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### THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND A UNIVERSITY'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY – THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES

*Multicontextual social changes expressed in the permanent creation of contemporary society, the specificity of qualitatively new transformations in the relationship between globality and locality, society and the subject – are not without significance for the quality of considerations on social responsibility, including university social responsibility. The term "sustainable development" is very popular today and it has made a quick career in the social sciences. In scientific research and in economic projects, it sets the direction of changes in which the inevitability of civilization development will not cause environmental degeneration. "Sustainable development" functions as a term, concept and idea to be implemented in specific actions of states, nations and social groups. This article takes up these issues and proposes some solutions as a voice in an important discussion, because it concerns the social responsibility of the university.*

*Keywords: sustainable development, university social responsibility, sociology.*

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**Introduction.** The term "sustainable development" is very popular today and it has made a quick career in the social sciences. In scientific research and in economic projects, it sets the direction of changes in which the inevitability of civilization development will not cause environmental degeneration. The term "sustainable development" was coined by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in the second half of the twentieth century. This term is taken from the principles of management in the eighteenth-century German forestry and then set the rules for all rational management.

However, without analyzing in detail the historical stages of the evolution of this concept at this point, it is worth emphasizing that a fuller understanding of it requires an analysis of the concept of "development" in the context of the needs of present and future generations. These needs are changeable and shaped by the dynamics of various

elements of social life. These needs are an important criterion of sustainable development, which means changing something for the better. Development is not only "no regression", but also a movement and, therefore, constant changeability. The idea of development is part of the orderly changeability of the world, is noticeable from the very beginning. Sustainable development as an idea is a part of this orderly changeability of the world as a task for people. It requires rational, creative and intentional behavior from a human being. In this context, "sustainable development" is a category not only of natural and, above all, anthropological, and thus, is also playing an important role in social sciences (Brennan, 2008, p. 389).

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**The concept of sustainable development and its inspiration.** The concept of sustainable development, like any other concept, is a project of understanding reality and accumulating knowledge. It is filled with content, influencing the contexts in which it is used. Today, it is a response to the problems related to the functioning of cultural and social systems perceived in the contemporary world. The concept of sustainable development resonates with the concept of "life" focusing thinking in the European culture of the twentieth century, as noted by Georg Simmel (Simmel, 2009, p. 123). When we start thinking about dependencies in the scheme of ecosystem relations, we notice that sustainable development guarantees the operation of systems.

Immanuel Kant inspired philosophers to consider the relationship between concepts and actual reality. As a result of these considerations, we are convinced that language is not a creation secondary to reality, but it organizes our thinking and our understanding of reality. The concepts we use have an impact on our actions and, through them, on the shape and dynamics of social reality. They are shaped by theory and practice by a system of understanding and a system of action. The context proposed by the paradigm of thinking, in which the notion of synergy and the concept of the ecosystem are important, significantly influences the contemporary understanding of

development. "Sustainable development" is just like the concept of "development" in the past, it is an evaluative concept. The concept of sustainable development can also be opposed to the contemporary radical discontinuity, which Manuel Castells describes in his book *Society of Networks* (Castells, 2004, p. 234).

At this point, it is also worth recalling the analyzes of Albert Schweitzer, who pointed out that the imbalance between the development of technical civilization and the development of culture is a source of many threats to humans. The conclusion is that people should develop in a sustainable manner in all their dimensions: biological, cultural and social.

The effects of cognitive activity are theories explaining dependencies, phenomena and events. The effect of practical activity based on theories is a social world created by man. Sustainable development is an effect of human activity, its foundation seems to be universal values. The effects of cognitive activity are theories explaining dependencies, phenomena and events. The effect of practical activity based on theories is a social world created by man. Sustainable development is an effect of human activity, its foundation seems to be universal values. Going beyond the modern scheme of interpreting relationships, we discover that values are neither a feature of objects, nor a subjective human product. The effects of cognitive activity are theories explaining dependencies, phenomena and events. The effect of practical activity based on theories is a social world created by man. Sustainable development is an effect of human activity, and the universal values seem to be its foundation. Going beyond the modern scheme of interpreting relationships, we discover that values are neither a feature of objects, nor a subjective human product. In addition to values, we also have something that exists and is considered valuable. They become valuable when they serve for the realization of values. Universal values are important for the duration of any system, but they are also important because they constitute a point of reference when it is necessary to creatively transcend the determinants of social systems. They are a justification and a reference point for creative activity and thinking. As Foucault notes, this ethical concern is a duty and at the same time a kind of "technique" of life

that combines the perspective of truth and good, a technique that results in "the development of the art of existence" (Foucault, 1954, p. 1965).

The research in the field of social sciences, focused on the global problems of the second half of the twentieth century, was of significant importance for the formation of the idea of sustainable development. Garrett Hardin presented in his works the dilemma of the process of destroying commonly available goodneses by an excessive increase in the number of their users. Attempts to solve the problem of managing the common goodneses in practice went in two directions. The first one, referring to the liberal tradition, suggested the transformation of common property into private goodneses. It is assumed that the individual owner will care much more about the resources entrusted to him. Followers of the second direction, known as institutional analysis, emphasized that it is the community that is able to carry out more effective changes in the rules of managing the common goods (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008, p. 315).

An important role in shaping the idea of sustainable development was played by the research conducted within social sciences, which took into account global issues and the systemic perspective of the analyzed phenomena, especially the relationship between a human and nature. In the field of sociological research, the analyzes focused on the issues of social order and the social conditions of the natural environment were of great importance for the discussed issues. Functionalists made an attempt to perceive social life as a system with a dominant tendency to achieve structural equilibrium. It can be said that they dealt with the sociology of the social order, trying to define its mechanisms and conditions. Talcott Parsons played a particularly important role in this matter. At the heart of his research interests, the American sociologist posed the question about the possibility of a social order. Searching for the answers to them, he, in fact, returns to the problem already formulated by Thomas Hobbes, and also to the discussion of numerous social thinkers of a later period. In the opinion of Parsons, the problem of an incorrectly functioning social structure remains unsolvable as long as the decisive influence on people's consciousness is made by utilitarian psychology,

explaining all actions of individuals with the fact that they are guided by their own interests (Alves, Mainardes, & Raposo, p. 2010).

Sociological analyses that made use of the achievements of social ecology were also of great importance for the idea of sustainable development. This concept appeared in social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century. It was then that a new direction of research about changes taking place within American cities was initiated among the scientists of the University of Chicago. The research of the so-called Chicago school, focused on the analysis of the impact between the position of an individual in the social structure and his activities. In the methodological sense, social ecology had to be an attempt to adapt the models derived from biological research to the analyzes of the social world. Undoubtedly, one of the significant events for the formation of the idea of sustainable development is the visible increase in interest in these issues in the field of social sciences. It took place under the influence of the emergence of new war technologies, processes of globalization and computerization. This resulted in the search for new theoretical orientations taking into account the above-mentioned challenges (Laredo, 2007, p. 449).

**The importance of education in the knowledge-based economy.** One of the significant challenges is the new nature of the knowledge-based economic system. The appropriate level of education helps to meet today's challenges and strengthens competitiveness both locally and globally. The important elements of a modern education system must be, in addition to its high quality, developing the habit of continuous learning and the implementation of an effective transfer of knowledge to the practice of social activities. The concept of "education" has a multifaceted dimension; therefore, it is defined in various ways. The literature on the subject emphasizes that this is a broad concept and includes, inter alia, the following aspects: intellectual, psychological and moral. Education is the implementation of an individual's development program throughout his life, which aims to integrate mentally, physically and morally. It is a process that includes not only the transfer of knowledge and values of culture which are broadly understood, but also inspiring the attitude of creative thinking and the capability of self-education. The concept of

education also refers to the process of integrating an individual into social life (Neave, 2006, p. 275).

The level of education more and more often affects the level of employment, the distribution of income, and, consequently, increasingly determines the wealth of the society. The research on the relationship between education and economic development, the level of education and the labor market has long been included in the research of social sciences. Universities play a unique role in shaping the knowledge society. The source of knowledge is not only the work of research teams, but also the relationship of the university with the social environment. The quality of these relationships is of key importance for building the university's social position and its social responsibility.

The term "corporate social responsibility" does not clearly indicate to which entities the organization should be responsible. Their identification becomes possible thanks to the use of *stakeholder theory*. The term "stakeholder" means an entity or group of entities involved in the activities of an organization, having an "interest" in the form of a legal or moral obligation (Setó-Pamies, Domingo-Vernis, & Rabassa-Figueras, 2011, p. 615).

The University organizes the processes of knowledge creation, as well as its diffusion, conversion and transfer, in a way that best suits the current organizational culture, its norms and beliefs. The perspective of being socially responsible indicates that the university is a transforming organism, functioning in an ecosystem of interconnected entities (Young, & Nagpal, 2013, p. 497). The success of a university depends on its stakeholders who also have individual or group expectations of it. Collaboration between these individuals, groups and subgroups takes many forms. They largely depend on whether their shared interests have a direct impact on the institution's success (Vasilescu, Barna, Epure, & Baicu, 2010, p. 4180).

It is worth emphasizing that many academic discussions about the role of the university in building a knowledge economy tend to ignore the complexity of higher education institutions. Numerous authors also emphasize that there is no single and universal rule that would define how a university can become socially responsible (*one*

*size does not fit all*). The process itself of implementing university social responsibility is often presented as a set of decisions and actions taken at the highest organizational level that spread down the hierarchy. Effective implementation of the idea of the university's social responsibility assumes building partnership relations with the environment (Wals, & Blewitt, 2010, p. 63). The university recognizes the benefits of being socially responsible, such as recognition, credibility and recognition for the quality of services provided.

In the literature regarding the subject, there are many definitions relating to the idea of a socially responsible university and recommended practices. In this regard, he noted that the university is expected to be oriented towards actions and values that show that it "gives back" to society more than the traditional outcomes of education and research. Social responsibility has four components: economic (productivity, profitability, growth), legal (legal economic activities), ethical (unwritten norms and values accepted by society) and philanthropic (voluntary actions aimed at improving the quality of life in general). Broadly speaking, the concept of a socially responsible university answers the question of how it responds to socio-economic, political and environmental problems (Thornton, & Jaeger, 2007, p. 1014).

In the literature, we can encounter numerous attempts to identify the obligations of the academic community towards society. An example of such a typology is the proposal pointing to three main principles of university responsibility, namely: a) one should act in such a way as not to endanger anyone's life; b) activities should be carried out in such a way that the condition of the surroundings improves in relation to the situation; c) the functioning of the organization must conform to social and political norms. In this context, it is necessary not only to comply with the law, but also the principles of social coexistence, both globally and locally (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008, p. 335).

The peculiarities of the principles of university responsibility are indicated by the perception of universities in three dimensions: in the market dimension, in the stratification dimension, and in the cognitive-educational dimension. The social importance of universities is evidenced by efforts to conduct research, educate future

elites and contribute to the multiplication of the common social good and strengthening of mature democracy. When considering social responsibility, one should take into account the multitude of roles played by universities. From the area of direct easement related to satisfying the needs of internal and external stakeholder groups: the needs of students, staff, the university's social environment, through cognitive functions: increasing knowledge, searching for truth and educating in the perspective of not only the dynamics of the labor market, but also preparing graduates to fulfill social roles community leaders, right up to being a center for the transmission and transformation of culture and good manners. A socially responsible university is a university that serves the environment (Schmitt, & Raufflet, 2015, p. 28).

Many authors emphasize that the primary scope of responsibility of universities is related to the creation of a socially useful educational offer, built with full awareness of the social roles that graduates will be able to play in the future, with the education of future academic staff and with the setting and support of various research directions. It is also not uncommon to mention the elite role of universities. Then we can talk about three components of the elite-creating role of the university: a) preparation for creativity, thanks to the fact that the university has always been creative, i.e. it has conducted scientific research, b) academic ethos, i.e. three university values: truth, beauty and goodness, c) social environment – members of the academic community (professors, other university staff, students) should not be an anonymous group, but should be a group of people who strive for a common, strictly defined goal that is not defined by interests but by social values. However, mass education, the "race" for ministerial funds and the unfavorable ratio of academic staff to students significantly reduce the elite-creating capacity of universities (Tight, 2012, p. 734).

The issue of university's social responsibility, apart from theoretical considerations, is also the subject of empirical research (Slaughter, Thomas, Johnson, & Barringer, 2014, p. 25). It should be emphasized that although research explorations in this subject do not have a rich tradition, they are aimed at recognizing the existence of strong social expectations regarding the active role of universities both in the



university management process, the scope of conducted research, and the quality of educational tasks.

**Conclusion.** The general conclusion that can be drawn from the fulfilled analyses indicates a clear increase in the interest of universities in pro-social activities that go far beyond the provision of educational services and the development of science. The sources of this tendency are believed to be the increase in competitiveness and the demographic decline. In this sense, one can risk a statement that universities will be more and more willing to undertake pro-social activities, while taking care of their image and building their good brand.

In today's interdisciplinary discourse, the issue of university's social responsibility requires constant reflection and debate. The development of modern thought on the subject of social responsibility of universities will focus on new areas of interest. The activity of the university in accordance with the principles of social responsibility and its diversity in the light of the expectations of stakeholder groups is to be directed towards the broadly understood social good. However, responsibilities arise on both sides – of society and the university.

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