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To cite this article: Said Elbanna (26 Sep 2023): Debate: Reimagining strategic management of social responsibilities in US universities—A comment on George et al. (2023), *Public Money & Management*, DOI: [10.1080/09540962.2023.2251281](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2023.2251281)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2023.2251281>



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Published online: 26 Sep 2023.



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Debate: Reimagining strategic management of social responsibilities in US universities—A comment on George et al. (2023)

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The focus on the social responsibilities of universities has been increasingly emphasized in recent years, pushing these institutions to go beyond their conventional mission and address emerging societal challenges. This debate article takes inspiration from the insightful research conducted by George et al. (2023), who delve into the strategic management of social responsibilities in US universities. Given the timeliness and significance of George et al.'s work, it serves as a catalyst for further scholarly involvement and exploration in this field. The purpose of this article is to enrich the ongoing discourse by discussing two key issues that arise from their thought-provoking study.

Strategic management of social responsibilities: closing the loop

George and colleagues emphasize the integration of social responsibilities into strategic planning and implementation activities as the two main components of strategic management. However, it overlooks an important component of strategic management: strategy evaluation (Pollanen et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2016). Strategy evaluation, in addition to strategic planning and implementation, plays a critical role in evaluating the effectiveness and impact of social responsibility initiatives. It entails monitoring and measuring the outcomes and progress of initiatives aimed at addressing social responsibilities. By incorporating strategy evaluation, organizations can obtain valuable feedback, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions for future planning and implementation efforts (Elbanna et al., 2020). Evaluation ensures that the goals, actions, and outcomes remain aligned, enabling organizations to contribute meaningfully to social change and make a positive impact. Hence, strategy evaluation needs to be added to the proposed model in George et al.'s Figure 1 to complete the strategic management practice loop for social responsibilities.

In addition, the authors present a clear dichotomy between strategic planning and strategy implementation activities and discuss how social responsibilities can be incorporated into each of these areas. It is important to further examine whether social responsibilities should primarily be integrated into the planning stage to be then considered in the implementation activities, or if a more flexible approach can be taken up, where social responsibilities can be addressed

during the implementation stage in response to emerging opportunities and challenges. Researchers could analyse the benefits and potential drawbacks of each approach, and determine which one might lead to a more sustainable and effective social impact. In other words, the question that remains is:

Should we incorporate specific initiatives for social responsibilities into the strategic management of universities or should we view social responsibilities as a mindset and a core value that guides all aspects of what universities do?

Perhaps the answer lies in adopting a mixed approach that includes the good of both the worlds. Future researchers also need to recognize that strategy implementation in the context of social responsibilities of universities is a multifaceted phenomenon, surpassing the scope of comprehensive campaign which is innately focused on communication, albeit important, but merely a fraction of the larger picture that looks at implementing social responsibility (see, for example, Fatima & Elbanna, 2022). Additionally, international institutions are known to be inherent with communication complexity, where institutions may show a lack of consistency in the type of information communicated relating to social responsibilities, the consistency of the institution's actions with these messages, and the execution of the action itself (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Brunton et al., 2017). This necessitates acknowledging the multi-dimensional and multi-level nature of strategy implementation pertaining to the social responsibilities of universities and incorporating them into effective operationalization of social responsibility implementation (see, for example, Fatima & Elbanna, 2022).

The four archetypes of strategic management of social responsibilities and their applicability in real-world scenarios

George and his colleagues propose four archetypes for strategic management of social responsibilities—mission-focused, planning-focused, opportunity-focused, and the savvy strategist. A question is raised on how applicable and effective these archetypes are in reality. Are universities clearly defined by one of these archetypes, or do they fluctuate between them based on internal and external factors? This point could also explore whether it is necessary or even feasible for all universities to aspire to become the 'savvy strategist' archetype, or whether different types of universities may find

different archetypes more suitable based on their mission, capacity, stakeholders' expectations, and the socio-economic context they operate in. In addition, the authors discuss the concept of the savvy strategist as an archetype where social responsibilities are central to both strategic planning and strategy implementation activities, suggesting an integration between these two components of strategic management. However, it is important to acknowledge that this integration may not always be seamless in practice. In certain situations, there may be discrepancies between what is planned and what is actually implemented, which raises questions about the alignment between strategic planning and the execution of social responsibilities. Hence, we need to delve deeper into studying the alignments between the different components of strategic management (Niven, 2008).

A crucial question arises: why do the majority of universities (over 85%) that fall into the first three categories seemingly fail to consistently integrate social responsibilities into their strategic plans and campaigns? Is it a matter of institutional inability, strategic oversight, or deliberate choice? We also would need to uncover the four identified archetypes and discuss the pros and cons of each, the factors influencing these approaches, and the practical implications of each approach in real-world scenarios. Several additional questions can be addressed here such as: Are universities that fall into the 'savvy strategist' category truly more effective in managing social responsibilities or does their approach bring about its own unique challenges? Could a different blend of approaches result in a more effective strategy for certain types of universities?

In conclusion, by probing into the issues discussed in this article, we can build upon the inspiring work of George and his colleagues and gain a deeper understanding of how social responsibilities can be effectively integrated into strategic management processes in universities. This understanding, in turn, has the potential to enhance the overall social impact of universities.

Acknowledgements

Open Access funding provided by the Qatar National Library.

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