

Review Article

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Social Responsibility in Universities: Bibliometric and Literature Review

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This article analyses the importance of University Social Responsibility (SRU), which is driven by a change in the vision of academics. The SRU initiatives appropriately enhance the reputation and brand image of universities. When universities actively engage in social and environmental initiatives, they are seen as an agent of socialisation. This can attract academics and also improve relationships with stakeholders, including the local community, through communication that must go well beyond marketing efforts to recruit potential academics and new stakeholders. A comprehensive communication plan should improve the discourse on the value of universities while helping to create more responsible societies.

Indeed, this study focuses on how the university deploys its SRU principles through missions and interactions with society and the environment. Universities have the power to reshape the social and ecological domain to support the Social Development Goals.

Materials/Methods. This study is part of a bibliometric review process aimed at providing an in-depth analysis of the evaluation methods and models used to measure the impact of social responsibility in universities. This methodology was chosen for its ability to identify, evaluate and synthesise the results of recent empirical research, thus ensuring a comprehensive view of evaluative approaches in education. Based on the recommendations of bibliometric guidelines, we have followed a rigorous process to identify, select and analyse relevant studies.

Results. Our review revealed a significant growth in interest in SRU in the research community between 2018 and 2023, with a diversification of topics studied. Empirical research methods adopted include qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Conclusion. SRU refers to the commitment of organisations, including universities, to contribute to the well-being of society and the environment beyond their immediate academic mission. As such, the university that shapes future leaders has a moral and ethical responsibility to promote social and environmental sustainability.



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1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (SR) is no longer the exclusive concern of companies but also of any other type of organisation, whether public or private. We are talking about the social responsibility of organisations (RSO). SR in the public sector is seen as an example, a model for the private sector to be more ethical in its activities (Elbousserghini et al., 2019).

Today, we are witnessing increased globalisation that has given rise to fierce international competition in all sectors, including higher education. That is why we are starting to talk about the university's social responsibility (CSR), which ensures differentiation in the eyes of the best students and the best teaching skills. The latter refers to the fact that the university must be ethical in its activities and missions as well as be responsible for the impact these activities have on the community. The SRU has become a major concern for higher education officials. The SRU seeks to ensure that universities consider the impacts of their decisions and activities on society and the environment by adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach to social responsibility. The challenges related to SRU include, among others, the promotion of equal opportunities and diversity, the integration of environmental impacts of academic activities, the contribution to local and cultural life, participation in economic and social development, etc. Moreover, the human capital provided by universities is now recognised as being just as crucial to production as physical capital.

In the face of competition, universities must concentrate their efforts on SRU, which has become essential for their competitiveness. The mission of universities is not limited to the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of research, but also includes the development of society. Social responsibility is an essential pillar of the mission and vision of any university. For this reason, the social responsibility of universities has been the subject of several academic works, some taking a purely theoretical approach while others are based on empirical data.

Our research question is: What is the current state of social responsibility in universities? To answer this, we will clarify in the first section the link and the transition from the concept responsibility of universities. While presenting the main initiatives for promoting SRU internationally and defining the concept. In a second section, we will answer our main question through the analysis of the main research, the presentation of the factors that lead to the emergence of SRU and the main initiatives for the promotion of SRU as well as our recommendations for the adoption of SRU by university management.

2. Concept of the SRU

Scientific research on SRU has increased in the last decade (Meseguer-Sanchez et al., 2020). Several researchers have tried to define the concept, making it difficult to find a unanimous definition (Vasilescu et al., 2010; Esfijani et al., 2012). This variety of definitions is due to the exploratory and embryonic stage of the concept of SRU (Lo et al., 2017; Kouatli, 2018).

The EUSR issue has been central to the EU-USR project, which aims to establish a European reference model for EUSR. The concluding report of this initiative describes SRU as a commitment by higher education institutions to accountability for their decisions and activities towards society and the environment through ethical and transparent approaches (Amorim et al., 2015).

According to Lo et al. (2017), SRU is the act of going beyond legal requirements. Universities are required to consider their impact on society and the environment in their management. To this end, the university must behave in a caring and responsible manner towards its key stakeholders, i.e. students, employees, government/funding agencies, other universities, the Community, the environment and suppliers. For Kouatli (2018), there is a certain similarity between the objectives of CSR and those of the SRU in considering the impact of their activities.

University Social Responsibility (SRU) is a relatively new concept that describes a university's responsibility to serve the public good, not only through education and research but also through community engagement and sustainable practices. In recent years, universities have gained ground by adopting a merchandising model that aligns with their values of social responsibility. Currently, universities have relied on merchandising to generate revenue from their brands, such as selling merchandise with the university's logo or visual identity. However, this new merchandising model goes beyond profit and focuses on sustainability, ethical sourcing and fair work practices. This approach is more aligned with SRU principles and can help universities strengthen their commitment to social responsibility.

The new academic model of merchandising involves stakeholders, partnerships with local or sustainable suppliers and the use of environmentally friendly materials for products. In this way, universities can promote responsible production and contribute to a sustainable future. In addition, universities can offer fair wages and safe working conditions to academics involved in the production process, thereby reinforcing their commitment to social justice.

Overall, the new university merchandising model aligns with SRU principles as it emphasises sustainability, ethical sourcing, and fair work practices. Therefore, adopting this model can help universities strengthen their social commitments, contribute to a sustainable future, and promote responsible consumption and production.

3. Distinction between SRU and CSR

Like CSR, the objective of SRU is to reduce the negative effects of university activity on the environment and society and to promote and create a positive impact. Indeed, Kouatli (2018) represents the SRU as a four-component Venn diagram: education, economics, environmental, and social responsibilities. Remarkably, the different components are an intersection. Environmental and social responsibilities can include education and economics.

However, while CSR and SRU engage with themes of ethical conduct and social justice in the workplace, they represent fundamentally different paradigms regarding agency, objectives, and accountability. CSR refers to a set of voluntary initiatives undertaken by corporations to demonstrate commitment to ethical, social, and environmental standards beyond legal requirements (Carroll, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008). It is typically employer-driven, strategically aligned with business objectives, and often designed to enhance corporate reputation and stakeholder relations (Porter & Kramer, 2006). In contrast, SRU emerges from the labour movement and emphasises the proactive role of trade unions in advocating not only for workers' rights but also for broader social justice causes such as environmental protection, equity, and democracy (Clawson, 2003; Moody, 2007). Unlike CSR's top-down approach, SRU adopts a bottom-up logic of collective action, where workers are positioned as central agents of change and solidarity extends beyond the workplace (Hyman, 1997). While CSR may seek to align business practices with societal expectations, SRU often challenges structural power imbalances and calls for more transformative change.

4. The factors of the emergence of SRU

Several reasons have been behind the emergence of USR. We can start with the growing interest in the principles of sustainable development. In addition, the current global context is pushing universities to adopt such initiatives, as higher education has become highly competitive at the international level. For this reason, universities must attract the best students, teachers, researchers, etc., through this social innovation called SRU. And let's not forget, of course, the values of society that fit perfectly with the principles of social responsibility (El Yaagoubi, 2019) and that facilitates its adoption. The emergence of University Social Responsibility (USR) is the result of various

interconnected factors that reflect contemporary social, economic and environmental transformations.

4.1. Social and environmental engagement

Universities are increasingly seen as key actors in promoting sustainable development and civic engagement. This commitment is reflected in concrete actions to address current social and environmental challenges. For example, recent reforms have strengthened the links between universities and their territory in France, positioning these institutions as major economic, social and cultural actors in their environment.

4.2. Stakeholder pressure

Students, faculty and other stakeholders are putting increasing pressure on universities to adopt socially responsible practices. This dynamic is fuelled by an increasingly aware society of social and environmental issues, prompting academic institutions to align their actions with these concerns. Thus, SRU represents the university integration of cultural concerns, environmental and socio-economic.

4.3. Institutional reforms and public policies

Public policies and institutional reforms play a key role in encouraging universities to adopt socially responsible practices, as SRU has become a major concern for higher education officials.

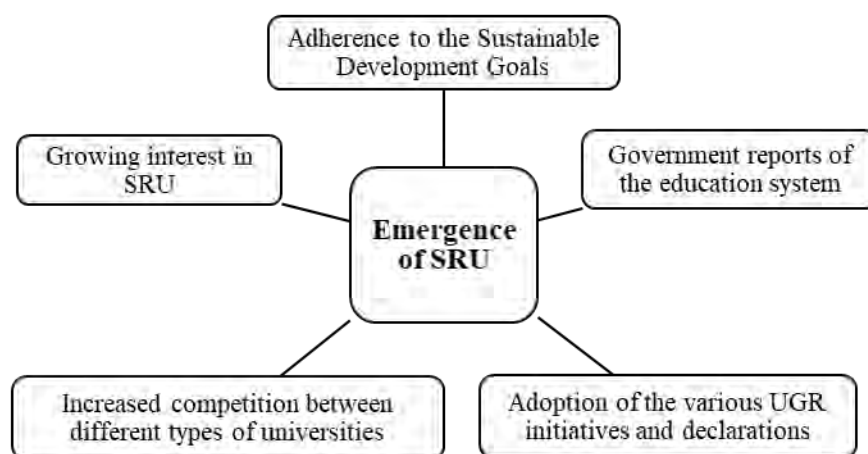


Figure 1. The emergence factors of SRU

4.4. Universities facing the challenges of social responsibility

Universities are experiencing an increase in their responsibilities as their missions expand due, on the one hand, to the increased demand for higher education and, on the other, to the globalisation of economic exchanges, financial and technological. As a result, universities play an increasing role in society because they are both creators of economic and technological change and also subject to these changes. «In retrospect, hardly anyone would now argue that the gradual extension of compulsory education has not been a part of a democratic society for a century. A productive investment in the dissemination of culture and knowledge" (Renaut, 2002). To the traditional commitment of universities towards universalism, pluralism is added the delicate task of reducing social imbalances caused by poverty, exclusion or conflict. Higher education must strengthen its functions of service to society, in particular its activities aimed at eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, and to develop peace through an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach" (World Declaration on Higher Education – Unesco). The World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) clearly states its vision for sustainable

development and improving society. This text shows that in addition to the traditional missions of education, training and research, "States, higher education institutions and their partners are invited to develop clear directions for supporting sustainable development, democracy and strengthening humanistic perspectives".

It would be up to the higher education sector to find and maintain a sensible balance between technical, economic, cultural and social development. Society is thus entrusting immense responsibilities to the university. It would be a matter of driving the rapid transformations that society imposes. The university would occupy a strategic position against the background of power relations between the state, institutions, global organisations, companies and society. The necessary conditions for ensuring this responsibility are based on academic freedom and academic autonomy. Not all universities are equal in terms of resources and image. Financial constraints can be the major obstacle to the development expected by society. How, in fact, can they ensure the responsibilities assigned to them without asking themselves the question of financing while preserving what makes their credibility: the independence of the objective service rendered to society? To this are added the threats of crises and international competition, where the concepts of excellence, reputation, and recognition become predominant.

For historical reasons, the university has been studied in its national reality until now. The OECD's 1998 annual report on education policy analysis highlights that "Investment in education has economic and social benefits because it enriches the stock of knowledge and skills, or human capital". For its part, the WTO is interested in the potential market that trade in education services represents. The World Bank encourages in its study "Priorities and strategies for education" (Washington, 1995) to reconsider higher education funding as the best way for higher education institutions would be to recover all costs, Students paying fees from their parent's income and future own income under a loan program or diploma tax." However, according to the same study, public subsidies in education are justified by considering the beneficial effects of human capital formation for society as a whole. In view of this rapid overview, it seems necessary to consider the trends and phenomena that lead universities to enter a phase of globalisation inspired by an economic logic of liberal type. Should the university be seen as a simple factor in the production of "human capital" or, on the contrary, should it contribute to "sustainable human development"? According to UNESCO texts, an institution that does not have the mission of financing education does not have the means to do so. In this context, where there may be multiple alternatives, enriching the reflection with empirical observations seems appropriate to perceive the underlying logic and probable evolutions.

5. Methodology

In order to identify all relevant articles on the topic while limiting the number of irrelevant articles, it is essential to balance the sensitivity and specificity of the research in order to develop a comprehensive research protocol. This can be accomplished by using the free vocabulary and thesaurus of appropriate databases; in our case, we will use SCOPUS. Identifying keywords relevant to the research topic can be the first step in the search strategy. Keywords should be chosen based on a thorough understanding of the field of study and may include specific terms related to cultural diversity and business performance. Searching for these keywords in titles and abstracts of scientific articles is possible. Thus, it is possible to identify more specific terms or synonyms using the thesaurus. It is advisable to combine keywords and thesaurus terms to refine the results when developing the search strategy using Boolean operators such as «AND» and «OR». For example, more relevant results can be obtained by combining keywords related to cultural diversity with thesaurus terms such as "University" or "social responsibility". In addition to keywords, it is crucial to use diverse search databases to ensure the completeness of results. Thus, it is necessary to define a time interval to determine the timing of studies. Following these principles, a comprehensive research protocol (see Table 1) can be developed, allowing to optimise both the sensitivity and specificity of the

research, in order to balance the inclusion of all relevant articles and the exclusion of irrelevant articles from the systematic review.

Table 1. The Protocol adopted in the literature review

Key words	Social responsibility, University, education
Sources (Data bases)	Scopus, Google Scholar
Filter criteria	The Publication Interval: 2000–2023 The language of articles: French & English
Research strategy	Selection process: Only articles that deal with the issue of social responsibility and its impact on the University, as well as articles that have a fairly clear methodology and results
Synthesis of data	The articles are briefly presented with a focus on the impact of social responsibility on university performance. To answer the research question

Table 1. Overview of the most cited publications

Author	Years	Name of the Book	Context analysis	The determinants to be tested	Result of impact of determinant
Vasilescu, R. Barna, C	2010	Developing university social responsibility: A model for the challenges of the new civil society	This article aims to explain the transition from university as a business-like entity towards the adoption of academic social responsibility. It presents a conceptual framework for social responsibility and considers the university as a particular organisation that must adopt a strategy of social responsibility, like other organisations, in order to meet the expectations of its various stakeholders, including current and future students, as well as the surrounding community.	Community	+
				Organisation strategy Student	+
				Academic social responsibility	-
Gallardo-Vázquez, D	2019	Measurement scale of social responsibility in the university context: a triple vision based on competencies, training and student participation	The objective of this work is the creation of a scale for measuring social responsibility (SR) oriented towards the university student with a triple approach: the transversal skills worked in the academic field in terms of SR and ethical behavior, the training received and the student's participation in such activities	social responsibility	+
				Activities student	+
				Skills of academic	-
Martín-Rubio, I Andina, D	2016	University Knowledge Transfer Offices and Social Responsibility	The evolution of Knowledge Transfer Offices depends on their role as facilitators of collaborations between various stakeholders, according to their mission and ability to solve the innovation gap. Following the line of social responsibility (SR) as a response to the specific needs of the main actors, we rely on recent theoretical conceptualisations to develop an integrative model. This model aims to understand the institutional impacts of Knowledge Transfer Offices on the social responsibility of universities.	Knowledge	+
				Innovation	-
				Social responsibility	+
				Institutional	-
Ladera-Castañeda, M	2021	Factors associated with the perception of university social	Students are central to university social responsibility (CSR) as key actors in change and essential elements of the teaching-learning process. This research focuses on the evaluation of factors that	Human capital	+

Paucar-Rodríguez, E		responsibility among dental students from two universities in the Peruvian capital	influence the perception of academic social responsibility among dental students in two universities in the capital of Peru.	University evaluation	-
				Students	-
Vutsova, A . Arabadzhieva, M	2023	Social responsibility at a university - students' perspectives	This article examines the integration of social responsibility into university education programs. The authors compare the perceptions of French and Bulgarian students regarding various aspects of social responsibility as well as the approach taken in university curricula. Bulgarian students perceive social responsibility more through volunteering, charitable actions and professional opportunities, while French students associate it mainly with environmental issues.	Students	+
				Social responsibility	+
				Educational Integration	-
Vallaey, F Alvarez-Rodríguez, J	2022	The Problem of The University's Social Responsibility	University Social Responsibility (SRU) is essential to collective democratic success, but it is still in its infancy as there are many barriers to institutional reforms within universities. There is no external social pressure for universities to adopt a socially responsible approach, and within the university, fragmentation of disciplines, isolation of teachers and disconnected quality criteria complicate the integration of SRU. Thus, the emergence of the SRU is not only part of the secular debate about the social role of the university.	Universities	+
				Social Responsibility	+
				social role	+
				Management	-
de Rodríguez, MIR. Gallego, CWM	2018	University Social Responsibility: perspective and contributions from a confessional university	The social responsibility of universities (SRU) is divided into two dimensions: one seeks to meet the expectations of its public, while the other emphasises the importance of acting in a socially responsible way through the training of individuals. The objective of this study is to describe SRU within the University Society, in order to highlight its perspectives and contributions as a faith-based institution towards a model for managing academic social responsibility. The results indicate that many facets of UAS are implicit in the actions of the University Society.	University Management	+
				knowledge Management	+
				Democracy	+
				Sustainable Development	+

Source : Authors

6. Results and discussion of the bibliometric review

6.1. Evolution de la recherche sur la SRU

For our study, we collected articles from sources containing a substantial amount of research work on University Social Responsibility (USR). The figure below shows the number of documents published between 2014 and 2023. The data shows a significant increase in the number of documents over the years, peaking in 2023 with 446 publications. After this year, there appears to be a slight decrease. The chart shows gradual growth with some variation.

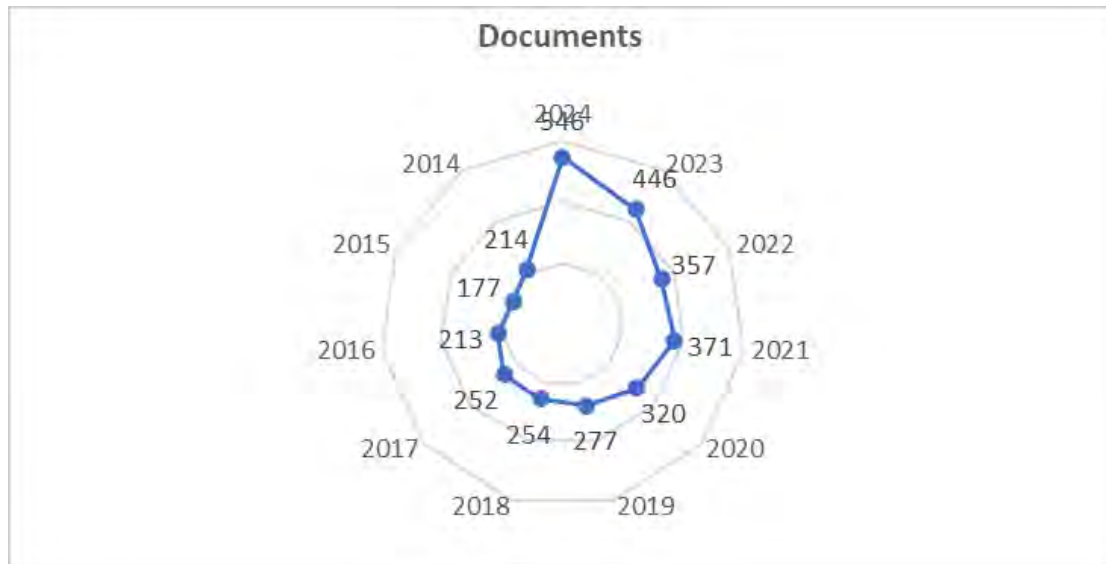


Figure 2. Evolution of RSU research

Source : Scopus

6.2. Distribution by subject area

The pie chart shows the distribution of scientific publications by field, highlighting a predominance of social sciences (39.2%), followed by business and management (13.9%) and engineering (7.8%). Other fields such as economics, computer science, environmental sciences and arts and humanities are also represented, but to a lesser extent.

In the context of University Social Responsibility (USR), this distribution shows that the majority of research related to this subject is rooted in social sciences and management, which is consistent with ethical concerns, governance and the impact of universities on society. Engineering and environmental sciences also play an important role, particularly in sustainable development and technological innovation for social responsibility.

Thus, SRU appears as an interdisciplinary field, combining the human sciences, economics and technology to respond to current social and environmental issues.

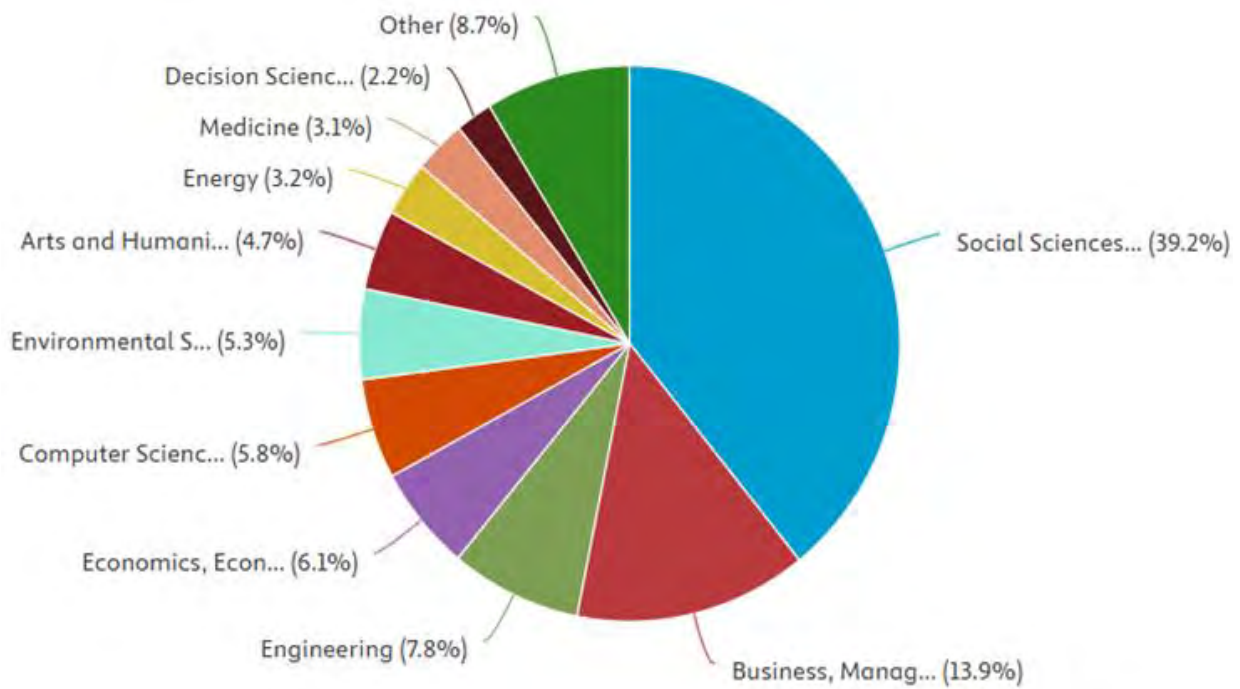


Figure 3. Distribution by subject area

Source: Scopus

6.3. Analysis of keyword co-occurrences

This network visualisation with VOSviewer highlights the relationships between different concepts related to higher education. The central theme, shown in blue, is "higher education" (higher education), strongly connected to topics such as social justice and inclusion. Several thematic groups emerge:

Clusters in green: Represent corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability, including corporate governance and sustainable development goals;

Clusters in yellow: Focusing on engineering education and economic and social effects, covering curricula, e-learning and staff training;

Clusters in red: Related to universities, learning and student experiences, with topics such as psychology, anxiety and challenges of medical students.

These groups are interconnected, illustrating the overall impact of social responsibility on higher education in universities and the growing importance of sustainability, equity and digitalisation issues.

6.5. Authors production over time

The graph Figure 7 presents the authors' production on the subject of University Social Responsibility (USU) over time. Each point represents an author's publications for a given year, with a size indicating the number of articles published and a color intensity reflecting the average number of citations per year (TC per Year).

It is observed that the majority of authors have published only one or two articles on the subject, with the exception of Gallardo-Vázquez D, who is distinguished by a larger volume of publications. Some authors, such as Bosio E and Amani D, have also made significant contributions. The fact that publications are concentrated over a single year suggests that SRU research, at least for these authors, may be relatively recent or specific to a particular period. In addition, the low number of articles per author indicates that SRU is an area where research is still being structured, with few authors having a continuous and voluminous production over several years.



Figure 6. Authors production over time

Source : Bibliometrix, R Studio

7. Conclusion

This study, in the form of a comprehensive literature review, focused on exploring the writings and research on the Social Responsibility of universities. Our methodology made it possible to examine the emerging themes between 2014 and 2023. The review revealed a significant growth in interest for SRU between 2019 and 2023, with a diversification of topics studied. The empirical research methods adopted include qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a preference for content analysis and questionnaires. In addition, a predominance of studies over universities was observed, highlighting a geographical inequality in scientific research on SRU.

Therefore, this Bibliometric Review found that the results of the various studies confirmed the positive impact of social responsibility on university performance. In line with the previous result, this study also combined the results of studies on economic and social performance and universities. By way of conclusion, SRU refers to the commitment of organisations, including universities, to contribute to the well-being of society and the environment beyond their immediate academic mission. As such, the university that shapes future leaders has a moral and ethical responsibility to promote social and environmental sustainability. By implementing SRU policies, universities demonstrate their commitment to ethical conduct, fostering a culture of accountability among students, faculty and staff, or academics. The SRU initiatives appropriately enhance the reputation

and brand image of universities. When universities are actively engaged in social and environmental initiatives, they are seen as an agent of socialisation. This can attract academics, and also improve relationships with stakeholders, including the local community, through communication that must go well beyond marketing efforts to recruit potential academics and new stakeholders. A comprehensive communication plan should improve the discourse on the value of universities while helping to create more responsible societies. Obviously, this strategy must contain the fundamental role of social media in the contemporary world, and therefore such communication must explore unconventional and bold ways to reach a wider audience to show the profusion of science, the current scientific and academic view of controversial issues.

The originality of this study lies in its bibliometric approach, which not only maps the evolution of SRU research over nearly a decade but also highlights underexplored geographical and thematic areas, offering a unique perspective for future research and policy development.

8. The limitations of the research

Despite the results obtained, the present bibliometric study has several limitations. Firstly, the number of articles and the limited range of databases used may not fully reflect the breadth of publications within the broader research community that have addressed our research question. Additionally, the analysis was based on multiple data sources that does not include the Web of Science (WoS) database and included only articles published in English, which may have led to the exclusion of relevant studies available in other databases or languages. These constraints suggest that broader inclusion criteria could offer new perspectives and insights. Future research is encouraged to expand the sample of selected articles in both quantity and quality.

Declarations

Author Contributions. The author is solely responsible for the conception, writing, and revision of this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement. No new data were generated or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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