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University Social Responsibility: The impact of student involvement in training/audit projects on their social, civic/political and professional development (0434)

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University social responsibility (USR) has been the object of a renewed interest in both research, policy and practice. This results for both external and internal needs and demands related with a variety of motives that range from the growing globalization and marketization of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to the emergence of serious concerns with how can HEI make real contributions to social change or innovation in public policy in our knowledge societies.

As such, and not surprisingly, the field of USR is paved with contradictions – including those related to its emergence as a relatively recent phenomenon inspired by corporate strategy (Larrán, López & Márquez, 2011) or, on the contrary, the assertion of its relation with classical roles of the university (Chase, 1923; Menezes, Coelho & Amorim, 2018), including with was designated as "third role" or "third mission" of HEI. On the whole, a sense of social purpose is undoubtedly an integral part of the nature of higher education and of the notion of "university", and should therefore be integrated in the institutional vision and strategy of HEI (Muijen, 2004; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011).

However, there is hardly a consensual definition in spite of various contributions from several international organisations. For instance, the UNESCO's "World Declaration for Higher Education in the 21st Century" (1998) stated the importance of the social responsibility of universities as a mission to confront the complexity and challenges of today's world. The ISO26000 Guidance Standard on Social Responsibility (2010) makes an appeal for a global consensus regarding sustainable development, taking into account the local and global impact of each HEI. In the post-Bologna 'European Higher Education Area', special emphasis was placed on the responsibility of

HEI to provide equal opportunities regarding students' access, progression and success despite of their different cultural and social background (London Communiqué, 2007); similarly, there was a call for projects to engage students and promote democratic participation (Simons & Masschelein, 2009). However, HEI are still far from achieving the goals of European policy statements in these areas (EACEA / Eurydice, 2011).

USR projects have a recognized potential to foster students' social and political conscientization and competences for active citizenship given to their commitment to principles of equity, social justice and citizenship (European Commission, 2010).

However, in spite of the proliferation of research in this area, most contributions are centred in the perceptions of USR by HEI actors (Larrán, López & Márquez, 2011; Vásquez, Aza & 2014), on the development of instruments and indicators that allow analysing and comparing USR practices (E3M, 2011) or of European framework benchmarks (Martin, 2016). So, the potential impacts of students' participation in USR projects on their academic, civic and professional life are not yet sufficiently studied. This is pointed out as a significant literature gap in this area (Larrán, López & Andrades Peña, 2012) and constitutes the background of this project.

Our research aims exactly to deal with this gap by exploring how European HEI conceive and operationalize the training potential of USR projects and, more specifically, how students perceive the impact of their own involvement on USR training/audit projects on their social, civic/political and professional development. Our research context is the Erasmus+ ESSA Project - European Students, Sustainability Auditing (ref. 2016-1-UK01-KA203-024648), funded by the European Commission. ESSA involves students from three European universities (University of Porto, University of Edinburgh and Technological University of Kaunas) on an experiential training experience on social responsibility auditing that includes two phases: (i) a training course on their local universities, and (ii) a real audit involving the analysis of USR policies and practices in a partner university. Our research design is autonomous in relation to the activities of the project, using a mixed research methodology (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Vilelas, 2009), including documental analysis, interviews, focus groups (face-to-face and online) and questionnaires. This methodological approach allows for a more detailed, in-depth and multifaceted information collection.

In this paper we will specifically focus on the experience of fourteen students from the University of Porto who participated in audits in the University of Edinburgh (2016) and the Technological University of Kaunas (2017). Through focus groups and in-depth interviews (data partly available and to be collected), together with documents produced by the students regarding their own learning as part of their assessment (data already available), the paper will consider how students view the audit experience and its impact on their perspective on CSR and their own social, civic/political and professional development. The longitudinal analysis will further previous results that suggest that the project can “empower students as critical agents of social responsibility” (Coelho et al., 2017, p. 1173); additionally, students also valued “opportunities to work outside their disciplinary areas and to support their institution in enhancing its social impacts” (p. 1174). These short-term perceptions will now be explored in more detail to consider the role of the ESSA experience in the development of students’ (or alumni’s) social, civic/political and professional competences, as they progress into the world outside the academia. This will also be interesting from the point of view of considering how they, as former students and current professionals, view the role of HEI in general in relation to social responsibility.

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