll's CSR model (Carroll & Shabana, 2010), according to which CSR rests on four pillars: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility. The research confirmed that universities often focus primarily on CSR's environmental and social aspects, while CSR's economic and ethical dimensions remain less developed. These findings indicate the need for a more comprehensive approach to bring together all dimensions of CSR and create a sustainable model for its implementation in universities.

## CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper highlights the growing significance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in academic institutions, emphasising its multidimensional nature that encompasses environmental, social, and economic aspects. The paper's main aim was to propose a framework model for creating and implementing a CSR strategy in the academic environment. The findings reveal that while awareness of CSR in academia is relatively high, its implementation remains inconsistent across different universities, often hindered by a lack of strategic planning, financial support, and institutional commitment.

The research underscores the importance of integrating CSR into the core functions of universities, including research, teaching, and community engagement. Students, faculty, and administrative staff perceive CSR differently, with students prioritising environmental sustainability, faculty focusing on ethical research and social inclusion, and administrative staff emphasising financial transparency and economic responsibility. These differences suggest that a tailored approach is necessary to address each stakeholder group's unique expectations effectively.

Furthermore, the research identifies significant regional disparities in CSR adoption. Universities in Western and Northern Europe demonstrate more systematic and well-funded CSR initiatives. In contrast, those in Central and Eastern Europe face challenges related to funding constraints and lack of institutional support. These findings highlight the necessity for a unified policy framework to bridge these gaps and promote a cohesive approach to CSR across European universities.

The proposed CSR implementation model provides a structured approach to overcoming these challenges. Universities can create a more effective and long-term CSR strategy by focusing on strategic management, financial sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation. Establishing dedicated CSR departments, securing financial resources, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and implementing robust reporting mechanisms are critical steps towards institutionalising CSR in academia.

Ultimately, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on CSR in higher education, offering practical recommendations for universities seeking to enhance their social responsibility initiatives. Future research should focus on developing standardised metrics for measuring CSR effectiveness, exploring innovative funding mechanisms, and examining the long-term impact of CSR policies on academic institutions and society. By embedding CSR into the academic ethos, universities can play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development, ethical governance, and social equity on a global scale.

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