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Social Responsibility in Engineering Curricula

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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept related to the need for companies to be not only competitive but also sustainable and refers to and the relationship of the company with its social and environmental surroundings, including labour issues [1]. CSR is also gaining attention within Higher Education, being related to a wide range of activities taking place at universities, especially the environmental dimension [2]. Apart from the issue of Social Responsibility within the institution, its role in the curricula of the different degree programmes also needs to be discussed. The University of Coruña (Spain), the University of Minho (Portugal), the University of Guanajuato (Mexico) and the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes (Mexico) started, in 2012, a research project focused on students', teachers' and university managers' representations regarding the concept and practices of So-

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cial Responsibility in Higher Education. At student and teacher level, the focus is on the role of Corporate Social Responsibility in the curriculum and seeks to answer questions on if and how students are prepared to assume an active role in social, economical and environmental responsibility in their future professional career. As a first step in this exploratory project, focus groups were held with students from all four participating universities.

The current study takes part of a broader international research project, involving three countries and four different universities (1 Portuguese, 1 Spanish and 2 Mexican). The research project focuses on the representations of three main actors in the university setting regarding the concept and practices of academic social responsibility: (i) the students, (ii) teachers; and (iii) the university administrators. The sessions lasted between 25 and 63 minutes. In each focus group, around 7 students participated.

This study was intended as the first step in an exploratory study on Social Responsibility in Higher Education, trying to identify perceptions and opinions of students.

Although they do not have a single definition of Social Responsibility, most students are familiar with the concept and know one or more examples, especially after a short introduction of the focus group moderators. They consider it important, both inside as well as outside university, but have second thoughts on the motives for companies to be engaged in initiatives that show Social Responsibility. They suspect that those motives are not in accordance with the deeper meaning of Social Responsibility and suspect companies to work first and foremost on their own benefits.

Looking at the contexts of the study, Spain, Portugal and Mexico, a difference in focus can be distinguished. The Iberian students appear to be more worried about ecological and economical issues at a personal level, whereas the Mexican students are more focused on the social dimension of Social Responsibility and take into account a wider context when for example referring to Social Responsibility and nature disasters.

As an exploratory step, the study has proven to be useful to the researchers involved. The meaning of Social responsibility to students, its role in their daily life and their professional future and the role of university are varying widely in the different contexts involved in the study. The multiple perspectives, due to the diversity of backgrounds of the researchers (economics and management, psychology, sociology and education) contributed to a comprehensive instrument for data collection. ■

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