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Social responsibility at a university – students' perspectives

Abstract

This paper explores social responsibility training as part of university educational programmes. The authors compare French and Bulgarian students' perceptions of various elements of social responsibility and how social responsibility is approached in universities' curricula. Bulgarian students see social responsibility more often in terms of volunteer work, charitable activities and career opportunities, while French students associate it with environmental aspects. The only statistically significant gender difference in Bulgaria emerged in linking improving working conditions with social responsibility. French students placed stronger emphasis on business and the possible practical applications of social responsibility training offered by universities.

Keywords: business, students, sustainability, university, social responsibility, teaching methods

Introduction

Higher education institutions of modern societies must address multiple social and economic challenges. Social responsibility therefore must become a necessary component of each university's mission and strategy. University social responsibility (USR) is a relatively recent idea (Kouatli, 2018; Larran Jorge et al., 2011), and the subject of growing academic interest (Larran Jorge & Andrades Pena, 2017; Meseguer-Sanchez et al., 2020).

Traditionally, social responsibility is associated with corporate organisations (Berber et al. 2014; Fontaine, 2013; Nardo et al., 2021), but plays an increasingly important role in public institutions (Bokhari, 2017; Kouatli, 2018; Ogarca & Puiu, 2017). Bokhari (2017) argues that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is associated more often with non-profit organisations and higher education institutions, as they seek to tackle various challenges through different reforms (Vasilescu et al., 2010). The need for higher education institutions to address in a better way the topics of ethics and social responsibility was identified several decades ago (Sims & Sims, 1991). Universities have only recently begun to adopt social responsibility and at a slower pace compared to business organisations (Hernandez et al., 2020). Universities apply social responsibility to gain a competitive advantage and demonstrate their commitments beyond teaching. They address targeted EU policies on research within the European Higher Education Area while paying attention to social responsibility. As a follow up, many universities have adopted social responsibility initiatives in their strategies.

Universities should make it part of their mission to support finding solutions to societal problems and contribute to social well-being and better quality of life.

From this perspective, social responsibility should be a priority in higher education institutions' vision and strategy, building on academic rigour and excellence. The policies in the respective universities have evolved over the years.

This paper studies social responsibility training as a tool to support the formation of socially responsible citizens and as an element of university activities. The main premise of the analysis is that students perceive social responsibility as an important part of social development and consider learning about this field as advantageous for their future. These propositions are related to previous research, as authors look at the influence similar education has on students' employability (Graham, 2012; Syper-

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Jędrzejak et al., 2022). Tormo-Carbo et al. (2019) claim, as far as teaching approaches are concerned, that the students' point of view is rarely analysed and further research is needed. Coelho and Menezes (2021) point out that understanding the students' perspective on USR policies and education should be better explored. Vazquez et al. (2015) call attention to changes in a curriculum through analysing the students' opinion. According to Ayala-Rodriguez et al. (2019), a new understanding of the university's role is emerging which reflects academia's contribution to solving social, political and environmental problems, and defining new pathways for cooperation between the private and the public sector. Responsible universities also cooperate with the society-at-large, for example, with local and disadvantaged communities as well as with self-organized citizen groups.

This paper examines student perspectives on social responsibility in curricula, comparing the views of French and Bulgarian students. This comparison offers insights into Old and New EU Member states and Eastern Europe's understudied focus on University Social Responsibility (USR). Despite differing economic stages—France being a strong innovator and Bulgaria an emerging one— the two countries share cultural traits such as a long-term educational focus.

Our research poses three questions: What are students' perceptions of social responsibility training at a university and what do they believe are the most effective methods to teach the subject, and what are the factors driving teaching on social responsibility in academia, including teaching the importance of USR policies? We conducted a mixed online and paper-and-pencil survey among students in economics, management, and related programmes to get insights from students in Bulgaria and France.

Theoretical background

University social responsibility as a basis of social responsibility training

The relationship between CSR and higher education was studied even before the term USR was first introduced by Matten and Moon (2004). CSR was introduced to the curriculum in many business schools. Subsequently, Barber and Venkatachalam (2013), Christensen et al. (2007), Hesselbarth and Schaltegger (2014) contributed to the establishment of this new field. CSR has a long tradition within the Japanese responsible management school of thought (Kuriyama, 2020) and the world's humanities universities. These educational institutions prepare their students for corporate recruitment questions like "How would you like to contribute to society?" and "How do you see our company assisting you?" instead of "Why you are the best candidate for us?"

Vasilescu et al. (2010) argue that a student represents a unique type of stakeholder for the purposes of USR. Ayala-Rodriguez et al. (2016) also recognize students as key players in USR (Chen et al., 2015). Students represent the future leaders and competent professionals, and universities educate them regarding social responsibility (Ayala-Rodriguez et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2020) and civics. Hudler et al. (2021) believe that universities should empower student activists to engage with various issues related to social injustice, marginalisation, and oppression as well as campus sustainability. However, if no dedicated programmes for student empowerment are in place, the university rhetoric has little or no value. Universities are considered laboratories for democracy, where students develop civic skills in addition to acquiring intelligence and erudition.

Jongbloed et al. (2008) argue that a socially responsible university supports equal opportunities, provides education targeted towards social needs, enhances the process of lifelong learning, and helps communities address major societal problems.

From the educational perspective, Idowu and Sitnikov (2020) outline several options: engaging young people with the concept of social responsibility; providing specialized training on the subject; developing practical skills for social responsibility, and investing in both fundamental and applied research on the topic. Audebrand (2017) claims that the responsibility for teaching social responsibility falls in particular upon institutions with an economic profile; they are expected to include social responsibility in their strategy as sustainability becomes an increasingly important part of strategic policy.

Bokhari (2017) provides a comprehensive analysis of the universities' area of social responsibility. It combines two types of measures: the first is knowledge transformation (acquisition/cognition and diffusion/education) and the second is social institutionalization (organization/socialization). Bokhari investigates the different responsibilities a higher education institution has – leading as an organization by example by maintaining socially responsible campuses, conducting valuable research in the ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) domain, and providing evidence-based education, policy advice and business consultancy. Through responsible education, a university encourages social responsibility awareness and engages students in activities related to a socially responsible campus. Thus, universities drive and shape sustainability.

Ali et al. (2021) provide USR typology of nine branches: social, sub-social, cognitive, organization, altruistic, economic, ethic, environment and education, which will be the basis of our empirical research. Over recent decades, there has been an expectation of universities that they go beyond and expand their role in community life, not only through addressing societal problems, but also by aligning their activities with USR (Ali et al., 2021). Higher education institutions play a unique part in maintaining sustainability in terms of knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, and teaching (Esfijani & Chang, 2012). Ali et al. (2021) share this view of universities as guarantors of sustainability, as these institutions are to breed future leaders.

Soderbaum (2009) recognises that universities influence young people and educate them on sustainability and social responsibility, and hence universities are an important part of engaging people with these ideas. The roles of students are also perceived differently and broadly, looking at them as representatives of society who cause an institution to transform (Ayala-Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2016). Another aspect of universities' ethical and moral values with respect to social responsibility is related to environment, current social situation, and consequences for the well-being of society. Moubed and Nadizadeh (2022) claim that communication and cooperation between higher education institutions and local and global communities could support the pursuit of a more sustainable society.-

The post-pandemic situation has compelled universities to rethink their strategies, especially in terms of social responsibility. The authors ask what the new role of social responsibility training is and to what extent it addresses student expectations.

Students' perception of social responsibility teaching

How students perceive ethics as an aspect of social responsibility in education has been researched for a while. Rutherford et al. (2012) observe that ethics, sustainability, and CSR have been included in a way in management disciplines in business schools. Adkins and Radtke (2004) concentrate particularly on this topic, and confirm that students found training in ethics useful and valuable. Hurtt and Thomas (2008) also realised the necessity of business ethics education. They found that preferred training methods included mixed approaches such as lectures, case studies, moral dilemmas. Other authors, such as Graham (2012), put emphasis on the aims and effectiveness of such training and analyse the students' opinion on the importance of the subject as well as the preferred teaching methods. The author came to several relevant conclusions – first, understanding ethics should be part of the employability skills of students. In addition, they perceive ethics education as important for their future careers, and as far as teaching is concerned, case studies are suggested as a practical and effective way to learn about the subject. Tormo-Carbo et al. (2016) confirm the need to include business ethics in higher education curricula to exert a positive influence on work practices of future businesspeople as there should be a balance between social and business goals. The results from their study also support the importance of training in ethics, specifically with the aim to train students to be more professional and comment that education should be adapted for this purpose. Medeiros et al. (2017) reveals that active participation in class improves the effectiveness of business ethics courses, such as presentations, discussions and especially workshops.

When students engage in service-learning projects, they not only gain skills that are valuable in the job market (Rutti et al., 2016) but also gain a better understanding and development of USR (Fonseca et al., 2020; Peric & Delic, 2016). Albareda Tiana and Alferez Villarreal (2016) affirm that tackling real-life problems through projects is an effective learning approach. Tormo-Carbo et al. (2019) suggest that further research is needed in course design and methodology. Additionally, they note that more studies should focus on the types of courses students prefer and their attitudes toward the subject, especially as the emphasis is placed on practical activities like workshops and internships (Syper-Jędrzejak et al., 2022). The learning process itself should also be considered, beyond just the specific subject matter.

Effective continual training in social responsibility, beyond just business ethics, should be integrated into corporate strategies by future employers of current students (Syper-Jędrzejak et al., 2022). Research confirms that there are current opportunities for greater engagement in social responsibility, especially in business-focused universities. Moreover, CSR education enhances students' professional development (Palacios Garay et al., 2021) and prepares them for sustainable careers by teaching them to navigate daily challenges responsibly. Gitsham (2011) found that CEOs increasingly seek graduates educated in CSR across various industries and organizations.

While the demand for responsible management education is increasing (*The Principles for Responsible Management Education*, 2018), countries in Central and Eastern Europe are still lagging other EU member states in adopting such practices (Berniak-Woźny, 2018). Gorski et al. (2017) research sustainability and CSR education in business schools focusing on the Balkan region, and point out not only that curricula should be updated, but that novel teaching methods should be implemented. Berniak-Woźny (2018) study the students' perceptions of CSR in business schools in Poland. The students lacked confidence in their knowledge of the subject, and only about half gained their understanding from university courses, expressing dissatisfaction despite a high level of interest. Most participants believed the subject should be elective and favoured lectures and discussions over case studies and group projects. Schulz et al. (2018) confirm that elements of different teaching methods such as lectures, projects, case studies, problem-solving, could be integrated for a multilevel learning approach, and even suggest playful modelling to engage various types of students with backgrounds in different disciplines.

Bulgaria and France

Methods

This paper investigates students' attitudes towards social responsibility and the related teaching methods at universities. When conducting the first comparative exploration in this field, we had to limit the scope of the empirical study by choosing departments and programmes in economics and business administration. For Bulgaria, we selected ten out of the existing

52 universities with a proper geographical mix (covering universities located across the country, which were Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Svishtov, Shumen, Blagoevgrad and Botevgrad) and types of universities (public and private, wide-profile and niche (students predominately studying economics, finance, management).

In France we were not able to obtain sufficient turnout, so we focused on the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, which is part of Universite Paris-Saclay[1]. The university aims to be a leader in the field of sustainability studies, and has signed a Commitment for Sustainable practices in higher education institutions. During the last ten years, the institution has made numerous commitments to the achievement of sustainability goals at local, national, and international level, and considers itself a pioneer in this field. Apart from various courses addressing the topic, the French university offers an MA programme in Sustainable Development. In France, the social responsibility-related courses are part of the compulsory programme and in Bulgaria they are predominantly elective.

The study was conducted over a period of three months during the spring of 2022. It was carried in accordance with GDPR policies and personal data protection, also respecting ethics; no students under eighteen years old were included, and other types of discriminatory practices were avoided. 126 students from Bulgaria and 99 from France provided responses. Most of the respondents (85.5%) are between the age of 20 and 25, 7.2% – between 26 and 30, and 5.8% preferred not to answer the question. The sample mostly comprised women – 85.5%.

After devising the questions in English, they were translated into the respective national language (Bulgarian or French) for each country using back translation to check comparability and that all texts were identical in meaning; however, a few questions differed, and this is analysed below. The survey was conducted in the form of online questionnaires (via a dedicated website and by email) and was also available in paper-and-pencil version. Most replies were received digitally. The survey data were analysed using the SPSS.

The questions in the survey aim to determine the extent to which students handle this subject and analyse their perspective on social responsibility education.

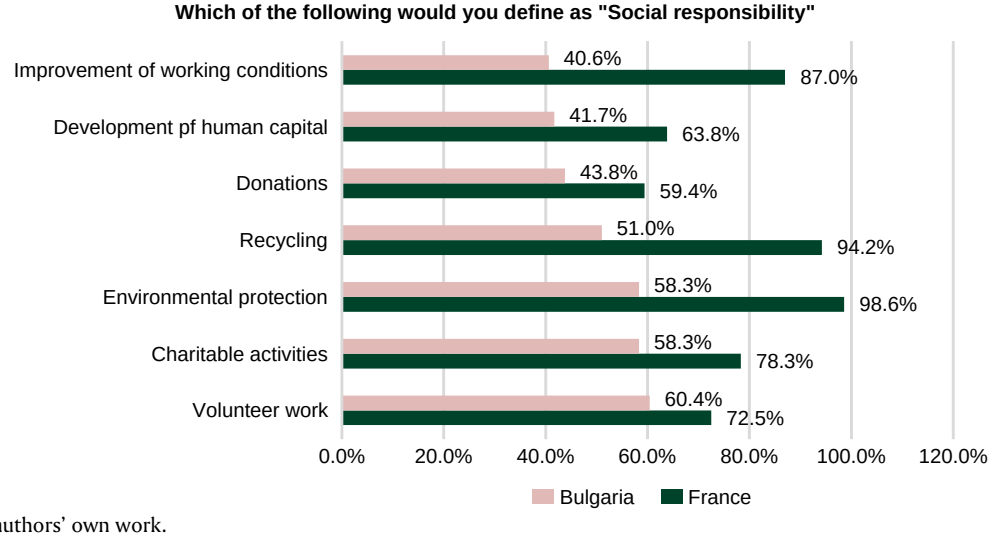
The students' views about social responsibility and its place in higher education

The starting point in the study among students was their personal familiarity with the meaning of the term "social responsibility" and the activities with which they associate it.

Unlike the Polish case (Berniak-Woźny, 2018) most students are confident in their understanding of social responsibility. Bulgarian students are familiar with its role in the three pillars of sustainability: economic growth, social well-being, and environmental protection. Many view it as a newer addition to the curriculum. French students have a deeper understanding of the various aspects of this term.

The groups differ in prioritizing the facets of this term in terms of Ali et al. (2021): Bulgarians focus on altruism, such as volunteer work and charity, while French students emphasize environmental respon-

Figure 1
Definition of social responsibility according to the students



Source: authors' own work.

[1] The survey at the Universite Paris-Saclay was conducted by prof. Gilles Rouet and prof. Stela Raytcheva.

sibility. Bulgarian students do not consider social responsibility to be linked to improved working conditions, whereas for the French, donations are least significant.

We tested for differences in the Bulgarian group by gender and level of education, and the ANOVA tests did not show any significant difference for a 95% confidence interval. For a 90% interval, only improving the working conditions would have been chosen statistically more often by women than men (level of significance 0.079). No other differences were observed.

Student responses across Bulgarian universities showed no statistical differences, except for Sofia University students, who more often linked environmental protection to social responsibility (significance level 0.082). This is attributed to initiatives by the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, such as their Sustainability Report and Code of Ethics, which emphasize USR. Sofia University aims to cultivate students as responsible, sustainability-focused citizens, a goal reflected in diverse courses across undergraduate and graduate programmes.

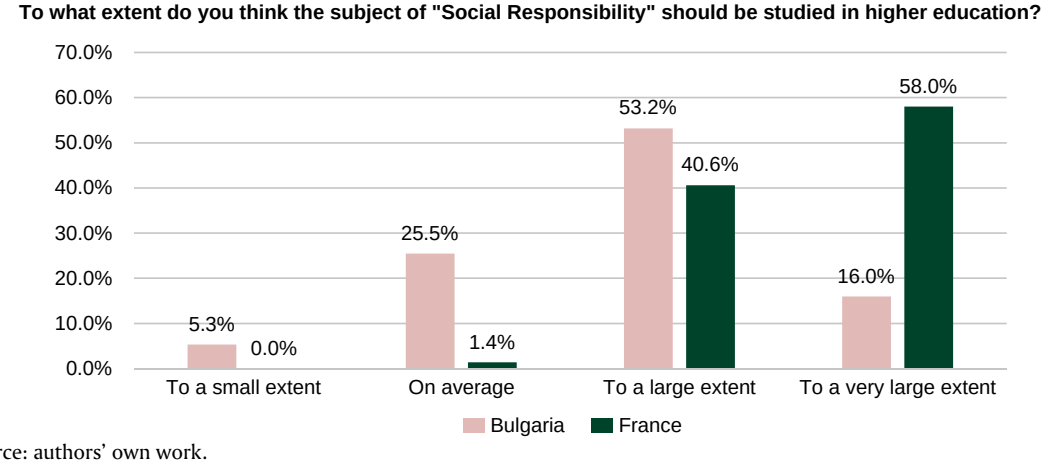
Students are aware of international trends in personnel training on social responsibility and its importance for sustainable business and economic development. French students consider studying social responsibility to be of greater value than their Bulgarian counterparts.

Over 80% of each study group rates social responsibility as "important", highlighting its relevance across economic and public life. The study suggests that meeting rising social demands requires socially responsible and transparent management across society, business, and education. Students believe that the best way to incorporate social responsibility into education is by involving businesses in university programmes.

Students consider the "academia-business" relationship to be highly important, suggesting that effective training methods could include practical experiences and partnerships with businesses, such

Figure 2

SR in HE according to the students in the survey



Source: authors' own work.

Table 1

Opinions on how SR should be included in higher education institutions, Bulgaria

In what way do you think the subject of Social Responsibility could be most effectively incorporated into higher education?	
Student internships in business organizations/internships	61.5%
Practical classes (exercises) on real business cases	57.3%
Conferences and seminars	46.9%
Research practices	42.7%
Business representatives visiting as speakers	41.7%
Implementation of specific projects in partnership with business	40.6%
Lecture course	36.5%
Seminar classes	32.3%
Creating a course in collaboration with the business	30.2%

Note. *Students in Bulgaria are asked to choose from all listed options for effective inclusion of "Social Responsibility" in higher education.
Source: authors' own work.

Table 2
Opinions on how SR should be included in higher education institutions, France

In what way do you think the subject of Social Responsibility could be most effectively incorporated into higher education?	
Student internships in business organizations/internships	78.3%
Practical classes (exercises) on real business cases	81.2%
Conferences and seminars	62.3%
Research practices	43.5%
Implementation of specific projects in partnership with business	95.7%
Lecture course	11.6%
Seminar classes	84.1%
Student projects	81.2%

Note. *Students in France were asked to rate responses on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The percentages aggregate the "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree" answers.
Source: authors' own work.

as internships, real case studies, and guest lectures. The primary distinction between French and Bulgarian students is that the former view independent or collaborative project-based study as a significantly more effective learning tool.

At the same time, there are significant differences between the students from FEBA and other Bulgarian universities in terms of how they see the most successful implementation of USR. FEBA students would significantly more often associate guest lectures from business (level of significance 0.046), real business cases discussed in class (level of significance 0.073) and working on real-life business projects in partnership with business (level of significance 0.039) with successful teaching methods. The major reason for this is the FEBA policy of research-business alliance.

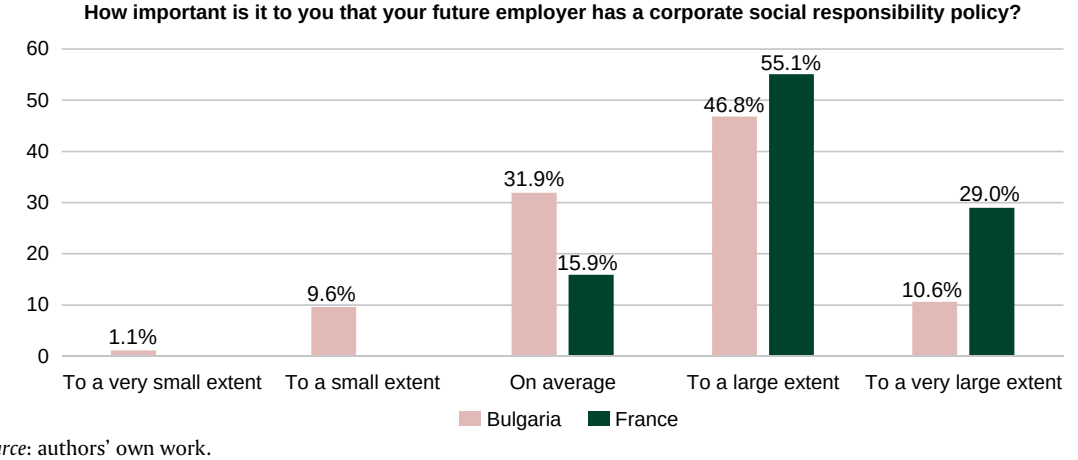
Students in both countries feel that social responsibility training would make them more competitive in the job market and consider it important for future employers to have a CSR policy. This aspect is more important to French students than to their Bulgarian counterparts.

Table 3
Best way to teach social responsibility

Best way to teach social responsibility	Non-FEBA students	FEBA students
Guest lectures from business**	39%	75%
Real business cases discussed*	55%	88%
Working on real-life business projects**	38%	75%

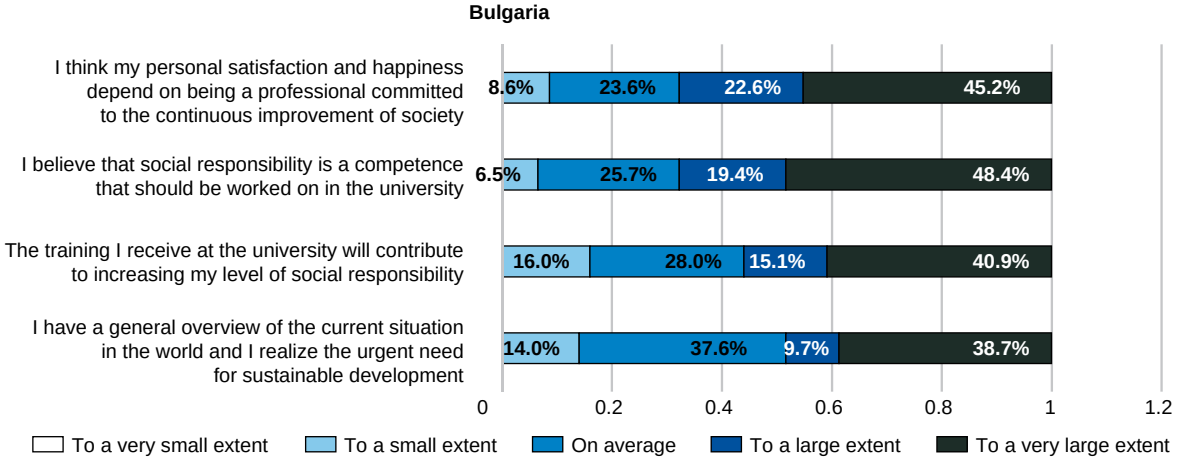
Note. * significance < 0.05; ** significance < 0.10
Source: authors' own work.

Figure 3
Social responsibility and future employment in students' views



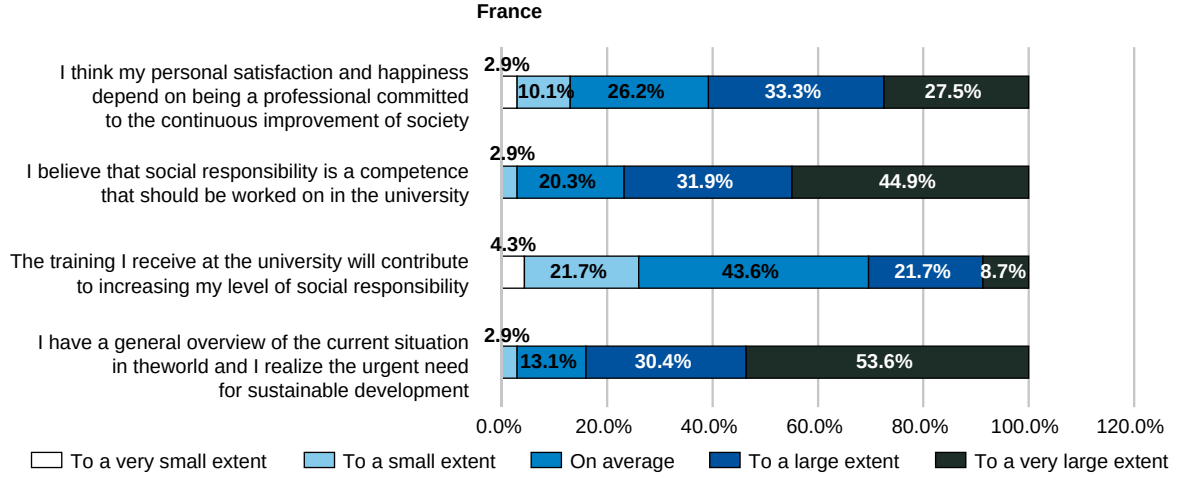
Source: authors' own work.

Figure 4
Students' views on social responsibility, Bulgaria



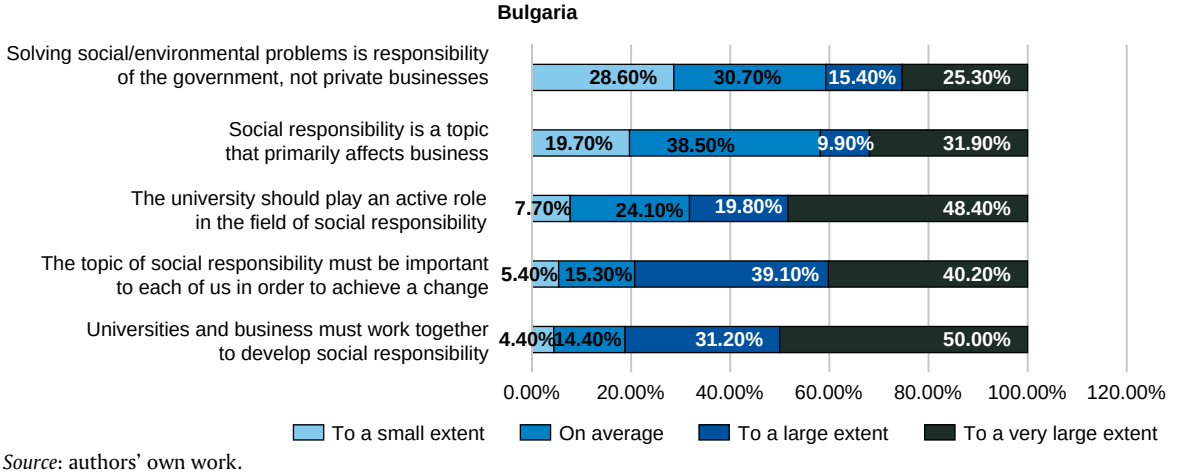
Source: authors' own work.

Figure 5
Students' views on social responsibility, France



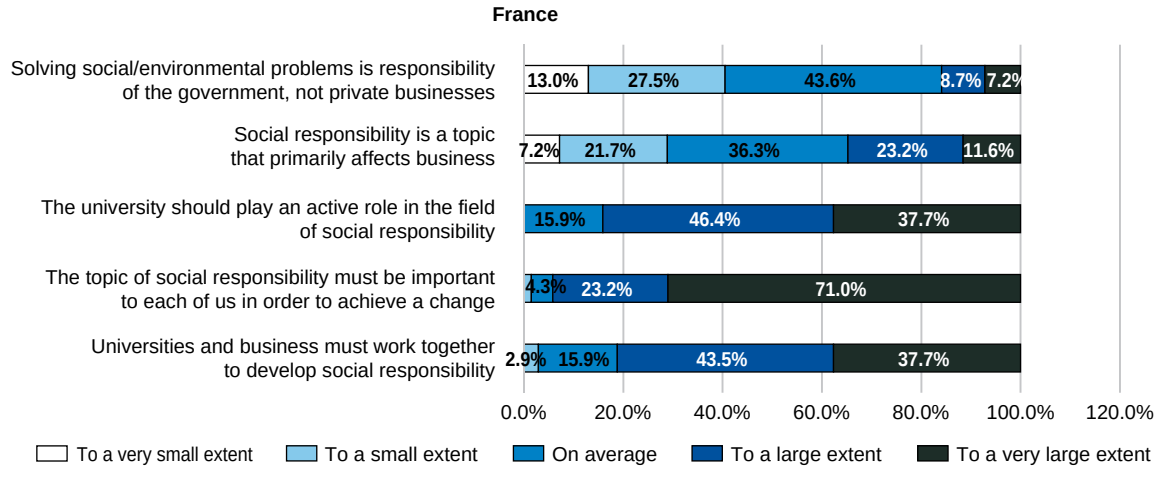
Source: authors' own work.

Figure 6
Students' views on social responsibility, Bulgaria, part 2



Source: authors' own work.

Figure 7
Students' views on social responsibility, France, part 2



Source: authors' own work.

The data indicates that students closely link their personal satisfaction to their future roles as professionals committed to ongoing societal improvement. The majority of respondents feel that universities and businesses should collaborate to foster social responsibility. Respondents also agree that meaningful change can only occur if social responsibility matters to each individual.

Discussion

Several findings stand out from the analysis of the understanding and the attitudes towards social responsibility of students in Bulgaria and France.

The study shows that students in Bulgaria and France view social responsibility as a competence that should be developed at university. The respondents declare social responsibility to be an "important" topic and to exceed 80% for each measured indicator. Bulgarian students do not directly link environmental protection with social responsibility as much as the French, but this might be because in Bulgaria the environmental agenda has been promoted mainly by volunteers and charitable activities of civil society organizations.

Probably as everywhere, all students believe that including businesses in various formats in the educational process is the best way to teach social responsibility, but it is likely that we would have received similar responses for teaching every business-related course. Although French and Bulgarian respondents answered questions in a different way – the former rating the options and the latter listing the ones they considered relevant, the tendencies were similar and aimed at business active participation. French students traditionally have access to a programme based on a long-lasting partnership with businesses, where internships form a substantial part of the educational process.

This paper finds that students in both countries generally view education in social responsibility as important and believe that businesses should also participate through business cases and guest lectures. French students place significant emphasis on independent or collaborative project-based studies as effective learning tools, while Bulgarian students do not favour this approach.

Students hold strong expectations for businesses to act in a socially responsible manner. They believe that CSR should be integrated into management processes. Students also see the significance of USR for societal development. This includes attitudes toward sustainability, well-being, ecology, and improved working conditions, with 87% approval.

Palacios Garay et al. (2016) and Rutti et al. (2016) indicate that social responsibility education benefits students both professionally and as responsible consumers and citizens. The current study confirms that this training improves their career prospects and competitiveness while equipping them with sustainability knowledge in line with national policies. Albareda Tiana and Alferez Villarreal (2016) confirmed that practical learning has a positive effect on areas such as lifestyle and skill development.

Students in both countries highly rate internships (61.5%/78.3%) and real business case exercises (57.3%/81.2%) as preferred teaching methods for skill-building. With new demands like non-financial reporting for large companies and environmental risk assessments for bank loans, the corporate world expects universities to offer courses on social responsibility.

Studying a student's perception of USR in Spain, Vazquez et al. (2015) found that early engagement with USR is significant for their professional initiatives. A similar perception can be seen in our study as well.

There are minor differences between the two countries, with French students emphasizing the practical applications of university-offered social responsibility training more strongly. This aligns with France's

standing as a strong innovator, credited partly to its solid business-academia alliance, whereas Bulgaria remains a modest innovator. Coelho and Menezes (2021) note that balancing theory and practice encourages students to reconsider their societal role, with projects serving as an effective way to apply knowledge.

Fonseca et al. (2020) also support the view that students should participate in service actions to develop their attitude towards social responsibility. They recommend having subjects regarding the topic and exercises to raise awareness too. Many universities show that including subjects related to social responsibility raises the awareness of the students and encourages a culture of sustainability (Peric & Delic, 2016). The students consider participation in projects and exercises as the proper way not only to better their knowledge but to raise their awareness about social responsibility, while Bulgarian students stress this point more (75%/38%).

Based on the survey findings and conclusions, students in both countries view social responsibility as essential to their roles as citizens and future employees. This validates our initial assumption about the value they place on education in this field. They favour practical classes and business engagement through internships and collaborative projects, indicating a readiness to actively participate in social responsibility efforts. Universities should consider these student perspectives and expectations as they are key stakeholders.

Conclusion

USR is a contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to the targeted policies in the context of ESG, and raising awareness of social responsibility is a key part of this. We have shown that students in Bulgaria and France are familiar with the subject and understand the value of social responsibility and the role of the university in integrating the topic into the curriculum. The study also confirmed that many students resume social responsibility measures as a factor for improvement of society and the increasing importance of ESG.

Students are influenced by social responsibility through their coursework, recognizing its importance for both their future careers and societal benefit. Universities should align their programmes with business needs by updating curricula and adding business-oriented tools. Before introducing new courses or master's programmes on social responsibility, a study should assess young people's expectations. Involving stakeholders like businesses in shaping this education can enhance its impact. Given the dynamic nature of social responsibility, courses must be frequently updated to reflect national or European contexts. At the same time, academic research should lead to new methodologies for better ESG reporting by business. Further research should explore students' perception of USR beyond its educational aspects.

Acknowledgements

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