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The state of scientific research on university social responsibility (USR) worldwide: a systematic literature review

Soundouss Cherboub
Doctorante, Faculté d'Economie et de Gestion de Kénitra Université Ibn Tofail –Maroc

Meryam Cherboub,
Doctorante, Faculté d'Economie et de Gestion de Kénitra Université Ibn Tofail –Maroc

Kaoutar Benslama
Doctorante, Faculté d'Economie et de Gestion de Kénitra Université Ibn Tofail –Maroc

Cheklekbire Malainine
Professeur de l'Enseignement Supérieur (PES), Faculté d'Economie et de Gestion de Kénitra Université Ibn Tofail –Maroc

Correspondence address: Faculté d'Economie et de Gestion de Kénitra, Université Ibn Tofail –Maroc

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Abstract:

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a significant issue in the business world (Rupp et al. 2003). The concept is not limited to businesses; but rather aims to encompass a variety of levels and players. Zaouche (2011) states, "There are as many CSRs as there are players". Stakeholder pressure has pushed higher education institutions to adopt socially responsible practices, resulting in University Social Responsibility (USR), which entails integrating sustainable development practices into public or private universities. RSU research is underexplored because it is a relatively new field (Abdelilah, 2019), whereas international scientific works are numerous in comparison to research in the Moroccan context. Thus, our goal is to provide an overview of scientific research on RSU worldwide from 2004 to 2024, using a systematic literature review of 36 articles published in national and international journals (Scopus, Springer, etc.) and in various contexts. Empirical articles dominated 58% of our sample. Despite changes in the university sector that have highlighted the social dimension of universities, this has not been widely adopted. As a result, Morocco faces significant challenges in terms of university social responsibility (USR).

Keywords: CSR, RSU, university, state of the art, systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are increasingly being urged to consider their role in fostering a sustainable and just society in a world plagued by escalating social issues. As a result, University Social Responsibility (USR) is emerging as a key concept linking social, environmental, and economic issues to universities' academic missions. This paradigm commits universities to actively participating in sustainable development and represents a necessary shift toward more moral and accountable university management. RSU is an extension of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is already well-established in the business world. Dewatripont et al. (2001) define CSR as "the integration by universities of cultural, environmental, and socio-economic concerns in their activities and relations with their various partners". This framework emphasizes the importance of interactions between universities and their societal environment, not just through education and research, but also through community engagement. Higher education institutions play an important role in preparing future leaders for these societal obligations. According to Bacigalupo (2008), the implementation of RSU represents a renewed commitment by universities to align their daily practices with sustainability and ethical principles. Universities must reconsider how they operate, not only to reduce their environmental impact; but also to maximize their contribution to the social and economic well-being of the communities they serve. As such, RSU can be viewed as an institutional response to the increasing pressure on universities to take the lead in the transition to a more sustainable society. Vallaeys et al. (2009) identify four major impacts of universities in this field: institutional, educational, cognitive, and social. These effects demonstrate the multifaceted scope of RSU, which includes both universities' internal actions and their external influence on society. However, despite significant progress, formalization and effective integration of RSU remain limited in many situations. An analysis of scientific publications from 2004 to 2024 reveals a gradual awareness of RSU, particularly after the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (Kaoutar and Hind, 2024). This increase reflects universities' growing commitment, but challenges remain, particularly in terms of funding, institutional policies, and impact assessment. Thus, this article proposes to investigate the dynamics and challenges associated with the integration of RSU in Moroccan universities using a literature review and stakeholder surveys. The goal is to identify potential levers for more successful formalization of RSU in higher education institutions while accounting for Morocco's unique contextual features.

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1. The evolution of CSR :

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved significantly over time. It is becoming more integrated into corporate strategy, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability, governance, and business ethics (add quotation). Over the last decade, corporate social responsibility has emerged as a critical component of corporate strategy and a factor in global competitiveness. Companies are increasingly looking to incorporate CSR into their supply chains to reduce environmental impact while also improving social impact, such as human rights, diversity, and inclusion. Corporate responsibility has evolved to reflect the contexts and boundaries of each era (Rahman, 2011), giving it a contingent and multidimensional character. Indeed, a brief history of the concept and related practices is required to ensure a thorough understanding and clarification of the concept.

- **1950s: The advent and early theorization of CSR**

The modern concept of CSR is unquestionably American in origin. This idea originated as corporate practices in the nineteenth century, became a doctrine in the twentieth century, and was theorized as a concept beginning in the 1950s. This concept spread throughout the world in the early twenty-first century, fueled by the rise of sustainable development ideology. Some are even promoting it as a new management philosophy because it is being discussed internationally in various forums, as evidenced by the recent release of the ISO 26000 standard. CSR pioneer BOWEN's famous book is the result of numerous discourses in which "discussions of corporate social responsibility are becoming not only acceptable in management circles; but even fashionable" (BOWEN, 1953). The RSE is also a paradoxical work, because its title clearly emphasizes individual (rather than corporate) social responsibilities, but these responsibilities are embedded in a highly standardized institutional and democratic framework (PASQUERO, 2013). CSR is therefore a research topic. CARROLL (1999) believes that BOWEN's work brings CSR into the academic realm. BOWEN's goal was to delve into the debates on corporate social responsibility that many American businessmen were having in the euphoria of the postwar era; and to enrich them with the influence of his great social and moral critique of the time. ACQUIER and GOND (2005) believe that his distant, pragmatic vision of the CSR object is similar to that of an "economic architect" who questions the relationship between the functioning of the economic system and social well-being. ACQUIER, GOND, and PASQUERO (2011) conducted a macro-economic analysis to evaluate CSR's potential to improve social well-being.

- **50s and 60s: Ethical concepts of CSR**

Conflicts over the abuses of economic liberalism in the United States began in the late nineteenth century, laying the groundwork for ongoing debate about the legitimacy of American capitalism. This debate paved the way for a lengthy discussion about reconciling public and private interests, laying the groundwork for what would become Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (PASQUERO, 2007). This period saw an increase in awareness of the importance of companies considering their impact on society and the environment, laying the groundwork for the evolution of CSR. At the time, CSR was frequently associated with business ethics. This "ethical" concept refers to a manager's internal characteristics, such as personal ethics, moral and religious values, and level of participation in corporate social responsibility policies (BRENNER and MOLANDER, 1977). According to Pasquero (2005), an "ethical" company, like an individual, takes on its social role through loyalty to the social actors who have contributed to its success. In other words, an "ethical" company must understand its actions and be willing to accept the consequences. However, corporate responsibility differs from ethics. The primary distinction between CSR and ethics is that the latter is a purely moral discourse that distinguishes right from wrong, whereas CSR is concerned with the organization's efficiency, functionality, sustainability, and responsibility (CAPRON and QUAIREL-LANOIZELEE, 2007).

- **70s to 90s: Utilitarian approach**

During the 1970s, American society's economic context created favorable conditions for the development of the CSR concept. Strategic management theorized the concept of stakeholders beginning in 1984 (FREEMAN 1984). CSR has evolved into a logical, rational response sought by economic agents themselves (CAPRON, 2007). Companies take a proactive approach, rather than waiting for the state to intervene. However, corporate behavior as a rational economic agent must be oriented toward economic performance. In the 1980s and 1990s, all CSR research centered on Corporate Social Performance (CSP). During this time, an abundance of managerial and academic literature dealing with the relationship between these two concepts was produced, highlighting the problem in terms of methodology as well as the direction of this relationship in terms of causality. GOND and MULLENBACH (2003) propose a more utilitarian approach to CSR, with a focus on applying principles at institutional, organizational, and managerial levels.

- **2000s: Design for sustainability**

Since the 2000s, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has grown in popularity in Europe, thanks in part to several European Commission initiatives. White papers (official documents issued by governments or institutions to inform and propose guidelines) and green papers (documents intended to stimulate reflection and debate on specific issues) are published, conferences are held, and networks between universities are formed. One notable initiative seeks to increase social awareness among French employers. According to the Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants d'Entreprise (CJD), the economy must not only integrate today's social and environmental dimensions; but also serve humanity. The primary goal of this ethical approach is to promote the public good. However, it should be noted that this is primarily applicable to non-profit organizations. The other two approaches to CSR, utilitarian and sustainable development, are still relevant in contemporary debates. Certainly, the rational approach, which limits the role of business to profit maximization, is still prevalent, particularly in English-speaking countries. While the sustainable development approach is gaining popularity in European countries, the conformist approach, which considers stakeholder interests, seeks to reconcile the ethical and utilitarian approaches (EPSTEIN, 1987). According to EPSTEIN, the various approaches to CSR are complementary and follow the same path.

2010: CSR and shared value creation

Porter and Kramer have been working on the concept of "Creating Shared Value" since 2006. This concept is part of a larger research effort aimed at connecting corporate social responsibility to competitive advantage. According to Porter and Kramer, businesses should focus their efforts on societal issues that have a direct impact on their performance and operating environment, emphasizing the interdependence of business and society.

In this context, Gond and Igalens (2008) explain that; to comprehend all CSR-related concepts, it is necessary to "build on the lowest common denominator" and recognize that CSR defines the interface between business and society. This idea reinforces Porter and Kramer's theory and emphasizes the importance of recognizing and capitalizing on the interdependence of business and social issues.

Porter and Kramer (2006) believe that it is in the best interests of businesses to concentrate their efforts on societal issues that can also benefit their performance. In this stage of reflection, they present the creation of shared value as an opportunity to guide businesses in implementing socially responsible approaches, as well as a means of prioritizing their actions. Creating shared value serves two purposes: organizing CSR approaches, reintroducing CSR into organizational strategy, and restoring corporate legitimacy (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

To illustrate the evolution of CSR and the contributions of the major thinkers in this field, we have included a figure below that summarizes the various phases and key theories.

Figure 1: Historical evolution of the major thinkers on CSR

Source : Authors

1950 (Bowen)	**The advent and theorization of CSR**
50 to 60 (Frederick & David)	**Ethical concepts of CSR**
70 to 90 (Caroll)	**Utilitarian conception**
2000 (Gond)	**Concept of sustainability**

2. Is there a consensus definition of CSR?

"The term 'social responsibility' is remarkable; it means something, but never the same thing to everyone". (Votaw, 1972, p.25)

The concept of corporate social responsibility has been and continues to be defined in a variety of ways by institutions and individuals from various fields and backgrounds. Several definitions have been developed since the publication of Bowen's work (1953), which is regarded as the foundation of this movement. They represent various points of view in the field of CSR. To date, there appears to be no global consensus on a single definition. In this regard, the diversity of mutual representations makes it extremely difficult to support a universal reflection on the subject. Indeed, the institutional and academic definitions of CSR frequently differ (Déjean and Gond, 2004). The majority of definitions adopted by institutional bodies emphasize the company's commitment, stating that it must go beyond legal obligations (Ben Yedder and Zaddem, 2009). The following table lists a variety of academic definitions.

Table 1: CSR definitions from the literature

Author	Theoretical definitions of CSR
Bowen (1953)	"CSR refers to the obligation of business people to carry out policies, make decisions and follow courses of action that meet the objectives and values that are considered desirable in our society".

McGuire (1963)	"The idea of social responsibility implies that the company has not only legal or economic obligations; but also responsibilities towards society that go beyond its obligations.
Davis (1973)	"CSR refers to the company's consideration of problems that go beyond its narrow economic, technical and legal obligations, and to the company's responses to these problems. [...]. This means that CSR begins where the law ends. A company is not socially responsible if it complies with the minimum required by law, because that's what any good citizen is obliged to do".
Carroll (1979)	"CSR integrates all the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations that society may have of a company at a given time".
Jones (1980)	"The idea that companies have an obligation to societal stakeholders that goes beyond legal or contractual requirements".
Wood (1991)	"The meaning of corporate responsibility can only be understood through the interplay of three principles: legitimacy, public accountability and managerial discretion. These principles result from the distinction between three levels of analysis: institutional, organizational and individual.
Dyllick and Hockerts (2002)	Meet the needs of the company's direct and indirect stakeholders (employees, customers, pressure groups, communities, etc.), without compromising the ability of future stakeholders to meet their needs.
Kotler and Lee (2004)	Commitment to improving community well-being through discretionary practices and contributions to company resources

Source: (Déjean & Gond, 2003)

Table 2 shows the definitions of CSR proposed by international organizations, including ISO 26000, the European Commission's Green Paper, the United Nations Global Compact, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Table 2 : Institutional definitions

Organization	Institutional definition of CSR
ISO 26000 standard	CSR is defined as "an organization's responsibility towards the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, reflected in transparent and ethical behavior that: contributes to sustainable development, including the health and well-being of society; takes into account the expectations of stakeholders; complies with applicable laws and is compatible with international standards; and is integrated throughout the organization and implemented in its relationships."
United Nations Global Compact	"CSR is about companies adopting, supporting and applying a set of fundamental values within their sphere of influence, in the areas of human rights, labor and environmental standards, and anti-corruption."
The European Commission	CSR is "the voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns into their business activities and their relations with their stakeholders".
World Bank	"The commitment (or obligation) for business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and wider society to improve quality of life, in ways that are good for development and good for business." (Nicolas, 2013).
OECD	"Companies are expected to comply with the various laws that apply to them, and in practice, they often have to meet societal expectations that are not recorded in the legal texts."

Source: Author's summary.

The concept of CSR has evolved over the past few decades. Initially, the focus was on large corporations, but later definitions expanded to include other organizations. The goal of CSR is to restore meaning and coherence; and to get everyone working toward a common goal, regardless of the type of organization. Furthermore, ISO 26000 states that it applies to both private and public companies, regardless of the type of institution or organization. It is also known as "Organizational- or Institutional- Social Responsibility" (OSR). It's easy to see why corporate social responsibility appeals to both public and private sectors. Previous research on universities has demonstrated that they can have "significant environmental impacts" (Jabbour,

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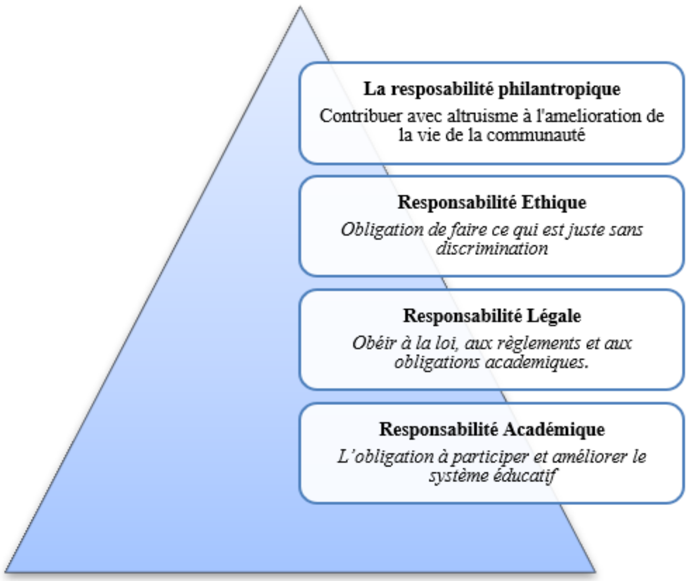
2010). Higher education institutions play a critical role in instilling social responsibility and sustainable development in future leaders. The practice of social responsibility in universities represents a renewed engagement with diverse publics while also harmonizing university social responsibility (USR) with day-to-day institutional process management (Bacigalupo, 2008). RSU emphasizes mutually beneficial relationships between university members and external stakeholders. University stakeholders (faculty, staff, and students) participate in a responsible learning process that includes external stakeholders (community, government, alumni). In other words, feedback from external stakeholders helps to improve curricula, teaching, learning, and research.

3. RSU « définition :

RSU is a new and still somewhat ambiguous concept. According to Sawasdikosol (2009), it was first mentioned in the literature in 2008. It could be a specific type of CSR, or more broadly, CSR involving universities as public bodies carrying out public service missions. According to Dewatripont et al. (2001), it represents, above all, "the integration by universities of cultural, environmental, but also socio-economic concerns in their activities and relations with their various partners."

Figure 2: University social responsibility pyramid



Source: Emese, 2020

4. Impacts of RSU :

Organizations of all types (companies, universities, governments, etc.) can have an impact through their daily operations and management. Organizations can harm others without realizing it. Universities, for example, have an economic, social, and environmental impact due to the large number of people and vehicles on campus, the massive consumption of materials, and the growth of complex activities. Vallaeys et al. (2009) unequivocally identify four impacts on universities:

- **Institutional impact**: A university, like any other organization, has an impact on the lives of its internal public (staff, professors, students) as well as specific environmental impacts (waste, logging, transportation, pollution, etc.) that are related to how it operates. Universities must question how they manage their day-to-day operations.
- **Impact on education**: This refers to the teaching and learning process, as well as curriculum development. Universities must consider the types of professionals they want to develop. How can education be restructured to prepare responsible citizens? Cognitive impacts include everything related to epistemological and ethical orientations, theoretical approaches, research, knowledge production, and dissemination. Here, universities must consider how to generate and manage knowledge.
- **Social impact**: Universities, like other organizations, should contribute to community development and social heritage. Universities have a clear impact on the social, economic, and political development of society.

5. Methodology

This synthesis review was conducted through a targeted search of published scientific data on university social responsibility. Searches were conducted using a variety of databases, including ScienceDirect (http://www.sciencedirect.com/), Pubmed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed), Scopus (http://www.scopus.com/), Google Scholars (http://www.scholar.google.com/), and Google. The following keywords were used in this bibliographic search: university social responsibility, corporate social responsibility, state of the art in RSU, and systematic literature review. It should be noted that the search used the same keywords that had been translated into English. The search began on PubMed and then expanded to ScienceDirect to identify previously missed studies. The search then extended to the other databases. The investigations were filtered based on title, abstract, or both. The selected articles were written in either English or French. To be included in our review, a study

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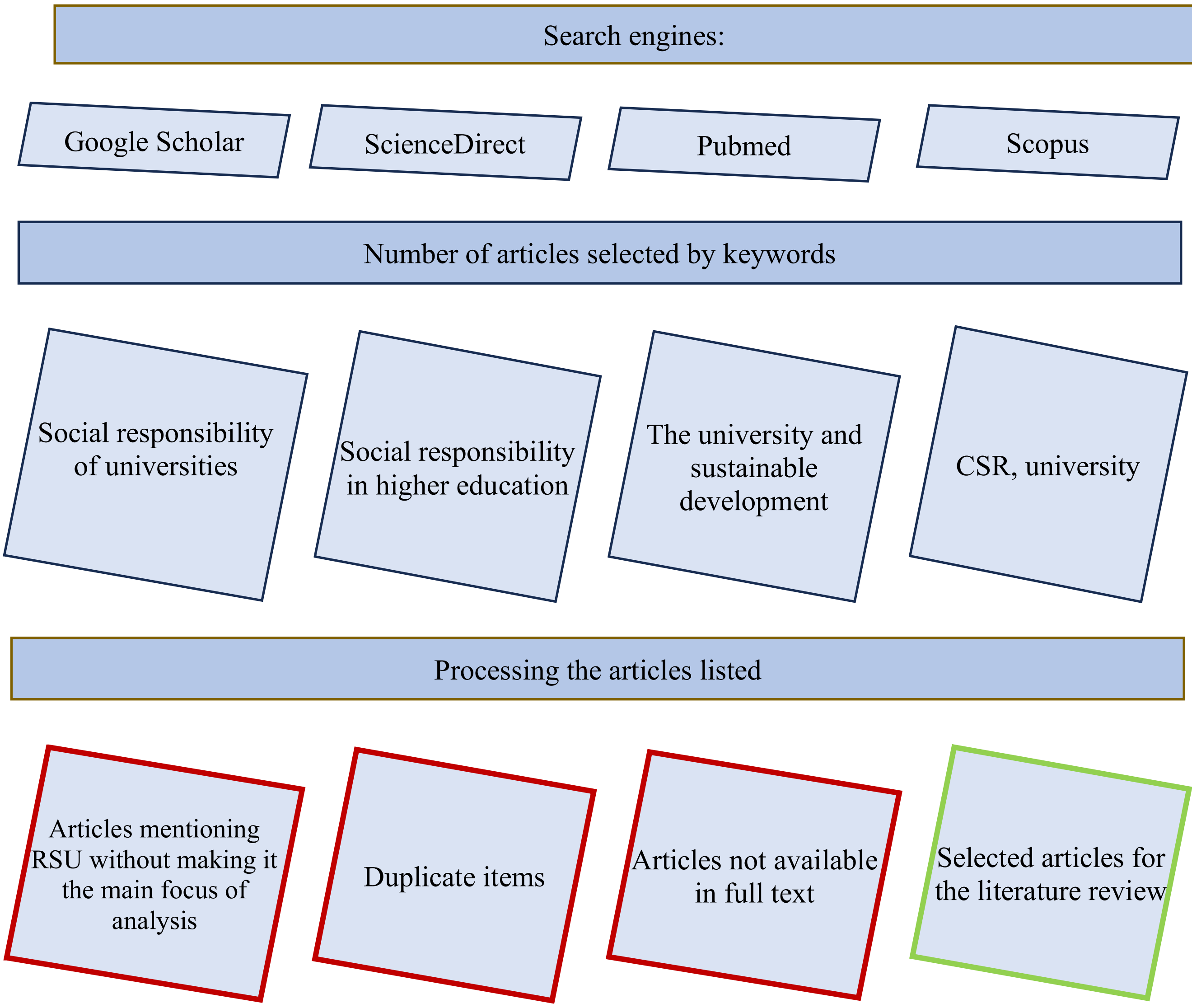
had to be published between 2004 and 2024 and focus solely on university social responsibility. Unrelated investigations were excluded, as were duplicate results from multiple studies.

Figure 3: Methodological process for identifying and selecting articles for analysis



Source: by the authors

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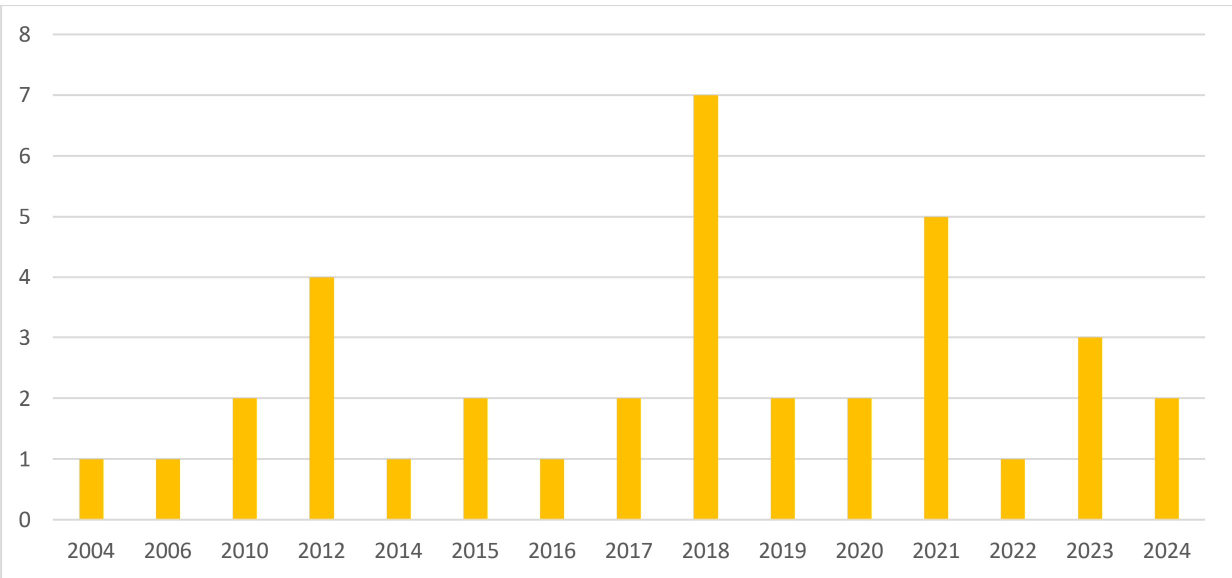
6. results and discussion

Figure 4 illustrates the evolution of the number of scientific publications on University Social Responsibility (USR) from 2004 to 2024, highlighting key trends over time. For starters, there was a moderate increase between 2004 and 2016, with some fluctuations, most likely reflecting academics' nascent interest in RSU, a concept that was still in its early stages in scientific and academic discourse. These issues dominated academic debates beginning in 2015; when the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Universities face pressure to position themselves on key issues like sustainability, social equity, and environmental responsibility.

The significant increase in 2018 (7 publications), when the number of publications peaked, could be attributed to a growing collective awareness of social responsibility issues, both within universities and in society as a whole. Despite a slight decrease in 2019, the number of publications will increase again in 2021. This renewed interest could be attributed to post-pandemic reflections on universities' roles in society, particularly in terms of social responsibility and contributions to global crisis resolution. Finally, since 2022, there appears to be a slight stabilization, indicating that RSU research has normalized, with interest remaining but becoming more consistent.

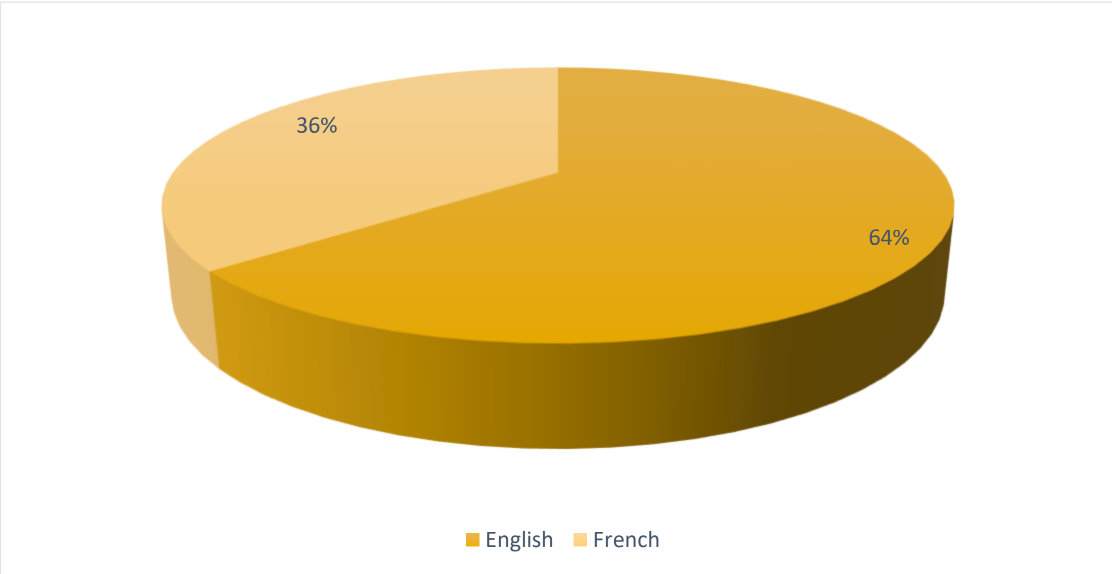
Figure 4: Scientific publications on University Social Responsibility (USR) from 2004 to 2024



Source: by the authors

Figure 5 shows the distribution of languages used, with English accounting for 64% of the total. This is not surprising given that English has become the language of reference in many fields, most notably academic research and international communication. The majority of publications, conferences, and collaborations worldwide are in English, which explains this predominance.

Figure 5: Languages used in publications



Source: by the authors

Table 3 displays the number of publications on University Social Responsibility (USR) by country, with a clear Moroccan lead. Indeed, Morocco stands out with 9 publications, which is understandable given our research context, as we are Moroccan researchers. Naturally, our work has become deeply ingrained in the Moroccan scientific community. This strong presence also demonstrates local researchers' growing interest in RSU and active participation in the field. France comes in second with 8 publications, demonstrating a strong dynamism in RSU research. Other countries, despite having fewer publications, contribute significantly to the international debate. It is also worth noting that this distribution is influenced by search engines, which favor local publications.

This may partly explain why Morocco occupies first place in this ranking.

Table 3: Breakdown of publications on University Social Responsibility (USR) by country

Country	Number of publications
Morocco	9
France	8
Malaysia	3
Poland	2

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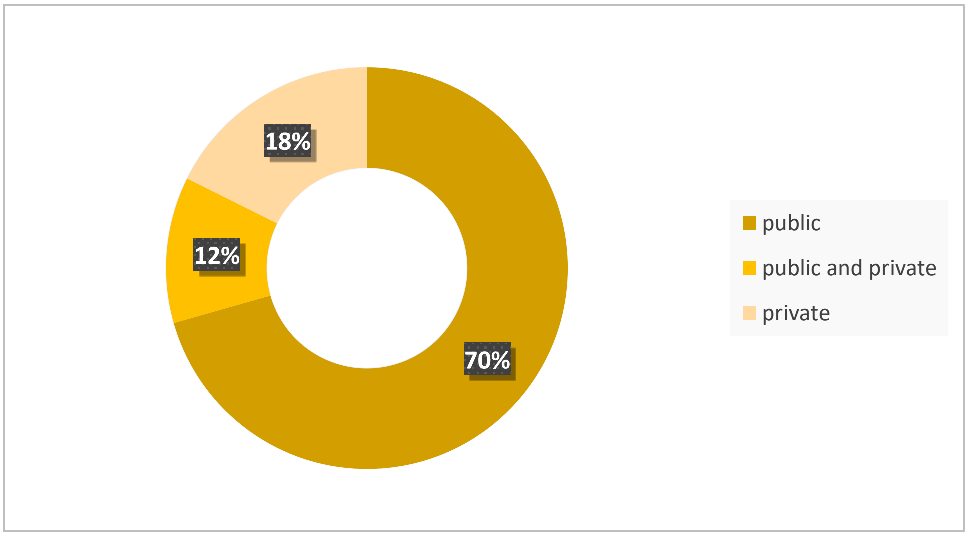
Cyprus	2
Netherlands	1
Italy	1
Czech	1
Spain	1
Saudia Arabia	1
Congo	1
Dakar	1
India	1
Ireland,	1
Belgium	1
Lithuania	1

Source: by the authors

Figure 6 depicts the distribution of university fields of study based on their status, with a clear majority of public institutions (70%). This demonstrates the significance of public universities in the academic landscape, especially in terms of University Social Responsibility (USR). Public institutions frequently play a central role in education, research, and community development, with government funding and support. Institutions that combine public and private resources account for 12% of the total. These hybrid institutions can capitalize on the benefits of both systems, using both state and private resources to innovate and adapt to society's changing needs. Private universities account for 18% of the field of study. Although their numbers are smaller, they play an important role by providing an alternative that is often more flexible and faster to adopt innovations to remain competitive in a rapidly changing environment.

Figure 6: Breakdown of universities by status: Public, Private and Mixed



Source: by the authors

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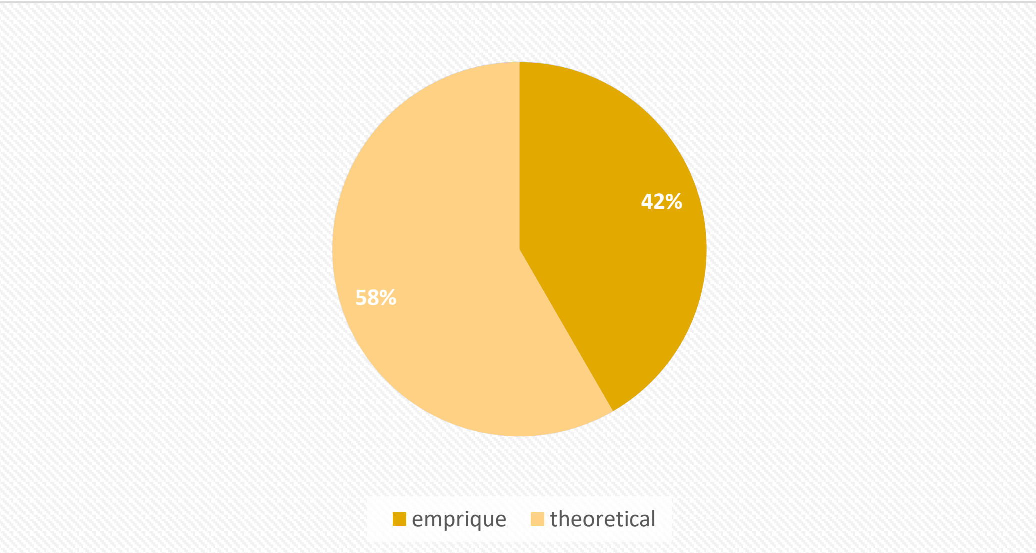
Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of research types. Empirical studies make up the vast majority of research (58%). This emphasizes the importance of observing and analyzing concrete cases, particularly those involving the application of University Social Responsibility (USR) principles. Researchers frequently prioritize the practical application of RSU through field studies, surveys, or pilot projects to gain a better understanding of how these concepts translate into reality and what tangible results exist. However, theoretical research, which accounts for 42% of studies, remains equally important. This work investigates, develops, and refines the conceptual frameworks that support RSU. Theoretical literature is critical in laying the groundwork for thinking about the principles, models, and issues surrounding social responsibility in higher education.

Figure 7: Distribution of RSU research by type: Empirical versus theoretical approaches



Source: by the authors

Figure 8 shows a clear dominance of scientific articles (94% of publications), with papers and theses accounting for only 3% each. This suggests that the concept in question is still relatively new and has not yet been thoroughly researched by doctoral students. The fact that there are so few theses may indicate that the topic has not yet received the attention required for in-depth research. However, the high number of articles indicates that the subject is gaining traction in the scientific community, paving the way for future more detailed work, particularly through research theses.

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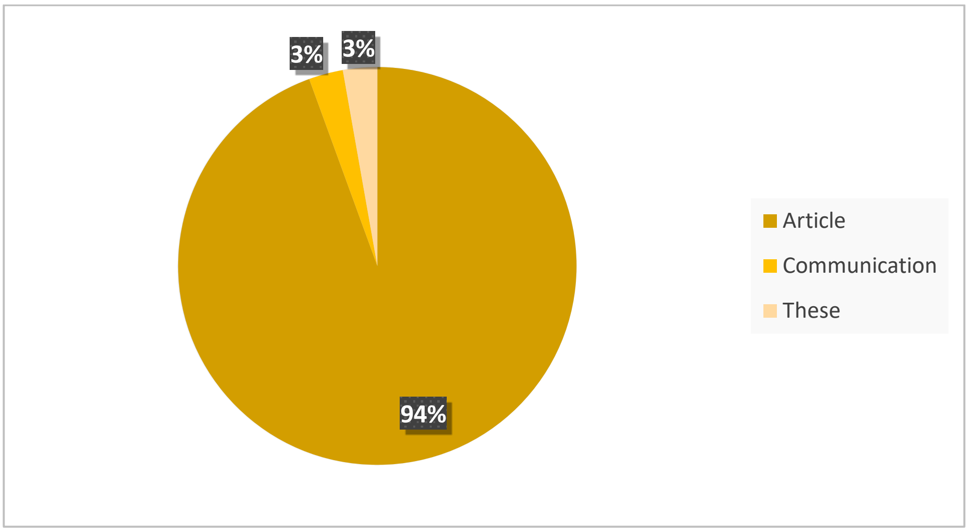
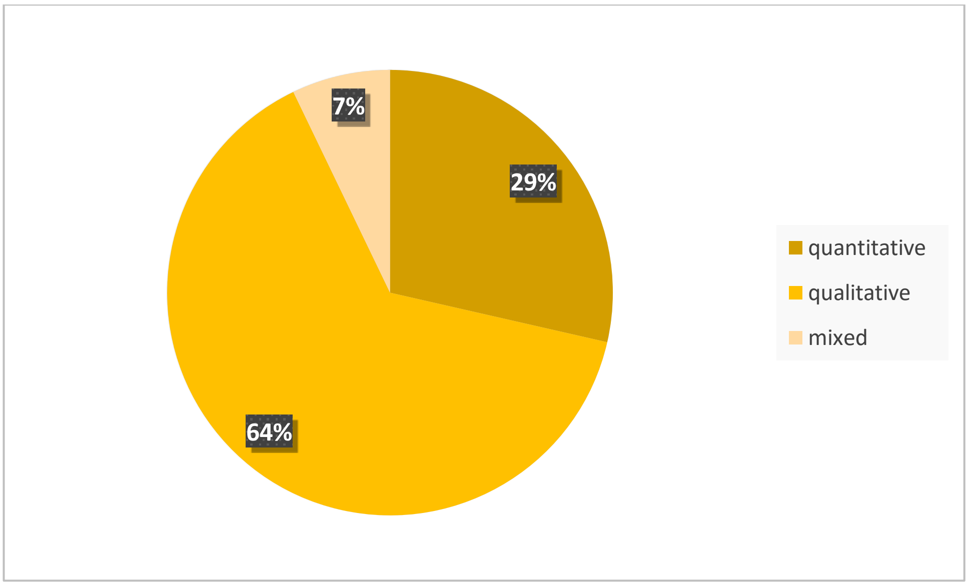
Figure 8: Typology of scientific documents



Source: by the authors

Figure 9 shows that 64% of university social responsibility (USR) research is qualitative. This is because the field is still relatively new. Instead of relying on established measures, researchers aim to investigate and discover new variables and dynamics. Quantitative methods, which account for 29% of studies, are less prevalent. This demonstrates that quantitative data in this emerging field are still in their early stages of development. Finally, mixed research, which combines both approaches, makes up only 7% of studies. This demonstrates that few works have yet succeeded in integrating these two perspectives, but this may change as the RSU theme evolves further.

Figure 9: Methodological approaches in RSU studies



Source: by the authors

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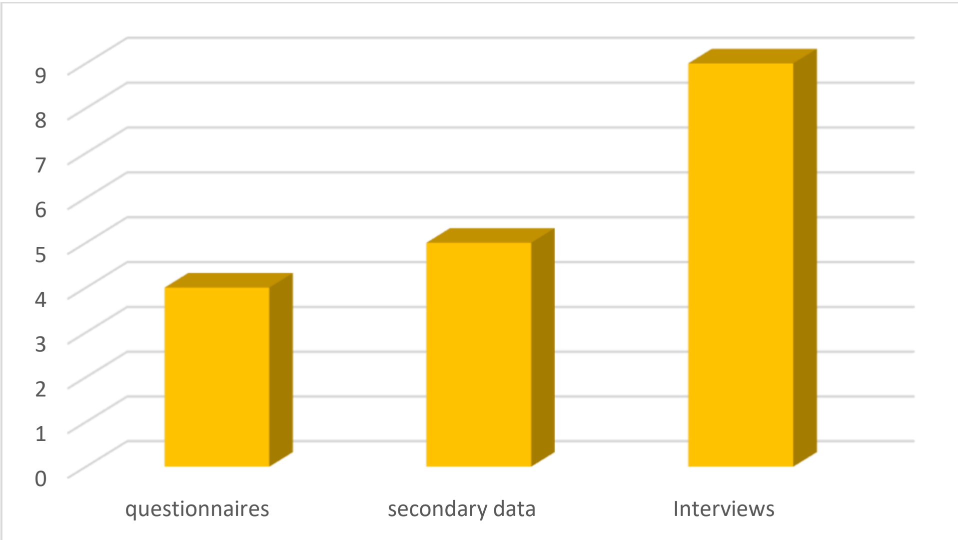
Figure 10 depicts the data collection tools used in the study, with interviews outnumbering other methods. This predominance is explained by the prevalence of qualitative methods in this type of research, where interviews allow for in-depth exploration of the topics studied. Secondary data and questionnaires, while less common, play an important role, but are often associated with quantitative or mixed methods. The emphasis on interviews reflects the exploratory approach that is commonly required in fields where concepts and variables are still being developed.

Figure 10: collection tools



Source: by the authors

Table 5 clearly shows that stakeholder theory is the most commonly used theory in RSU literature, with 14 mentions, emphasizing the importance of relationships between universities and their stakeholders (students, faculty, and society). Other theories, such as neo-institutional theory (4 mentions) and transaction cost theory (2 mentions), are less commonly used but still relevant in specific analyses. These findings demonstrate a focus on universities' commitment to their stakeholders in the evaluation of RSU.

Table 5: Frequency of theories mobilized in research related to RSU

Mobilized theories	
Stakeholder theory	14
Neo-institutional theory	4
The theory of legitimacy	1
The theory of resource exchange	1
Transaction cost theory	2
Diffusion and innovation theory	1

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Source: by the authors

Table 6 shows the various dimensions commonly used in studies on University Social Responsibility (USR), as well as their frequency of occurrence in the literature. The social dimension receives the most mentions (17), indicating that RSU prioritizes social issues such as universities' commitment to their communities and the management of internal relations (students, staff, etc.). The economic dimension receives 12 mentions, indicating a keen interest in the economic implications of RSU practices such as responsible financial management and investments in sustainable development. The environmental dimension (10 mentions) is also significant, demonstrating the importance of universities' efforts to reduce their ecological footprint and promote sustainable practices. The ethical (6 mentions) and philanthropic (4 mentions) dimensions emphasize the importance of moral values and charitable initiatives in university management. Finally, the legal (3 mentions), ecological (1 mention), and political (1 mention) dimensions are present but not extensively studied.

Table 6: Typology frequency of dimensions used

Dimension	Frequency
Social	17
Economical	12
Environmental	10
Ethics	6
Philanthropic	4
Legal	3
Ecological	1
Policy	1

Source: by the authors

Figure 11 depicts how studies on University Social Responsibility (USR) are organized based on the number of dimensions they investigate. The majority of studies (7) focus on three dimensions, indicating a desire to balance social, economic, and environmental concerns. A significant number of studies (5) concentrate on two dimensions, implying a more focused or specific approach. In contrast, a few studies (3) consider four dimensions, providing a more comprehensive and detailed view of RSU. Interestingly, only a few studies (1 each) use a multidimensional approach or a single-dimension analysis. This demonstrates that researchers prefer a multidimensional approach, frequently focusing on three or two dimensions to achieve depth of analysis and precision.

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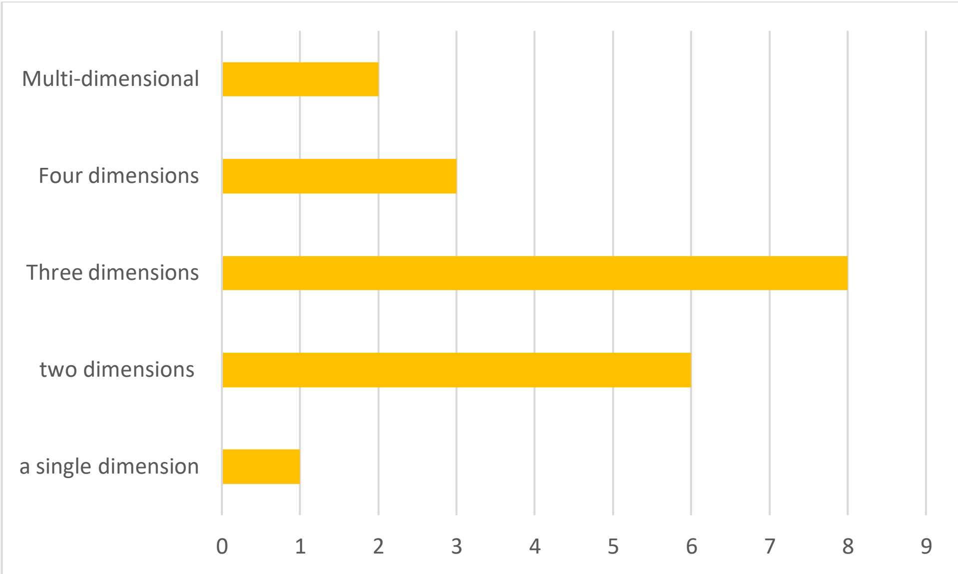
Figure 11: Number of dimensions used per search



Source: by the authors

Table 7 depicts the distribution of key concepts related to social responsibility, particularly within the academic context. What stands out the most is the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is mentioned 17 times, demonstrating how central this concept is to contemporary thinking. The university, which is mentioned 12 times, is also at the center of the discussions, indicating a growing interest in its role in the implementation of responsible practices. RSU, or Responsabilité Sociale des Universités, is a significant term with 11 occurrences, demonstrating academic institutions' growing commitment to social and environmental issues. Development, which can be interpreted as sustainable development or institutional growth, is a recurring theme that appears eight times. Education is mentioned six times, emphasizing its importance in integrating social responsibility into educational programs. Stakeholders, for their part, are mentioned five times, emphasizing their importance in implementing social responsibility. Finally, Organizational Social Responsibility (OSR) is mentioned only once, implying that it is not a primary concern in this context, but should be considered in broader discussions of social responsibility. This table demonstrates that, while businesses remain a primary focus, universities and their social practices are emerging as a growing area of interest, with a particular emphasis on stakeholder relations and sustainability.

Table 7: The frequency of key concepts used.

Concept Clé	Frequency
CSR	17
University	12
RSU	11
Sustainable development	8
Higher education	6
Stakeholders	5
RSO	1

Source: by the authors

The purpose of this study was to review the literature on University Social Responsibility (USR) from 2004 to 2024. This approach is justified by institutional changes that emphasize the university's social dimension and critical role in society. The articles we worked on are typically published in specialized journals, such as the Social Responsibility Journal. The first finding is that, despite recent university sector reforms that have highlighted the social dimension of universities, there is still a long way to go in terms of University Social Responsibility (USR). This highlights several challenges to incorporating social responsibility principles into four key areas: education, research, management, and community engagement. Possible solutions to these challenges include establishing university-specific research and training program, cultivating an entrepreneurial culture within these institutions, and revising the recognition and reward system for teachers and researchers (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Larrán et al., 2017).

The second finding The majority of work on RSU worldwide takes the form of literature reviews, such as those by Kaoutar, N. and Hind, L. S. L. (2024), Wigmore-Álvarez, A. and Ruiz-Lozano, M. (2012), and El Yaagoubi, J. (2023) in "La responsabilité sociétale des universités au Maroc: bilan actuel". There are several explanations for this dominance. To begin, literature reviews help to synthesize the state of research in a rapidly changing field like RSU, highlighting major contributions, existing gaps, and future prospects. Second, because RSU is a global and multidimensional issue, it necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. Literature reviews provide a framework for integrating theoretical and practical perspectives from a variety of regional and cultural backgrounds. Finally, given the diversity of USR practices and policies around the world, these reviews are an important tool for comparing and analyzing international trends, allowing for a better understanding of global issues while accounting for local differences.

The third finding is that the majority of research on RSU is qualitative (Luangsay-Catelin, Carine, and Marie-Hélène Gasner-Bouquet, 2020; Stadge, M. R. B., 2021). To gain a better understanding of the institutionalization of social responsibility in French universities, a study of five universities was conducted, primarily through exploratory interviews. This indicates that the concept has not yet been fully explored or matured in academic research. Indeed, while qualitative studies allow for in-depth exploration of the players' perceptions and experiences, they frequently represent an early stage in the development of a field of research. This frequent use of exploratory interviews suggests that our understanding of the RSU concept is still evolving, necessitating more robust and diverse studies to broaden its scope and practical implications.

Compared to the international context, the Moroccan case presents several specific features that deserve to be highlighted. First, Moroccan universities’ engagement in USR is still at an embryonic stage, largely due to the absence of a formal regulatory framework and limited institutional incentives. While countries such as France or Spain have integrated sustainability reporting and accreditation mechanisms into their higher education systems, Moroccan universities mainly rely on individual initiatives led by research teams or university leadership. Second, the issue of funding represents a major constraint: public universities, which account for over 70% of the Moroccan academic landscape, face structural budgetary limitations that hinder the implementation of large-scale social responsibility programs. Third, the Moroccan case is marked by the strong influence of national policies and reforms (e.g., the Strategic Vision 2015–2030 and the New Development Model), which frame universities’ missions but have not yet fully translated into operational mechanisms for USR. Finally, Morocco’s context highlights the potential role of universities as catalysts for socio-economic development, given their proximity to local communities and their responsibility in addressing pressing social challenges such as youth unemployment, inequality, and sustainable territorial development. These elements distinguish the Moroccan case and demonstrate that, while international experiences provide useful benchmarks, the integration of USR in Morocco requires context-specific approaches that account for governance, financial, and societal constraints.

Conclusion

The incorporation of University Social Responsibility (USR) into higher education institutions represents a strategic response to the growing challenges of sustainable development, social equity, and institutional ethics. During this study, we investigated the theoretical foundations of RSU as well as its practical applications, particularly in the Moroccan context, and discovered that, while some progress has been made, RSU's full formalization and integration remains embryonic at several universities. Universities, as places where knowledge is transmitted and future leaders are trained, play an important role in spreading socially responsible practices. According to Dewatripont et al. (2001), RSU extends far beyond academics, incorporating cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental commitments into university management and external relations. However, the systematic implementation of RSU remains insufficient. Our findings highlight disparities in RSU appropriation across universities, indicating significant differences in institutional policies, resources, and willingness to commit. Furthermore, it appears that the growing awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted by the United Nations in 2015, has played a catalytic role in raising university awareness of RSU. Nonetheless, despite this surge, numerous challenges impede effective implementation. The main barriers identified include a lack of funding, the absence of solid institutional frameworks to frame RSU, and a failure to recognize RSU as a tool for improving academic and institutional performance. These challenges are exacerbated by a managerial culture that, at times, remains solely focused on economic priorities, pushing societal concerns to the background. In the case of Moroccan universities, the study reveals that, while there is growing interest in RSU, there are still gaps in governance and management for responsible initiatives. The implementation of a more structured regulatory framework could not only improve the impact of RSU, but also encourage a more thorough evaluation of initiatives in terms of sustainability and social responsibility. Several levers of action can be considered to ensure that the RSU becomes a tangible and long-term reality in Moroccan universities. First and foremost, appropriate institutional policies must be developed to encourage and facilitate the integration of RSU into overall university strategies. This could include financial incentives and support programs for projects that follow RSU principles. Second, training and raising awareness among university stakeholders (students, professors, and administrative staff) about the issues at stake in the RSU is critical to ensuring the collective appropriation of these values. Finally, partnerships with civil society, local governments, and economic actors must be fostered to increase RSU's impact and strengthen universities' legitimacy as responsible societal actors. Finally, RSU is a critical tool for aligning universities' missions with current societal expectations. While the integration of RSU is still in the works, it provides a unique opportunity to transform universities into drivers of sustainable, social, and economic development. This process necessitates concerted, multidimensional action by all stakeholders, to create truly responsible universities dedicated to collective well-being. Building on these findings, several operational recommendations can be proposed to strengthen the integration of USR in Moroccan universities. First, the establishment of clear institutional policies and dedicated funding mechanisms would facilitate the alignment of universities with national and international sustainability agendas. Second, the adoption of USR indicators and reporting tools, inspired by international best practices, could enhance monitoring, transparency, and comparability across institutions. Third, it is essential to develop training and awareness programs for students, faculty, and administrative staff to ensure the collective appropriation of USR principles. Finally, universities should foster strategic partnerships with civil society, local authorities, and the private sector in order to maximize their social and economic impact. These recommendations, while particularly relevant to the Moroccan context, also provide practical insights for other higher education systems facing similar challenges.

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