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Beyond the Ivory Tower: Exploring University Social Responsibility through the Lens of Tunisian Higher Education Leaders

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Abstract

Social Responsibility (SR) is increasingly vital in the daily operations of higher education institutions (HEIs) as it affects HEIs' brand and students' intention to join such HEIs. However, in the proliferation of this concept and its effective application in student and academic life, a gap exists in understanding this issue in developing nations, i.e., Tunisia. The main objective of this research is to study the perceptions of university social responsibility (USR) by heads of Tunisian higher education institutions using stakeholder theory. A qualitative study was undertaken with public and private Tunisian HEIs, using an interview guide to understand the perceptions of USR. The results showed that a minority of academic institutions gives remarkable interest to the USR, mainly private sector institutions. Additionally, heads agreed that social responsibility should be a priority for all HEI actors performing in this way in their behavior. These socially responsible behaviors are grouped into four dimensions as perceived by HEI heads: responsibility to internal stakeholders, ethical responsibility, philanthropic responsibility, and commitment to the community. The results confirm the role of USR in achieving universities' missions beyond education and scientific research.

Keywords: Higher education, leadership, qualitative study, social responsibility, stakeholder theory, Tunisia, and USR perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Social responsibility (SR) according to Swaen and Chumpitaz [1] refers to ongoing beyond “profit-seeking” and “compliance”. Instead, the expectations of all stakeholders should be considered at the level of the institution’s activities [2]. Previous research on SR has been based on either contractualist or institutionalist theory or stakeholder theory [3]. In this research, we used stakeholder theory, also known as stakeholder marketing theory. This theory is based on identifying the different stakeholders of an organization and their expectations to be considered in its marketing strategy. It underlines the need to go beyond the classic notion of “market orientation” which has its origins in the work of Kohli and Jaworski [4] and Narver and Slater [5]. In recent years, university social responsibility (USR) has become one of the essential levers for the internal functioning of HEIs [6], the improvement of their image [6, 7], participation in sustainable development [8, 9], and the retention of its stakeholders [6]. However, despite all the benefits it brings to HEIs, SR is still poorly considered in many parts of the world [10, 11].

The introduction of SR in higher education institutions (HEIs) has obviously created new functions for these institutions. Indeed, the USR according to several authors such as Esfijani et al. [12]; Larrán and Andrades [13]; Latif [14] and Yassine [15] will lead to making the HEI accountable to its internal and external stakeholders in terms of equal opportunities and respect for the law, provides a high level of education that complies with quality standards and norms, which also provides suitable working conditions, makes all the necessary information available to its stakeholders, and also helps its students find their places in the professional world. It respects the environment by trying to reduce its waste and consumption of scarce resources, provides charitable and solidarity actions, organizes awareness days in society, and commits with associations to support social events, etc.

The objective of this article is to study USR perception, its practices, and its obstacles to the establishment by heads of Tunisian HEIs. This will make it possible to draw up a set of recommendations for the consideration of the USR in the general HEI policy. This article is structured as follows: it starts with the emergence of USR and defines USR with a specific focus on the HEIs context. The stakeholder theory is then discussed. Following this, the methodology and the results obtained are presented. Managerial recommendations are also discussed.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. The emergence of USR

The birth of the notion of SR in the business world dates to 1953 with Bowen and has been extensively studied by for example, Terramorsi et al. [16], Gond and Igalens [17], and Luangsay-Catelin and Gasner-Bouquet [18]. At the end of the 20th century, SR has been an academic research concept [19-21]. Rapidly, SR has been transformed from a purely academic concept to an application in multiple fields of knowledge; the design of goods that does not present a danger for customers, transparency towards consumer in relation to the conditions of manufacture of the products, the assurance of the employee’s well-being at work, the protection of the environment, etc.

In an academic context, USR has become a crucial area of debate in higher education, as universities has become a major pillar of society. Nowadays, the chargeable nature of the higher education market places through the university in a complex environment that calls university actors (teachers, researchers, executives and administrative staff, etc.) to apply the principles of customer orientation used by profit institutions in the promotion of their image through the use of USR techniques to be more attractive on its environment [22]. Although the emergence of SR in the education context dates to the 1980s [12] to our knowledge, its application is still little present at the HEIs level. Although the above terms have not been identically defined in the literature, they have the same basic idea that HEIs do not have the sole mission of generating knowledge, but they also have responsibilities to their stakeholders and to society at large. The term “stakeholders” includes several entities such as university administrative staff, teachers, students, governments and society [23, 24].

2.2. Definition of USR

A multitude of definitions have been proposed for the concept of USR. Indeed, Reiser [25], through its USR definition, highlights the concept of “sustainable campus” as an HEI strategy that manifests itself in streamlining resource use and raising awareness of ethics and sustainability to lessen the detrimental effect of its operation on nature. Reiser [25] distinguished four types of practices according to it a HEI is socially responsible: “(1) preparing students for responsible citizenship to ensure sustainable development, (2) social responsibility for scientific and technical activity, (3) mutual learning for development, (4) socially and ecologically responsible university life [15]. Given the multiplicity of USR definitions, Esfijani et al. [12] attempted to use the most cited terms to define the concept of “engagement, education, research, service, ethics, transparency, stakeholders”.

According to Yassine [15] a HEI is socially responsible if: “it integrates social, ethical and environmental issues into the training which provides while meeting the demands of society; it ensures better quality of scientific research and knowledge transfer; implements good governance practices while taking into account the stakeholders and ensures the promotion of citizenship behaviors and civic values among all those around them and the socio-economic development of its environment». Similarly, several authors such as Jongbloed et al. [26], Sawasdikosol and Moral [24], Langworthy [27], Garde Sánchez et al. [28], Ralph and Stubbs [29], and Larrán and Andrades [13] emphasize that the concept of USR refers to the HEI as an institution that integrates ethical, social, and environmental principles into its core activities to meet the needs of its stakeholders. This conducted through (1) the integration of social, environmental and ethical domains in educational programs, (2) the transfer of knowledge to society through research, (3) responsible management established within the HEI and externally in its relations with its stakeholders (helping students to achieve their objectives; ensuring equal opportunities

in access to training for the whole population, reducing the environmental impact of its activities), (4) encouraging Community activities aimed at promoting citizenship.

The inclusion of USR as a core function of HEIs can benefit this institution and society at large. In fact, the partnership of HEIs with society gives rise to the development of critical thinking among students resulting from the high quality of their education, the stimulation of a sense of commitment, responsibility and social awareness among students, the improvement of well-being, the quality of life and health of society, increasing the rate of employability, and providing other social and economic benefits [30].

In view of the above, we can conclude that USR is the voluntary engagement of the HEIs and their ability to actively engage all their stakeholders in a process of enhancing the societal component, making it one of the priorities of the HEIs in the same way as teaching. From this conception, we can conclude that the role of socially responsible HEIs goes beyond teaching and research to include contributions to socio-economic regional development. The HEIs must become a real company by remaining attentive to all their stakeholders, being attractive to their students, and communicating with the company to always be at its service.

2.3. Stakeholder Theory

The majority of USR definitions are based primarily on stakeholder theory. For example, it was defined as “any group or individual that may affect or be affected by the achievement of business objectives” [13] especially from commercial literature [31]. Given its importance in this research discipline, stakeholder theory presents one of the theoretical foundations of the notion of social responsibility Cazal [32]; Mullenbach-Servayre [33] and Jamali [34]. Freeman [35] is the founder of this theory. He postulates that when talking about social responsibility, there are in addition to actioners of the company, other stakeholders who demand special consideration when making decisions. According to Freeman [35] “a stakeholder in the organization is any group of individuals or any individual who may affect or be affected by the achievement of organizational objectives.” This definition includes any individual or group of individuals to play the role of a stakeholder in the organization when it influences its existence and sustainability. According to Maringe [36] there are multiple HEI clients: students, administrative staff, and society [37].

Knowing that the expectations and satisfaction of the stakeholders with the performance of higher education must become the starting point of the HEI in the preparation of their marketing strategies. As shown in Figure 1, Kotler and Fox [38] subdivide HEI stakeholders into 16 groups. However, it should be noted that Hewitt and Clayton [39] consider teachers and students to be the most important stakeholders in teaching.

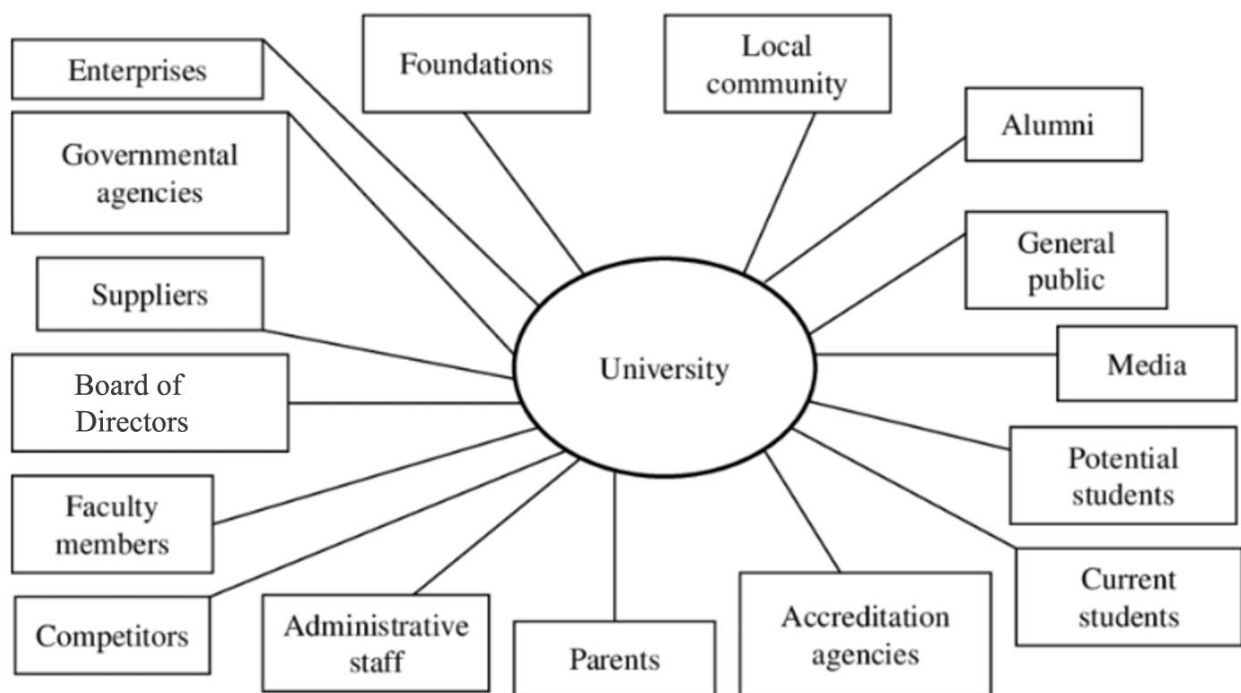


Figure 1.
University Stakeholders.
Source: Kotler and Fox [38].

3. Methodology

Through our literature review on USR, we have seen the polysemy of the concept of social responsibility, since its application to different contexts, emphasizing the breadth of the fields of application of this concept, whose perceptions and practices are by far very divergent. Let us add to this observation that this variable context difference is not culturally engraved in the morals and social norms of the Tunisian citizen. All these combined factors led us to conduct a qualitative interview with Tunisian HEIs. In our study, we use one-on-one interviews as a source of data collection. An interview guide has been prepared for these interviews. This grid was used to summarize themes related to the subject studied and, more specifically,

to the research issue [40]. These themes will be presented, according to Evrard et al. [41], in the form of open-ended questions and reminders to stimulate the interviewee to deepen his or her remarks.

3.1. Data Collection

Our individual interviews allowed us to gather information about the perception of Tunisian HEIs in relation to the USR. Given the health conditions associated with the Coronavirus during which this study was conducted, the number of face-to-face interviews was limited to only three. The others were conducted remotely after sending the interview guide by email to the selected managers. In advance, each manager was contacted by phone to explain the purpose of the study and the topics concerned, and then the Google Forms link to the guide was sent to them by email. We then managed some remote queries to ensure maximum clarity and authenticity of the answers. The selected samples of HEIs were varied in terms of the disciplines taught and the regions in which they exist.

Our interview guide has been developed by several rules. We began by transforming our problems into themes and then transforming these themes into general questions. The latter will guide the respondents in their answers [42].

The funnel principle (going from general to individual) was respected. Thus, our guide begins with a short introduction to thank the interviewee, explain the framework of our study and how the interviewee's answers will be used. We then asked general questions, followed by themes directly related to our research problem [43]. To deepen certain key questions for our study and to avoid respondent blocking, which may hinder the continuation of the interview, we used the technique of relapse [44]. We closed our guide with a conclusion. After writing our guide, we conducted tests through interviews, these tests allowed us to adjust the order of the topics to be addressed and to rephrase some questions that were misunderstood.

3.2. The Study Sample

The number of interviews to be conducted during a qualitative study depends on the criterion of semantic saturation, since this criterion is more important than the principle of representativeness of the sample [45]. Thus, we reached saturation from the twelfth interview. Our sample is made up of managers in 11 different HEI positions, including 2 deans, 3 directors, 1 deputy director, 1 director of studies, 3 department directors and 2 general secretaries (Figure 2).

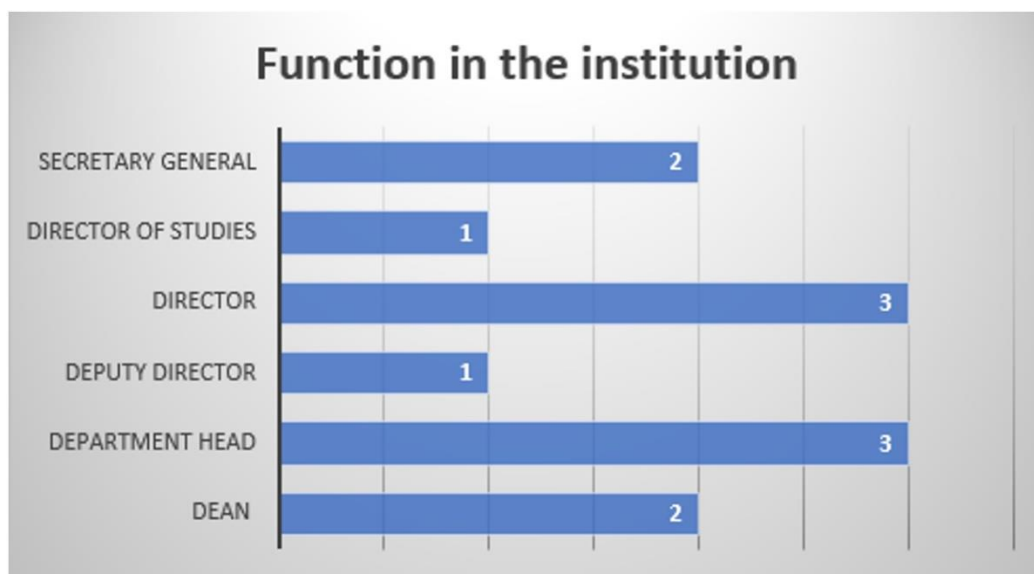


Figure 2.
The function of the head in the establishment.

In addition, we have ensured that our sample is varied in terms of the specialty of EES (economics, management, IT, fashion, etc.) and the region to which this institution belongs (Nabeul, Bizerte, Sousse, Tunis, Monastir, Kairouan) In order to be able to approach the subject from different perspectives, respectively, to the specialty and the specific concerns of the students and the HEIs concerned (Table 1).

Table 1.

Characteristics of respondents.

	The function of the person	The name of the establishment	The region in which the establishment is located
1	Dean	FSEG	Nabeul
2	Dean	ISG	Bizerte
3	Director	ENI	Sousse
4	Head of Department	FSEG	Tunis
5	Head of Department	IHEC	Carthage
6	Deputy Director	ISMode	Monastir
7	Head of Department	ISIG	Kairouan
8	Director	Université libre de Tunis	Tunis
9	General Secretary	ISET	Nabeul
10	Director of Studies	ISIG	Kairouan
11	Director	Faculté méditerranéenne privée des sciences informatique et économiques et de gestion de Tunis	Tunis
12	General Secretary	Université Virtuelle de Tunis	Tunis

3.3. Content Analysis of Interviews

According to Krippendorff [46], the most widely used method for analyzing data from a qualitative study is content analysis. To be able to carry out a content analysis, we have to go through the following stages of the Bardin [47] procedure: (1) make the transcription of the interviews afterwards, (2) prepare an analysis grid and code the transcribed information and eventually (3) process it. The collected data from interviews with the Tunisian EES managers, after having transcribed them in their entirety in “Microsoft Word”, we imported them into the qualitative data analysis software “NVIVO 10”. It would be interesting to note that, although this software has several performances, we have not limited ourselves to its functionalities but rather to our intellectual contribution to be able to come up with very thorough interpretations [48].

4. The Interpretation of the Findings

The interviews revealed that the USR does not have major administrative concerns. Moreover, we found that official documents developed by HEIs in favor of the USR do not exist in their majority (only 33.33% have them), as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.**

Existence of official documents for the USR.

In fact, the USR initiative of HEIs was developed from an institution-specific strategy in only six observations. In the rest of the interviews, in addition to institutions that do not have a USR orientation, as one of the leaders commented:

“In Tunisia, the notion of social responsibility does not exist in practice, among other things, in universities, it is a rather theoretical notion that is discussed via the media. In Tunisia, we are imitating foreign practices as a response to modernism” (HM10).

It turns out that this comes either from the personal will of the interviewee or from a personal will mixed with a decision made by the HEIs.

4.1. The Meaning of USR

To identify the important words allowing us to define the USR as close as possible to the meaning developed by managers of Tunisian HEIs, a lexical analysis was conducted from the automatically encoded nodes. The word cloud (Figure 4) created around the meaning of USR brings out an agreement between university managers about its definition from a set of words such as change, teaching, culture, collaboration, openness, innovation, etc. We also note their insistence on the use of certain terms in the explanation of USR, including sustainable development, economic development, participation, improvement, citizenship, society/societal/ social, ecological environment, etc.



Figure 4.
The meaning of USR (word cloud).

In view of these findings, the USR is a concept according to which HEIs are perceived as providing three main pillars of higher education: education, scientific research, and societal service. “USR incorporates cultural, social, economic, and environmental concerns” (HM6). The aim is to contribute to socio-economic, professional, and cultural progress (HM11) by considering the economic, social, and ecological environment in university activities and life (HM1), while fostering an excellent atmosphere of serenity, conviviality, enthusiasm, and confidence (HM11). It is a fact that:

“a voluntary involvement of the university and the integration of social and environmental concerns in its training activities and its relations with its environment for a real contribution in the sustainable development of our country.” (HM12).

It consists, therefore, of an orientation towards sustainable development and innovation (HM8), an opening of the university to its environment (HM5), which highlights respect for nature as a major concern by encouraging students to consume and promote green and/or terroir products (HM10). It is also about the university’s involvement in empowering its students, raising their awareness of community concerns (HM3), and anchoring the values and challenges of sustainable development in their minds (HM4). The university should not be seen as an institution of learning, teaching, and/or research only; it must hold all stakeholders accountable so that everyone can contribute to societal change (HM7).

In other words, the USR consists of the ability of adaptation of the student to his environment through correct training and a good modulation of his capacities and his reflections which will have repercussions on his productions and will bring changes on his environment. Its aim is to train responsible student-citizens who can integrate easily into civil society and

contribute to its change. Thus, on a practical level, the USR covers, in the Tunisian context, several axes, of which we can mention:

- Participation in social actions in the region of the institution (charity, projects of collaboration with economic actors within the framework of their CSR)
- Collaboration with civil society on development projects with a focus on developing students' skills and their active participation in actions and events
- Student Resource Management. Thus, voluntarily or as a part of their PFE, students can, through training and coaching programs, promote the image of their institution and the environment in which they operate and evolve.
- Environmental actions with local laboratories.

4.2. Objectives of Adopting the USR Approach

The results of interviews showed that the adoption of the USR approach is of dual interest. On one hand, it has advantages in favor of the image of the institution, and on the other hand, it allows not only to teach, but also to train a citizen and a responsible student as it could be seen in the following.

4.3. The Effect of USR Practices on the Institution and its Environment

The USR has many positive consequences. First, it contributes to a better atmosphere within the HEIs by improving working conditions to create a friendly climate as

"It contributes to a better life at university and its development in the long run" (HM1), "I think it at least creates dynamism" (HM6), "Cohesion of the administrative and teaching team members" (HM8).

Second, it enables participation in economic, ecological and social sustainable development of society. It helps develop cooperation with economic, academic and civil society partners to gain visibility, credibility and trust as the comments below show:

*"There is an undeniable impact on IHEC's image among employers and its graduates" (HM5),
 "Recognition of the ULT by professionals" (HM8),
 "This axis has enabled our institute to be approached by several economic and academic actors who have become partners" (HM2).
 "The institution must be involved in USR approach and not disengaged because it will lose its virtues" (HM6),
 "University outreach" (HM8),
 "More civic, responsible university that conveys a positive image in society" (HM1),
 "Developing the institution's brand" (HM2),
 "A better university image" (HM7),*

It helps adapt to societal requirements to align with socioeconomic and cultural developments at a national and international level:

*"... to support scientific research and to foster the institute's contribution to the development of research with both theoretical and practical contributions. The institute is involved in several projects to ensure its openness to the environment and to put science at the service of economy and society."
 "Supporting the global direction towards sustainable development" (HM6).*

Third, ensuring the selectivity of students through the attractiveness of the HEI through the eyes of new graduates:

*"a pride of belonging" (HM11).
 "Modestly and without any pretension, this axis has enabled the ISG Bizerte to attract a greater number of graduates during the university orientation, ..." (HM2).*

Fourth, motivating teachers to be proactive and involve them in their coaching role and animation of students going beyond their teaching role:

"The involvement of staff (administrative and teaching staff) in the accompaniment of projects" (HM2).

Fifth, integrating the HEI into the international anticipation and accreditation systems:

*"... Branding of the institution at the national and international levels and the Application of our corporate values" (HM2).
 "Recognition of the ULT at the international level" (HM8).
 ... especially during the signing of conventions and exchanges with partners abroad and during the preparation of accreditation" (HM1).
 "It allows better visibility of the UVT and a citizen university image" (HM12).
 "... and the development of the institution's brand equity" (HM2).
 an excellent position and a good notoriety in academic and social life both nationally and internationally" (HM11),*

Sixth, it helps in practically translating institutional values:

"USR approach is interesting for the UVT in that it adheres to its public service missions, its leading position in e-learning, and its desire to ensure a quality approach leading to an ISO certification." (HM12),

4.4. The Effect of USR Practices on Students

The student is called to cultivate himself socially within the university because the diploma is not a competence, especially in some specialties. He also needs to acquire skills, learn to do and learn to be. SR practices, including associative work, are among other ways to promote the development of skills, essential for a better integration in the social environment, in the first place, and subsequently in the workplace.

"The existence from an early age of an environment conducive to the social integration of the student for example, clubs, cultural and sports associations, previous participation in volunteer activities in associations, affects the student's predisposition and involvement in the social responsibility practices organized by his institution" (HM10).

These practices should:

- Facilitate student volunteering and dedication to associative work,
- Encourage students' spirit of initiative,
"a significant number of project promoters with a strong proposal value and a constructive competition between clubs" (HM2).
- Contribute, although *"indirectly"* (HM8), to a better education and training of a student citizen *"... who thinks about society"* (HM1).
- To better educate students on the sense of responsibility and citizenship to train future socially committed and responsible leaders, through participation in societal projects with added value.
- Develop learning and soft skills among students through USR practices applied within associations, because the diploma is no longer a competence in itself.
- Ensuring better integration of students into the professional world through a versatile training of excellence:
"Proliferate the role and contribution of universities in terms of employability and improve the quality of institutional mission for the benefit of all stakeholders" (HM6).
- Support students who are not able to finance their training through humanitarian actions by giving them financial assistance, for example,
- Develop the student's sense of belonging,
- Motivating students to learn in a friendly climate:

"The absence of USR practices leads to disengagement and demotivation of students" (HM3).

4.5. Challenges to the Implementation of USR Practices

Despite its importance and the added value recognized by all the managers interviewed, the USR remains poorly adopted by Tunisian HEIs, and does not figure among the strategic and priority plans of the latter. This controversy has been explained by obstacles inherent in:

4.5.1. A Cultural and Social Limit

In fact, a few regions where associative work is developed allow the student to get used to joining associations from a young age. This can be explained by the effect of social norms and values:

"We are working seriously with UTICA and the associations to think seriously about adapting learning content, but what is disappointing is that these solutions remain theoretical and not exploitable." (HM1),

We feel that this concept is still parachuted and inconsistent with Tunisian culture." (HM10).

In Tunisia, our vision of the future is unclear; we have no long-term strategy, the concepts taught remain theoretical and not adapted to the economic and cultural context of our country." (HM4).

4.5.2. A Limit Linked to The Predisposition of the Student

The will of the student, his or her consciousness and the environment to which s/he belongs. Indeed, these three factors can influence its responsiveness to USR practices developed and its involvement in the programs planned by the university:

"We will not be able to make a good start if the student is not involved of course, he must be a bearer of these values which is unfortunately not the case" (HM11).

4.5.3. Administrative Limitation

An administrative limitation related to the HEI's predisposition to integrate SR among its primary concerns:

"No budget for USR practices for lack of awareness" (HM4).

"We do not have a clear USR approach", "the administration does not grant authorizations to organize such events" (HM7).

"Apart from the budget, the two directors of the IHEC do not believe in the importance of the USR" (HM5),

"... no dedicated service for these actions with paid agents, lack of involvement, no budget and no strategic thinking and almost no follow-up of these USR actions" (HM1).

4.5.4. A Limit Linked to the Teaching Staff

We can mention in this sense the passivity of certain teachers whose role in the HEI is limited to teaching and who, due to a lack of volunteering and/or initiative, do not try to motivate students to engage in associative work within their academic institutions.

"... And the lack of involvement of stakeholders, especially teachers, who are only there to provide the required courses, I believe that we must be able to motivate all concerned in order to go further" (HM6).

4.5.5. Infrastructure and Budgetary Limit

Several HEIs suffer from a poor infrastructure, limiting their capacity to practice associative activities, for example, the lack of a shower room, refreshments and areas where students can stay during off-peak hours and areas reserved for clubs.

"At our level, social responsibility and sustainable development remain a comfort luxury that cannot be achieved without satisfying basic and vital needs" (HM10).

"There is still no focus on USR, so the budget is almost missing." (HM1).

"Lack of government funding" (HM 3).

"There are no specific budgets." (HM5).

"We have a problem of budgetary resources due to a lack of State funding, especially in this period of crisis" (HM8).

"For the aforementioned achievements in this area, we have relied mainly on sponsoring." (HM2).

5. Discussion

The analysis of the USR from the point of view of the Tunisian HEIs heads has allowed us to highlight several results. We begin by noting that initiatives in these institutions often remain fragmented, with no systematic integration into institutional policy. The results corroborate several previous studies showing that, although USR is increasingly promoted in academic discourse, its actual implementation remains limited [49]. However, Rolland and de La Debutrie [50] and Ory et al. [49] contradict our assumption and state that many universities are engaged in approaches to sustainable development and social responsibility, often formalized. However, the implementation of these plans may vary.

Only a few pioneering HEIs have adopted a comprehensive and structured approach to USR, particularly in countries where public policies encourage its development [51]. However, in many contexts, the lack of clear standards and monitoring mechanisms hinders its integration [52]. It may also be due to a lack of awareness and training [53]. A second postulate worth highlighting is the idea that some institutions demonstrate through their adoption of USR practices that corporate social responsibility should be a priority. Indeed, prioritizing the integration of USR can not only improve their societal impact but also differentiate and serve as an example for the entire education sector.

Several universities around the world have integrated USR at the heart of their operations; we cite as an example Harvard University, which has set up a responsible investment program by reducing the use of fossil fuels, a commitment that influences other universities to follow this example [54]. In addition, academic rankings take USR into account, such as the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings and the Sustainable Campus Index. Despite the emphasis on integrating USR into the core of HEIs' operations, organizational constraints may cause HEIs to prioritize research, education and funding, while relegating the USR to a secondary role as pointed out by Jorge et al. [55]. Our third finding relates to the increased sensitivity of private HEIs to the issue of USR. This idea can be explained by a greater decision-making autonomy than public HEIs, which may facilitate the implementation of USR initiatives. Indeed, private HEIs have greater budgetary flexibility and do not depend on government subsidies, and can allocate their resources according to their strategic priorities [56].

Although the greater autonomy of private higher education institutions may facilitate the implementation of USR, De Freitas Netto et al. [56] and Sobaih et al. [57] caution that these institutions sometimes adopt USR initiatives primarily as marketing strategies, without substantially transforming their internal practices or institutional culture to truly embody the principles of social responsibility.

Ultimately, we can say that these results collectively suggest that the implementation of USR policy in Tunisian higher education institutions faces a combination of structural, strategic and institutional obstacles that reflect international trends while being shaped by Tunisia's specific educational, economic and regulatory environment. The variation between public and private institutions highlights how governance structures significantly influence USR policy outcomes, beyond simple policy statements. Adopting USR becomes a vital issue for universities as it affects their environmental performance and overall image [57]. Hence, University leaders have to think green and prioritize USR to have a significant impact on society and contribute to UNSDGs [58].

6. Conclusions

Through an exploratory study based on qualitative interviews with a dozen heads of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Tunisia, we were able to discover the perception of the University Social Responsibility (USR), its practices, and the obstacles to the implementation of these practices. Among the main findings, we can note that a minority of academic institutions give significant interest to the USR. This is particularly the case for private sector institutions. However, we cannot deny the acknowledgment by some institutions that their social responsibility should be a priority to guarantee a better social and economic environment. This has been demonstrated by several USR actions and practices undertaken by some HEIs. However, these actions are scattered and are mostly not included in a clear USR approach and are not part of a medium- and long-term strategic reflection involving all stakeholders.

The results show that the main obstacles are essentially related to either a cultural and social limit, the predisposition of the student, or an administrative limitation; in other words, an obstacle linked to the HEI's predisposition to integrate SR among its primary concerns. It can also be linked to the teaching staff or to infrastructure and budgetary limits. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate a USR approach to involve all stakeholders. At this level, the role of the state, and more specifically the Ministry of Higher Education, is paramount in setting up an overall USR strategy accompanied by a legal and regulatory framework to promote its application.

The health conditions associated with Coronavirus, in which our qualitative study with HEI managers was conducted, led us to conduct only three face-to-face interviews. The others were conducted remotely after sending the interview guide by email to the selected managers. Some questions were managed remotely to ensure maximum clarity and authenticity of the answers. Like all qualitative research, our research has several limitations related mainly to the authenticity and generalization of the results. It would be interesting in future research to measure the perception of this concept among students, professors, and administrative staff of HEI. Then, we could study their socially responsible attitudes and behaviors.

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