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UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the factors influencing the practice of university social responsibility (USR) in Ho Chi Minh City, based on a proposed model comprising four input factors (leadership commitment, organizational resources, social responsibility culture, and stakeholder engagement), one mediating variable (level of USR implementation), and two outcome variables (organizational image and student engagement). Data were collected from 400 students and faculty members and analyzed using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The results indicate that all input factors have a positive impact on USR, with leadership commitment being the most influential. USR also has a strong effect on both organizational image and student engagement.

Keywords:
University social responsibility (USR), organizational image, student engagement, Ho Chi Minh City, SEM.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Vietnamese higher education undergoing a profound transformation toward autonomy, international integration, and sustainable development, universities are not only responsible for the quality of education and research but must also clearly demonstrate their role and obligations to society. In Ho Chi Minh City – the country's largest economic, cultural, and educational hub – many universities have implemented socially responsible initiatives such as student volunteer programs, community service projects, and environmental protection activities. However, most of these activities remain fragmented, lack long-term strategic orientation, and are not fully integrated into the university's governance systems. Notably, the practice of University Social Responsibility (USR) is still not perceived as an essential component of organizational development, but rather as a peripheral activity. Furthermore, recent empirical studies, such as those by Phung Tuan Thanh et al. (2024) and Do & Huang (2023), highlight that factors such as leadership commitment, limited resources, and inconsistent organizational culture are major barriers to the effective implementation of USR in Vietnamese universities. In addition, the engagement of key stakeholders – particularly students and communities – lacks formal mechanisms and has yet to realize its co-creative potential in fostering sustainable university development.

From a theoretical perspective, University Social Responsibility (USR) is a continuation and expansion of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory, which has been extensively developed over the past two decades. Scholars such as Vasilescu et al. (2010), Larrán Jorge et al. (2015), and Carroll & Shabana (2010) have affirmed that USR not only contributes to community development but also enhances the intrinsic value of universities through brand image, student satisfaction, and engagement. At the same time, Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) emphasizes the importance of interaction and responsiveness to the expectations of stakeholders such as students, faculty, parents, employers, the government, and society at large. However, most existing theoretical studies have been developed in the context of developed countries and lack empirical validation of USR models within the practical conditions of

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Vietnamese higher education, where there are significant differences in terms of resources, governance mechanisms, organizational culture, and community engagement. Therefore, a systematic study of the factors influencing the implementation of university social responsibility in Ho Chi Minh City is both a practical and theoretical necessity. This research not only provides empirical evidence for educational administrators in developing USR strategies suitable for the Vietnamese context, but also contributes to the body of theoretical knowledge on university governance aligned with sustainable development in a rapidly evolving education landscape.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The Concept of University Social Responsibility (USR)

University Social Responsibility (USR) refers to the commitments and actions of higher education institutions aimed at contributing to sustainable societal development through activities in teaching, research, governance, and community service. According to Vasilescu et al. (2010), USR encompasses behaviors and policies implemented by universities to enhance the quality of life for students, faculty, staff, and the local community, while maintaining their academic goals. USR is not merely about charity or volunteerism; rather, it is an integrated part of the university's development strategy, aiming to create social value alongside academic achievements. Larrán Jorge et al. (2015) also emphasize that USR comprises four main pillars: academic responsibility, organizational responsibility, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility—thus forming a comprehensive governance model aligned with the public mission of higher education.

2.2. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Theory

USR is a continuation and extension of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) theory, which holds that enterprises are responsible not only for maximizing profits but also for acting ethically, transparently, and making positive contributions to society. One of the most prominent CSR models is Carroll's (1991) CSR Pyramid, which identifies four levels of responsibility: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. Carroll and Shabana (2010) argue that CSR not only helps companies improve their public image and customer loyalty but also enhances internal performance and competitiveness. When applied to the education sector, CSR serves as a theoretical foundation explaining why universities should implement USR as an integral part of strategic management and the fulfillment of their social mission.

2.3. Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, proposed by Freeman (1984), suggests that an organization exists not only to serve shareholders but also to meet the needs, expectations, and interests of all its stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and the government. In the context of higher education, stakeholders include students, faculty, parents, employers, the government, social organizations, and the local community. This theory emphasizes that building harmonious relationships with stakeholders is essential for a university's survival and sustainable development (Mitchell et al., 1997). When a university actively implements USR, it not only enhances institutional value but also strengthens engagement and consensus among stakeholder groups—especially students and the community, who are at the core of modern education.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Nguyen Nhat Hy (2024) conducted a study examining the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on brand loyalty among Generation Z in the fashion industry in Ho Chi Minh City. The study surveyed 322 university students using a convenient sampling method. The research model included variables such as CSR, trust, company–customer identification, word-of-mouth, and brand loyalty. The data were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach. Results showed that CSR had a positive effect on brand loyalty through the mediating roles of trust and word-of-mouth (Nguyen Nhat Hy, 2024).

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The study by Phung Tuan Thanh and colleagues (2024) proposed a theoretical model to analyze the impact of CSR on brand equity in the hotel industry in Ho Chi Minh City. Although no empirical survey was conducted, the authors developed a conceptual model comprising two main variables: CSR and brand equity, based on a review of previous studies and formulation of research hypotheses. The study suggested that CSR plays a positive role in enhancing brand image and value in the service sector (Phung Tuan Thanh, Le Dinh Hac, & Tran Van Dat, 2024).

Another study by Phung Tuan Thanh and Huynh Gia Tran Thao (2024) also focused on the Vietnamese hotel industry, investigating the relationship between CSR and brand equity, with customer trust and customer participation as mediating variables. Although the sample size was not specified, the research model was systematically developed and employed quantitative methods. The findings confirmed that CSR positively influences brand equity, especially when customer trust and participation are leveraged as mediators (Phung & Huynh, 2024).

Do and Huang (2023) focused on analyzing the barriers to implementing university social responsibility (USR) in Vietnamese higher education institutions. Data were collected from 20 higher education experts, each with over five years of experience, and analyzed using the TOPSIS method. The results highlighted major barriers including the lack of a clear legal framework, limited understanding of USR, and a lack of consensus among stakeholders (Do & Huang, 2023).

Carroll and Shabana (2010) conducted a comprehensive literature review on corporate social responsibility (CSR), including applications in the education sector. This was a theoretical rather than empirical study, identifying four core components of CSR based on Carroll's CSR Pyramid: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. The study suggested that universities could apply this CSR model to guide community engagement activities and enhance institutional value (Carroll & Shabana, 2010).

Larrán Jorge and colleagues (2015) studied the implementation of university social responsibility (USR) at public universities in Spain through a survey of 115 faculty members and administrators. The research model focused on four dimensions: education, research, governance, and community engagement. The study used quantitative methods, including exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and linear regression. Results indicated that "responsible governance" played a key role in shaping perceptions and implementation of USR within universities (Larrán Jorge et al., 2015).

Another noteworthy study by Vasilescu and colleagues (2010) examined the implementation of USR in several European universities, emphasizing the role of stakeholders such as students, faculty, and the local community. The survey sample included over 200 staff and students. The research model included variables such as leadership commitment, student participation, and community relationships. Multivariate regression analysis showed that student and community involvement had significant impacts on the effectiveness of USR implementation (Vasilescu et al., 2010).

Filho and colleagues (2019) conducted a global study involving 120 universities to assess how social responsibility and sustainable development were integrated into institutional strategies and academic activities. Research variables included the level of integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), faculty participation, and transparency in reporting mechanisms. Content analysis and descriptive statistics indicated that the integration of USR and SDGs varied across countries, but the trend was increasingly positive (Filho et al., 2019).

4. PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

4.1. Proposed Research Model

This study proposes an integrated model to identify the factors influencing the level of University Social Responsibility (USR) implementation at higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, while also evaluating the impact of USR on organizational image and student engagement.

Specifically, the proposed model includes four input factors: (1) Leadership Commitment, (2) Organizational Resources, (3) Social Responsibility Culture within the University, and (4) Stakeholder Engagement—factors that are

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expected to influence the level of USR implementation. The mediating variable in the model is the degree of USR practice, measured through activities related to responsible teaching, community service, transparent governance, and sustainable operations. The outcomes are two variables: Organizational Image and Student Engagement. The model also proposes hypotheses such as: leadership commitment positively influences USR; USR positively influences the university's image; and organizational image positively influences student engagement, among others.

4.2. Research Hypotheses

Based on the proposed model and the theoretical foundations of organizational social responsibility, the following hypotheses are developed to test the relationships between influencing factors of USR implementation, as well as its effects on organizational image and student engagement.

First, leadership commitment is considered a key factor in driving and encouraging the university to implement socially responsible activities. Studies such as that of Do and Huang (2023) highlight that leadership plays a decisive role in shaping policies, strategic directions, and allocating resources for USR initiatives.

H1: Leadership commitment has a positive impact on the level of USR implementation in universities.

Organizational resources are a necessary condition for effective implementation of USR activities. According to Vasilescu et al. (2010), resources—including financial capital, facilities, and human resources—are critical to the feasibility and sustainability of social programs.

H2: Organizational resources have a positive impact on the level of USR implementation in universities.

Organizational culture—especially one that promotes social responsibility—contributes to creating an environment that encourages responsible behavior among all university members. As Carroll and Shabana (2010) noted, organizational culture is a foundation for CSR and USR to become behavioral norms.

H3: The culture of social responsibility within the university positively affects the level of USR implementation.

Another important factor is stakeholder engagement, which includes students, faculty, the community, and businesses—groups that are directly or indirectly impacted by the university's operations. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder model affirms that stakeholder engagement is not only an obligation but also a critical resource for implementing social responsibility.

H4: Stakeholder engagement positively influences the level of USR implementation.

On the outcome side: USR implementation is believed to significantly impact the organizational image in the eyes of students and the public. A study by Larrán Jorge et al. (2015) on Spanish public universities demonstrated that proactive social initiatives help build a reputable and responsible institutional image.

H5: The level of USR implementation positively affects the organizational image as perceived by students.

When students perceive their university as socially responsible, they are more likely to feel engaged, identify personally with the institution, and demonstrate greater loyalty. As Noh and Ju (2020) confirmed, USR has a positive impact on student engagement with their university.

H6: The level of USR implementation positively affects student engagement.

Several studies also show that organizational image plays an important mediating role in strengthening the relationship between students and the university. According to Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001), a positive image helps enhance student loyalty and engagement.

H7: Organizational image positively influences student engagement.

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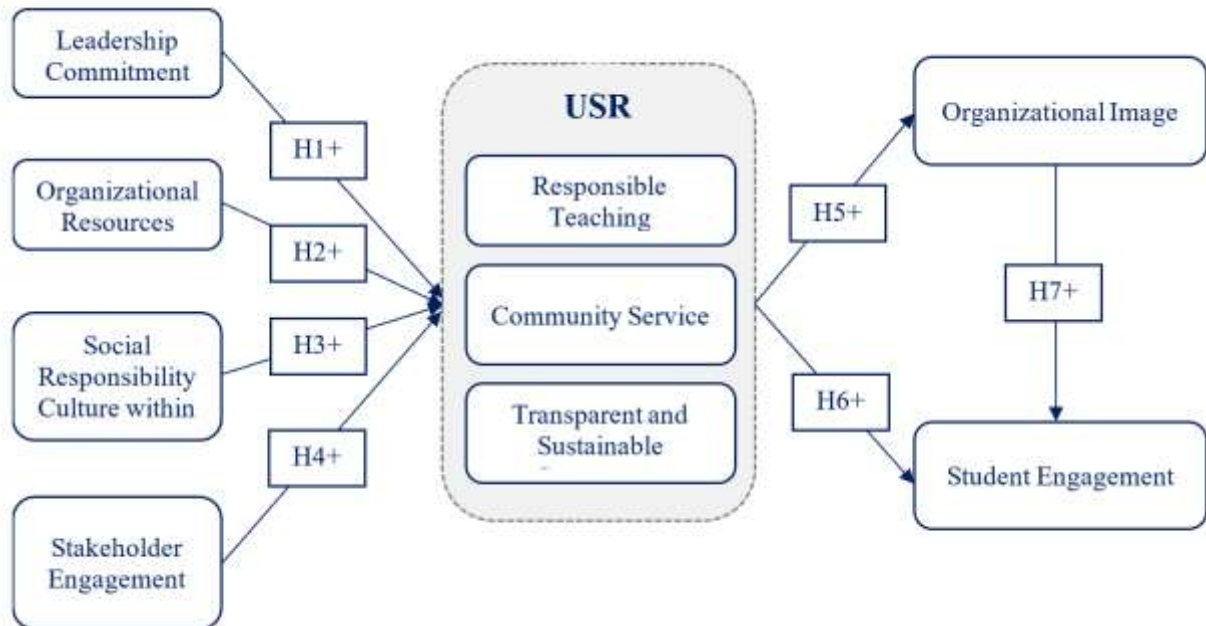**International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management**
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Figure 1. Research Model
(Source: Adapted by the author from a synthesis of previous studies)

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to test the proposed theoretical model of factors influencing the implementation of university social responsibility (USR) at higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, while also assessing the impact of USR on organizational image and student engagement. The research design included several stages: developing a survey questionnaire, conducting a pilot test, collecting official data, and performing statistical analyses.

First, the survey questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from prior studies such as Vasilescu et al. (2010), Larrán Jorge et al. (2015), and Carroll & Shabana (2010). The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree) and consisted of 34 items divided into seven groups corresponding to the seven variables in the model: leadership commitment, organizational resources, social responsibility culture, stakeholder engagement, level of USR implementation, organizational image, and student engagement. A pilot test was then conducted with 30 students and lecturers at a university in Ho Chi Minh City to assess the clarity and initial reliability of the instrument. Some wording adjustments were made to ensure clarity and contextual relevance to Vietnamese higher education.

The ficeal data collection phase was carried out during May and June 2025 at six public and private universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The questionnaire was distributed both in-person and online (via Google Forms). A total of 412 responses were collected, of which 400 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis.

The data were processed and analyzed using SPSS 26 and AMOS 24 software. The analysis proceeded through the following steps: reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha; exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify the structure of the measurement scales; confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs; and finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the proposed theoretical model and research hypotheses. The evaluation criteria included: $KMO > 0.7$ and statistically significant Bartlett's Test for EFA; model fit indices for CFA meeting standard thresholds (CFI and $TLI > 0.9$, $RMSEA < 0.08$); and statistically significant path

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coefficients in SEM with p-values < 0.05. Each research construct was measured with 4 to 6 observed indicators, with composite reliability (CR) values greater than 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.5, ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

6.1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

A total of 400 valid questionnaires were collected from six universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The sample structure is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Sample

Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Respondent Type		
Students	300	75
Lecturers	100	25
Gender		
Male	152	38
Female	248	62
Type of Institution		
Public University	300	75
Private University	100	25
Field of Study/Expertise		
Economics & Business	240	60
Engineering & Technology	80	20
Social Sciences & Others	80	20

(Source: Compiled by the author)

6.2. Reliability Testing of the Scales (Cronbach's Alpha)

All scale groups met the reliability requirement, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients greater than 0.7. No items were eliminated.

Table 2. Results of Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Leadership Commitment	5	0.875
Organizational Resources	4	0.832
Social Responsibility Culture	5	0.849
Stakeholder Engagement	5	0.821
USR Implementation	6	0.890
Organizational Image	4	0.870
Student Engagement	5	0.894

(Source: Compiled by the author)

6.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA was conducted using the Principal Axis Factoring extraction method and Promax rotation. The results are as follows:

- KMO = 0.892, Sig. (Bartlett's Test) = 0.000 → the data is suitable for factor analysis
- Seven factors were extracted with Eigenvalues > 1, and the total variance explained was 68.3%
- All factor loadings were greater than 0.5

6.4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The CFA results indicate a high level of model fit:
- Chi-square/df = 1.967 (less than 3)
- CFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.931
- RMSEA = 0.048 (< 0.08)

These indices show that the measurement model exhibits good convergent and discriminant validity. The Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded 0.7, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.5.

6.5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

SEM was employed to test the seven proposed research hypotheses. The model demonstrated a good fit with the survey data:
- Chi-square/df = 2.015
- CFI = 0.937, TLI = 0.926
- RMSEA = 0.051

The results of the structural model analysis are presented in Table 3:

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Testing Using SEM

Hypothesis Code	Relationship	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Conclusion
H1	Leadership Commitment → USR	0.52	0.000	Supported
H2	Organizational Resources → USR	0.36	0.002	Supported
H3	Social Responsibility Culture → USR	0.33	0.001	Supported
H4	Stakeholder Engagement → USR	0.28	0.005	Supported
H5	USR → Organizational Image	0.41	0.000	Supported
H6	USR → Student Engagement	0.37	0.000	Supported
H7	Organizational Image → Student Engagement	0.43	0.000	Supported

(Source: Compiled by the author)

6.6. Indirect and Total Effects

The study also examined the indirect effects of input factors on student engagement through the mediating roles of USR and organizational image. The results indicate the following:
- The indirect effect of leadership commitment on student engagement: $\beta = 0.52 \times 0.37 = 0.192$
- The indirect effect through both USR and organizational image: $\beta = 0.52 \times 0.41 \times 0.43 = 0.091$

Overall, leadership commitment is the most influential factor across the entire value chain from USR to organizational image to student engagement.

7. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings confirm that all factors proposed in the model have a positive and statistically significant influence on the implementation of University Social Responsibility (USR), as well as a spillover effect on organizational image and student engagement. These findings not only validate the proposed theoretical model but also expand practical understanding within the context of Vietnamese higher education.

First, leadership commitment was found to be the most influential factor on the level of USR implementation ($\beta = 0.52$). This underscores the critical role of university administrators and leaders in shaping strategic directions and driving social responsibility initiatives. This result aligns with the study by Do & Huang (2023), which found that the absence of leadership direction is one of the greatest barriers to implementing USR in Vietnamese universities. It also supports the traditional CSR framework by Carroll (1991), which emphasizes that ethical and strategic changes within

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an organization must begin with top leadership.

Second, organizational resources have a significant positive impact on USR ($\beta = 0.36$), indicating that social initiatives can only be sustainably implemented if there is sufficient human, financial, and physical capital. This finding complements the theory by Vasilescu et al. (2010), which identifies resources as a prerequisite for developing systematic social responsibility programs. In the current context of increasing financial autonomy among Vietnamese universities, ensuring adequate resources for USR should be embedded in long-term strategic planning rather than treated as a surplus-dependent activity.

Third, a university culture that promotes social responsibility positively influences the practice of USR ($\beta = 0.33$). This suggests that when ethical values, community care, and sustainable development are embedded in the organizational culture, responsible behavior among faculty, students, and administrators is more likely to occur organically and voluntarily. This finding aligns with the view of Carroll & Shabana (2010), who argue that CSR can only be sustainable when it is "absorbed" into organizational culture rather than treated as a one-off campaign.

Fourth, stakeholder engagement—including students, faculty, businesses, and the community—also positively affects USR implementation ($\beta = 0.28$). This finding is fully consistent with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which emphasizes that organizations can only achieve long-term success by balancing interests and enabling active participation from all stakeholders in decision-making. In practice, stakeholder co-creation remains relatively new in Vietnamese universities, but this study shows that it is a promising approach to improving the effectiveness and resonance of USR efforts.

Fifth, the level of USR implementation significantly impacts both organizational image ($\beta = 0.41$) and student engagement ($\beta = 0.37$). This suggests that when a university demonstrates a genuine commitment to social responsibility, it not only contributes to the community but also builds a strong, trustworthy image that attracts and retains student loyalty. This finding supports the study by Larrán Jorge et al. (2015), which showed that USR enhances institutional reputation and fosters pride and alignment among students. In today's increasingly competitive academic environment, building a socially responsible brand can help universities differentiate themselves and enhance their competitiveness.

Lastly, organizational image strongly influences student engagement ($\beta = 0.43$), which is consistent with findings by Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001), who stated that a positive institutional image motivates student loyalty and supportive behaviors such as academic engagement, peer referrals, or returning for future studies. The indirect effects of input factors on student engagement via USR and organizational image are also evident, reinforcing the mediating role of USR in the modern university value chain.

8. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

8.1. Conclusion

This study developed and tested a theoretical model of factors influencing the implementation of University Social Responsibility (USR) in the context of Ho Chi Minh City, amid a period of significant transformation in Vietnamese higher education toward autonomy, international integration, and sustainable development. Drawing from the theoretical foundations of CSR (Carroll, 1991), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), and international USR studies (Vasilescu et al., 2010; Larrán Jorge et al., 2015), the research proposed and validated an integrated model that reflects the relationships between four input factors (leadership commitment, organizational resources, social responsibility culture, and stakeholder engagement), the level of USR implementation, and two outcome variables (organizational image and student engagement).

Analysis of 400 valid survey responses showed that all seven hypotheses were statistically supported ($p < 0.01$). Among these, leadership commitment was the most influential factor on USR implementation, highlighting the strategic role of university leadership in driving sustainable social responsibility initiatives. Organizational

resources—including funding, human capital, and infrastructure—were also shown to be a critical foundation for effective USR programs.

Notably, a university culture that emphasizes social responsibility and stakeholder engagement—including students, businesses, and the community—were also found to significantly influence USR practices. This indicates that social responsibility is not merely an internal management issue but a multidimensional social process requiring alignment and collaboration among stakeholders.

In addition, the study confirmed that USR positively affects both organizational image and student engagement—two key outcomes that reflect a university's long-term sustainability. A university with a strong social image fosters trust, pride, and deeper emotional commitment from students, thereby enhancing educational quality and institutional reputation.

This study contributes theoretically by providing an empirical model for USR within the under-researched context of Vietnamese higher education. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for university administrators in developing socially responsible and sustainability-oriented strategies.

8.2. Policy Implications

Based on the research findings, several policy recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of USR practices in universities across Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam as a whole:

First, strengthen the leadership role in guiding and committing to USR implementation. Educational leaders should treat social responsibility not as a peripheral task but as a core element of the university's development strategy. Leadership commitment must be demonstrated through concrete actions: issuing internal USR policies, establishing dedicated USR departments, incorporating USR into management KPIs, and actively participating in community, environmental, and human development initiatives.

Second, ensure stable and sustainable resource allocation for USR activities. Universities should establish dedicated USR funds or integrate USR budgets into their annual financial plans. In addition, resources can be mobilized from businesses and NGOs through public-private partnerships (PPP) or cross-sector social responsibility programs. Developing a professional team with expertise in sustainability and community engagement is also essential for the professionalization of USR.

Third, foster an organizational culture that emphasizes social responsibility. A culture of social responsibility should be cultivated among both educators and learners. Universities should integrate content on USR, sustainable development, and global citizenship into curricula, extracurricular activities, and institutional core values. Recognition and reward mechanisms should be put in place for individuals and units that effectively contribute to community service, environmental protection, and academic ethics.

Fourth, promote stakeholder engagement in USR governance. Students, faculty, businesses, and communities should be invited to co-create USR initiatives—from planning and implementation to evaluation. Universities should establish formal communication channels (e.g., student–leadership forums, community–university councils, academic–industry partnerships) to ensure transparency, collaboration, and two-way feedback in USR implementation.

Fifth, reinforce organizational image through USR as part of a branding strategy. Universities should communicate consistently and transparently about their USR activities, achievements, and impacts. USR should be integrated into institutional marketing strategies and positioned as a distinctive value, contributing to student recruitment, public trust, and enhanced international reputation.

Sixth, implement system-level policies from the government. Official guidelines on USR implementation in higher education are needed, including integrating USR into quality assurance and accreditation criteria, and encouraging universities to publish annual social responsibility reports. The government could also design technical and financial support programs to help universities—especially smaller or less experienced ones—build comprehensive USR

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models.

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