

A South African Perspective on Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility



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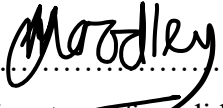
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Declaration

I, Yogasthrie Moodley, declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree of Master of Management in the branch of Management and Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.


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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of ethical web governance and university social responsibility within the South African context. As universities increasingly integrate digital platforms into their operations, the ethical management of these resources becomes paramount. The study examines how South African universities implement ethical web governance practices and the subsequent impact on their social responsibilities such as transparency, accountability, and community engagement, by analysing web governance policies from various South African higher education institutions and drawing on interview data collected from key individuals at the University of the Witwatersrand. The research identifies best practices and areas for improvement, offering insights into how ethical web governance can enhance a university's social responsibility. The findings further aim to provide actionable recommendations for South African higher education institutions to foster a more ethical and socially responsible digital presence.

Keywords: social responsibility; web governance; South African universities; digital ethics in higher education; internet governance; policies

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Table of contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of contents	iv
List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	viii
List of abbreviations and acronyms	ix
CHAPTER 1.....	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background.....	2
1.1.1 Policies and Higher Education	2
1.1.2 The Evolution of the Web and Web Governance.....	5
1.1.3 Web Governance Policies at Universities	6
1.1.4 University Social Responsibility	7
1.2 Problem Statement.....	9
1.3 Research Purpose.....	10
1.4 Research Question	12
1.4.1 Key research question:.....	12
1.4.2 Sub questions:.....	12
CHAPTER 2.....	13
LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility vs University Social Responsibility.....	14
2.2 Disclosure of Social Responsibility Initiatives.....	16
2.3 Accountability	18
2.4 Strategic Planning.....	19
2.5 Web Governance and Ethics.....	19
2.6 Internet Governance	20
CHAPTER 3.....	22
THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS.....	22
3.1 Conceptual Framework.....	22
3.2 Analytical Framework	25
CHAPTER 4.....	27
METHODOLOGY	27
4.1 Research Design	27
4.2 Data Collection	28
4.2.1 Policies from other South African public universities.....	29
4.2.2 Interviews with key staff at the University of the Witwatersrand.....	30

4.2 Data Analysis	32
4.3 Limitations.....	32
4.3.1 Limited Sample Size and Scope	32
4.3.2 Subjectivity in Participant Responses.....	33
4.3.3 Evolving Digital Landscape	33
4.3.4 Focus on Internal Stakeholders.....	33
4.4 Researcher Positionality	33
4.5 Ethical Considerations.....	34
CHAPTER 5.....	35
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS	35
5.1 Content from Web Governance Policies	35
5.1.1 Overview of Key Themes that emerged from University Web Governance Policies	36
5.1.2 Analysis of Common Themes in University Policies	37
5.1.3 Analysis of Unique Themes and Overview	40
5.2 Deductions from Common and Unique Themes in Policies	42
5.3 Number of Institutions Reporting on Social Responsibility.....	44
5.4 Findings from Interviews.....	46
5.4.1 Overview of Key Themes from Interviews	47
5.5 Thematic Comparison Between Web Governance Policies and Interviews	57
5.5.1 Commonalities Between Policies and Interview Insights.....	58
5.5.2 Divergences Between Policies and Interviews	58
CHAPTER 6.....	61
DISCUSSION.....	61
6.1 Mapping findings against the conceptual framework	62
6.2 Using the SWOT Framework to conclude the discussion.....	66
6.2.1 Strengths	66
6.2.2 Weaknesses.....	67
6.2.3 Opportunities	68
6.2.4 Threats	69
CHAPTER 7.....	70
CONCLUSION	70
7.1 Answering the Research Questions.....	71
7.1.1 How is ethical web governance associated with university social responsibility in South Africa?	71
7.1.2 How do web governance policies create a transparent environment to share a university's social responsibility initiatives?	71
7.1.3 How do web governance policies provide for the university to account for its actions?	72

7.2	Recommendations	73
7.2.1	Recommendations for Wits University	73
7.2.2	Recommendations for Other Universities	75
7.3	Further Research and Concluding Remarks	75
REFERENCES		77
APPENDICES.....		87
1.	Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet	87
2.	Appendix B – Participant Consent Forms	89
3.	Appendix C – Interview Schedule.....	90
4.	Appendix D – Ethics Clearance Certificate.....	91

List of Figures

Figure 1: The evolution of the web from Web 1.0 to Web 4.05

Figure 2: Conceptual framework diagram that illustrates the relationship between Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility (USR) (Framework developed by researcher).23

Figure 3: Overlap of key themes from web governance policies from 12 South African universities.....36

Figure 4: The presence of web governance policies and dedicated social responsibility websites at South African universities.....45

List of Tables

Table 1: Policy availability from all South African public universities29

Table 2: Description of Themes in Policies.....36

Table 3: Key findings mapped against conceptual framework62

List of abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviation / Acronym	Meaning
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EWG	Ethical Web Governance
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
THE	Times Higher Education
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAf	Universities South Africa
USR	University Social Responsibility
WCAG	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
WITS	University of the Witwatersrand

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, universities increasingly rely on web-based platforms to facilitate communication, learning, and administration. Lažetić (2019) emphasises that institutional websites are more than just mediums of communication and information dissemination but have evolved into mediums through which institutional identity and stakeholders such as students are constructed. This reliance on websites underscores the importance of ethical web governance, which encompasses the principles and practices that ensure the responsible management and use of web resources.

Ethical web governance is not merely a technical or administrative concern; it is intrinsically linked to a university's broader social responsibility. Garde Sánchez et al. (2020) states that universities are instruments that provide knowledge and prepare students to address the challenges of society. There is growing synergy between internal governance mechanisms (ethics) and external societal expectations (CSR), as highlighted by Bamel et al. (2024). CSR traditionally refers to corporate entities integrating social and environmental concerns into their operations and interactions with stakeholders. In contrast, USR adapts these principles to the higher education context, positioning universities as civic institutions responsible for societal development, not just education and research. According to Joseph et al. (2023), universities now face increasing pressure to publicly disclose ethical policies, governance standards, and responsible digital practices, mirroring the transparency expectations in the corporate CSR space.

This qualitative study explores the relationship between ethical web governance and a university's social responsibility in a South African context. In the context of this study, ethical web governance is defined as the policies, practices, and values that guide the ethical management of a university's digital presence, particularly its website. This includes decision-making structures, transparency mechanisms, content accuracy, inclusivity, data protection, and stakeholder accountability. By examining how universities implement ethical guidelines in their web governance, we can better understand the impact these practices have on their social responsibilities, including transparency, accountability, and community engagement.

The study seeks to provide actionable insights that can help universities enhance their web governance strategies in alignment with their social responsibility goals. Understanding this relationship is crucial for fostering a more ethical and socially responsible digital presence in higher education institutions (HEIs).

The study was conducted at a South African institution of higher learning, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where the researcher works. It involved an analysis of policy documents from other South African universities and interviews with key specialists at Wits University. This research report proceeds to provide an overview of the study, followed by an appraisal of pertinent literature. Thereafter, the methodological and theoretical elements of the study are discussed, after which the results of the document and data analysis are described and discussed. Finally, some concluding remarks and some recommendations for further research are offered.

1.1 Background

Ethical web governance is an increasingly important topic within higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly as universities expand their digital presence, a trend underscored by Huang and Do (2021), who highlight the role of governance in ensuring ethical, transparent, and sustainable institutional practices in increasingly digitised academic environments. In the South African context—where higher education is both a site of transformation and a vehicle for social development—there is growing pressure on universities to align their digital strategies with principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. This alignment is not only a technical concern but also a reflection of a university's commitment to its broader social responsibilities. The following section provides a contextual overview of the evolution of web governance policies in higher education, the development of web governance, and its growing link to university social responsibility (USR).

1.1.1 Policies and Higher Education

Higher education institutions take on the responsibility of restoring imbalances of the apartheid era and contribute to the economic growth and development of society (Barac & Marx, 2012). Barac and Marx (2012) further add that universities now act “less as critics of society and more as servants responding to the needs of society” (p. 354). Early on, the role of policies and policy formulation at higher education institutions were not standardised, and targeted at an institution

depending on factors of apartheid. Fisher (1998), in their research, questions the content and validity of policy formulation for an apartheid scarred higher education system where universities were divided by language, history and ethnic composition, research capacity, allocation of and access to resources.

According to Hall and Symes (2005), any policies in higher education before 1994 were targeted at the white minority with selected universities, reserved for white students, enjoying substantial autonomy. They further added that, since South Africa's democracy, higher education institutions have been experiencing continuous restructuring with the setup of the National Commission on Higher Education that introduced the term cooperative governance, which they described as "combining more democracy with more modern management" (Hall & Symes, 2005, p. 4). Post 1994, universities have generally been seen to be in a "constant state of change" (Tsheola & Nembambula, 2015, p. 22), with the expectation that they will generate solutions for societal problems and challenges (Tsheola & Nembambula, 2015). Marx (2007) points out that universities not only need to be well governed but should be seen as being well governed to maintain support from society and government. As Salvioni et al. (2017) explains, universities are key drivers in the social and cultural growth of a country. Therefore, it is imperative to gain greater insight into how South African universities approach ethical web governance, while meeting their social responsibility mandates.

Concomitantly, Vale, Bertuzzi and Monteiro (2022) emphasise how HEIs can influence society through the creation of knowledge, its research, and teaching and learning, ultimately training graduates to be ethical future managers and leaders. The authors further highlight the stakeholders' needs for transparency and accountability, and while many university's annual reports focused on financial information, there is pressure to report on social responsibility initiatives as well. As such, universities have become active agents in the governance of public values, especially in areas related to digital presence, ethical leadership, and social impact — a shift reflected by Salvioni et al. (2017), who argue that universities play a pivotal role in the social and cultural development of society through governance mechanisms that prioritise ethics and stakeholder engagement.

However, the effectiveness of higher education policies is highly contested. While evidence-based policymaking is widely promoted as a cornerstone of quality assurance, it often operates more as symbolic compliance than as a driver of substantive change (Beerkens, 2018).

Beerkens (2018) argues that the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation is particularly evident in the use of performance metrics and digital tools, which may mask underlying inequities or administrative agendas. This argument is reinforced by Lackner (2021), who found that stakeholder consultations in Norwegian higher education often serve as procedural rituals rather than platforms for genuine input, suggesting a form of symbolic governance that prioritises legitimacy over inclusion.

This is especially relevant in contexts where university social responsibility (USR) is becoming more closely aligned with the principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR). As universities adopt digital platforms to communicate their policies, ethics, and social commitments, their web governance strategies become key indicators of institutional integrity. Research by Joseph et al. (2023) highlights that universities in developed countries are more likely to disclose ethical frameworks and governance practices on their websites, reflecting a disparity in digital transparency between regions.

Moreover, the integration of USR into policy discourse reflects a growing recognition that universities are not isolated academic environments, but embedded in broader socio-political ecosystems — a view supported by Vale et al. (2022), who emphasise that higher education institutions shape society not only through education and research, but also through governance, stakeholder accountability, and ethical engagement. Their ability to respond to societal challenges such as inequality, digital transformation, and ethical governance depends not only on institutional will but also on policy frameworks that enable innovation and inclusivity. Yet, as Bamel et al. (2024) point out, such frameworks often lack consistency, especially in how they treat ethics and responsibility as strategic, measurable dimensions.

In this light, higher education policy must be understood as part of a hybrid governance model one that blends formal rules with ethical norms, digital practices with institutional cultures, and local accountability with global reputational pressures. This hybrid character requires ongoing critical evaluation, particularly as digital platforms and performance rankings continue to shape how universities perceive and project their value to society.

This disconnect between institutional policy and the operational significance of ethical web governance reflects a broader gap in how universities conceptualise and implement digital accountability measures. As the governance of online spaces becomes increasingly central to

institutional credibility and public trust, the absence of coherent policies poses both strategic and ethical risks. By examining this gap in the context of South African higher education, this study aims to contribute to addressing the problem by offering insights and recommendations that support more effective, ethical, and policy-aligned web governance practices.

1.1.2 The Evolution of the Web and Web Governance

Despite seeming to have no legal constraints within the early years, general standard setting practices of the internet began as early as 1865 while organisations tasked with managing it only emerging in the 1980's (Radu, 2019, p. 63). To really understand web governance, it is important to first appraise the evolution of the web. In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee wrote a proposal for what would become the World Wide Web (Kujur & Chhetri, 2015). Figure 1 below shows the evolution of the web since the 1980s (Madurai, 2018).

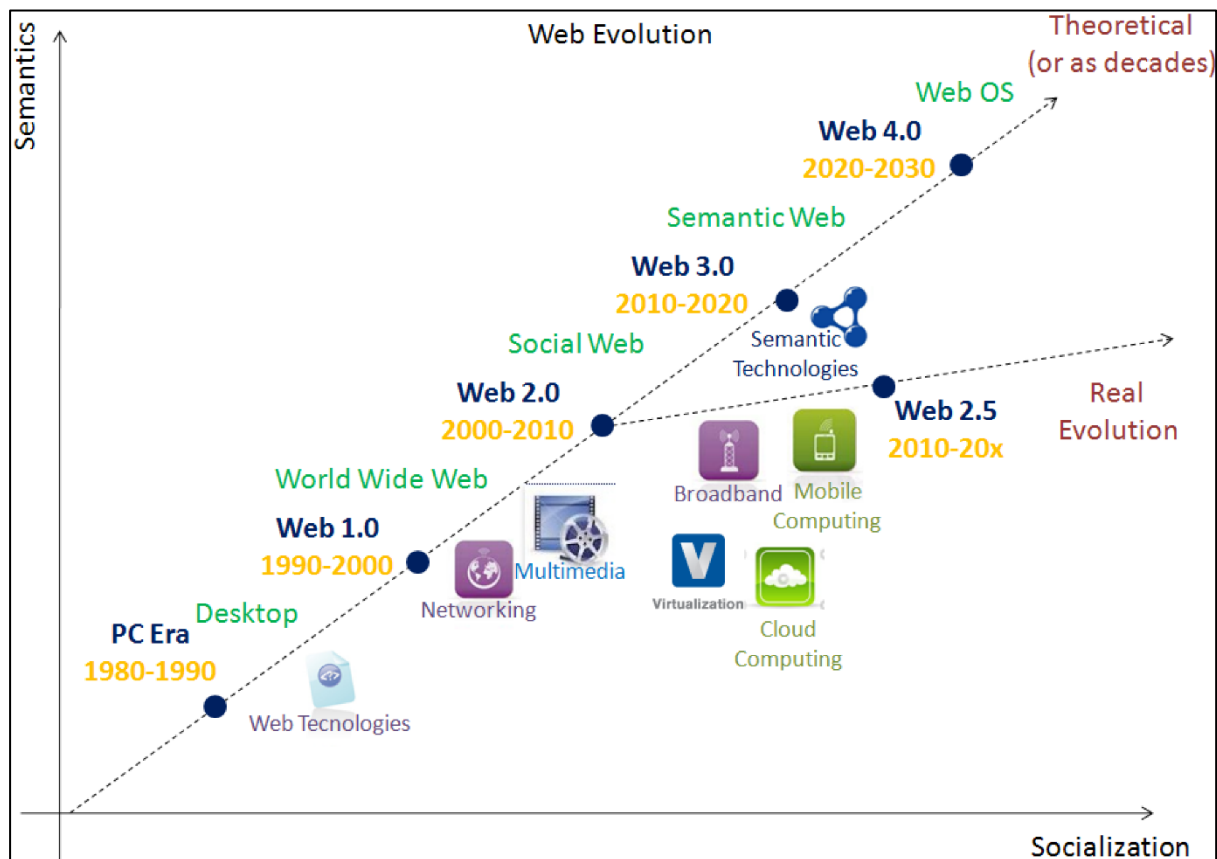


Figure 1: The evolution of the web from Web 1.0 to Web 4.0

Kujur and Chhetri (2015) outlines the evolution of Web 1.0 to Web 4.0 as follows:

Web 1.0	This was the read only static web with individual content producers and web users following links to get to documents.
Web 2.0	Allowed users to control their content with read and write capabilities. This was a two-way process of users consuming content as well as contributing to it through blogs, YouTube and other platforms.
Web 3.0	Regarded as the semantic web or the intelligent web. Focused more on data, thus allowing users the option to find information through millions of linked databases.
Web 4.0 and the future web	Aims to achieve a symbiotic relationship between humans and the internet with advances in nanotechnology and artificial intelligence.

With the rapid evolution of the features of the web, as is highlighted above, it became apparent that standards and structures needed to be created for some order. While governments and private companies took the lead with this in an informal way, rigorous academic contributions began to emerge when it was realised that the internet was growing so rapidly that policymakers could not write a code to govern it. Early web governance was based on infrastructure and architecture only, but it has since evolved into a collaboration of internet users who reach a consensus when establishing standards and protocols (Radu, 2019).

1.1.3 Web Governance Policies at Universities

Web governance policies guide what higher education institutions can share with its stakeholders on a public platform and hold universities accountable for the content on its official website. More universities are being increasingly transparent about the reason for their existence and want to share their social responsibility strategies, projects, and innovations on their websites (An et al., 2019; Arceo, 2017). It can be argued that stakeholders would want to engage with institutions that possess the same values that they do and would want institutions they are associated with to strive to solve social problems that affect the community or the world. Universities are sometimes judged by their brand and reputation before their social impact, but ethical governance in all its forms is what sets the tone for brand value.

However, there seems to be limited research conducted in South Africa that explicitly links the content of web governance policies at universities and their social responsibility, as existing literature appear to focus predominantly on international universities. All websites should have some kind of accountability and having proper web governance measures in place allow web teams to align with the strategy of the university. Yet many South African universities appear

not to have adopted a web governance policy for their institutions (see Chapter 5). Digital content on university websites should represent the culture, values, and experiences of the physical university. This beckons the question: Are universities doing themselves a disservice by not having approved web governance policies implemented? Universities could be missing an opportunity to produce targeted content for their stakeholders.

It is important that social responsibility be ingrained into the strategic objectives of the university. Web governance policies could provide important guidelines for what and how content should be added to university websites. In turn, social responsibility imperatives create the expectation that an institution will be transparent about its practices. For this reason, investigating the potential role and relevance of ethical web governance policies within a South African university context could provide new insight into social responsibility practices and disclosures on university websites for the country.

1.1.4 University Social Responsibility

University social responsibility is not a new term but has increasingly become popular during recent years with many researchers linking corporate social responsibility (CSR) to university social responsibility (USR). Ali et al. (2021) define USR as another version of CSR, highlighting the moral and ethical responsibilities of universities to society through their services, teaching, and development. The core focus is on getting internal stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, alumni) and external stakeholders (communities) to work for the betterment of the society they live in. Higher education institutions (HEI's) have to be increasingly aware of their stakeholders' needs, which is the reason why USR is considered a major theme in top HEIs around the world (Vale et al., 2022). These researchers further elaborate that universities' internal governance, performance, accountability and transparency are a part of what is important to stakeholders. Kouatli (2019) points out that one of the main responsibilities of a university is to encourage its stakeholders to become citizens who act responsibly towards their social environment, with Rehman and Naz (2022) explaining that responsible citizenship is key to democracy. Not surprisingly, then, higher education institutions have the responsibility to develop future decision makers who contribute to society's decision processes (Severino-González et al., 2022).

Naturally, USR intersects with broader societal problems. Research by López (2022) looks at the relationship between university social responsibility and the Sustainable Development Goals¹ (SDGs) set out by the United Nations (UN), further adding that students need to acquire the necessary skills to solve the social problems highlighted in the seventeen goals. USR is not merely a requirement but a necessity for universities that take their reputation seriously, and while CSR is merely concerned with the development of products or offering of services that show concern for the environment, USR intertwines an institution's daily functioning with all aspects of society (Kouatli, 2019). Linked closely to USR are university strategies, policies, and governance.

Governance, ethics, and policy formulation should go hand-in-hand. Alles (2019) adds that there should be adherence to certain principles and a foundation of ethics when it comes to governance. In the South African climate where corruption is rife and unethical businesses thrive (Salahuddin et al., 2019; Bernardi et al., 2008), unethical governance would only serve to cripple an institution or organisation, making it ungovernable and open to fraud and corruption as can be seen by the research conducted by Lasthuizen et al. (2011). Safara and Odeku (2021) further concedes that corruption impedes the delivery of services to a community, affecting sustainability, development, and economic growth, all of which hinder efforts to achieve the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. If an institution cannot be governed, then it is in no position to act responsibly towards its community and stakeholders. While research exists in the field of governance being driven by ethics or ethical practices (Rossouw, 2019; ElGammal et al., 2018), there is very little research on the relationship between ethical web governance and university social responsibility within a South African context.

South Africa has unique challenges (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), but even experiences of these vary vastly based on an entity or individual's geographical location within the country. It is important to understand the contributions that higher education institutions could make. They have an obligation to give back (Păunescu et al., 2017) by way of creating leaders for future generations and it is important to understand whether there are any barriers or opportunities that could assist them to achieve this. In the last few years, several socioeconomic issues have

¹ United Nations (2015) defines SDG's as "... a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership."

plagued institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Some of these challenges include: i) an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) on campuses largely due to the non-reporting of incidents and the acceptance of GBV being a South African culture (Mutinta, 2022; Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018); ii) the worsening of unemployment rates of graduates with a significant year-on-year decrease from 40.3% to 36.2% in quarter one of 2022 (Stats SA, 2022); iii) the psychological effects on student life due to inconsistent power supply and the constant threat of loadshedding² (Malik et al., 2022); and iv) corruption allegations within the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and ongoing financial sustainability concerns (Thebus, 2022; Essop, 2021; Paterson, 2021). Universities are judged by their contributions to finding sustainable solutions for these societal issues (Vasilescu et al., 2010).

One aspect of being a socially responsible institution is through transparency about the university's activities and the sharing of information with stakeholders and ultimately building these into policies and other governance structures at the university. Universities seek to understand stakeholder expectations and translate these into their strategic objectives and goals (Salvioni et al., 2017). While many governance practices at higher education institutions emanate from government and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the autonomous nature of universities allow for the majority of the decision making to happen from within the institution and for policies to be written and implemented independently. While this study focuses predominantly on one South African university (the University of the Witwatersrand), other universities in the country are likely to benefit from the findings and recommendations that will be put forward.

1.2 Problem Statement

In the contemporary digital landscape, universities are increasingly dependent on their online platforms to disseminate educational materials, engage with students, and connect with the wider community. These digital platforms are integral to university operations and serve as a reflection of their dedication to ethical principles and social accountability.

² Naidoo (2023) explains that loadshedding "... is a strategy that is used in contexts of chronic [electricity] interruptions to prevent a systemic power failure, or a total collapse of the power system, as a result of instability in the supply-demand chain ..." (p. 9).

Despite the heightened awareness regarding the significance of ethical web governance, numerous universities encounter substantial obstacles in harmonising their online practices with their social responsibility objectives. Challenges such as insufficient data protection, inadequate digital accessibility, and concerns regarding content integrity compromise the trust and inclusivity that institutions aim to foster. Additionally, the lack of standardised policies and frameworks for ethical web governance further complicates the integration of these practices into overarching social responsibility efforts.

The convergence of ethical web governance and university social responsibility is vital for sustaining institutional credibility and ensuring equitable access to digital resources. As universities strive to meet their social commitments, they must address these governance challenges to enhance transparency, safeguard user privacy, and promote accessibility. This is crucial not only for adhering to legal and ethical standards, but also for cultivating a positive and inclusive academic atmosphere.

Neglecting to adequately address these challenges may result in adverse outcomes, including reputational harm, legal issues, and a decline in trust among students and the community. Conversely, effectively merging ethical web governance with social responsibility can bolster institutional efficacy, enhance stakeholder relationships, and establish a standard for ethical practices within higher education. Consequently, this study examines the current landscape of ethical web governance in the South African higher education sector, before turning attention to one South African university, Wits University. The researcher first evaluates the institution's alignment with social responsibility goals, before identifying best practices and strategies for enhancing this alignment. By analysing these factors, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on ethical governance in the academic sector.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to critically examine ethical web governance practices within South African universities, with a specific focus on Wits University, to understand how these practices align with broader social responsibility objectives. The research aims to identify existing gaps and challenges in current governance models, investigate institutional barriers to adopting ethical digital practices, and explore the implications for university credibility and public accountability. It further seeks to develop best practice frameworks and policy

recommendations that integrate ethical governance with university social responsibility (USR). By incorporating insights from key stakeholders and experts, the study aspires to enhance awareness, guide institutional policy formulation, and contribute to scholarly discourse in the evolving field of digital ethics in higher education. Ultimately, this research intends to offer actionable guidance for strengthening web governance structures at Wits in alignment with ethical and socially responsive university mandates.

The research seeks to fulfil several essential objectives:

Identify gaps and challenges	• To assess the existing web governance practices within South African universities and pinpoint any deficiencies or obstacles concerning ethical standards and social responsibility. • To investigate the challenges that Wits University may encounter in adopting ethical web governance practices that are consistent with their social responsibility objectives.
Develop best practices and frameworks	• To formulate and propose best practices and frameworks for ethical web governance that Wits can implement. • To offer guidance to Wits and other South African universities on the benefits for the creation of web governance policies that merge with university social responsibility.
Enhance stakeholder engagement	• To integrate insights from various key experts into the formulation of effective web governance practices at Wits.
Advance knowledge and awareness	• To establish a foundation for future research both locally and internationally. • To elevate awareness regarding the significance of ethical web governance about university social responsibility among policymakers at Wits.
Provide actionable recommendations	• To present actionable recommendations for Wits and other South African universities to enhance their web governance practices in alignment with their social responsibility commitments.

In conclusion, this study aims to provide more in-depth insight into and to improve the management of web governance practices at South African universities, ensuring alignment with their social responsibility goals ultimately leading to implementation at Wits University.

1.4 Research Question

1.4.1 Key research question:

- How is ethical web governance associated with university social responsibility in South Africa?

1.4.2 Sub questions:

- How do web governance policies create a transparent environment to share a university's social responsibility initiatives?
- How do web governance policies provide for the university to account for its actions?

The remainder of this research report is structured as follows. Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature, focusing on university social responsibility, web governance, and ethical digital practices within higher education. Chapter Three outlines the conceptual and analytical frameworks that guide the study. Chapter Four describes the research methodology, including the data collection and analysis processes. Chapter Five details the findings derived from the analysis of university policies and interviews conducted at Wits. Chapter Six discusses these findings in relation to the literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, Chapter Seven offers conclusions drawn from the research, answers the research questions, and provides recommendations for policy and practice, along with suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores the key theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the study. It begins by distinguishing corporate social responsibility (CSR) from university social responsibility (USR), then delves into the ways universities disclose their social commitments online. Subsequent sections examine the roles of accountability, strategic planning, ethics, and governance—particularly as they relate to digital and web-based structures. The chapter concludes with an exploration of internet governance to position the concept of web governance within a broader global context. These themes collectively form the academic foundation upon which the research is built.

This literature review has been structured to progressively build a conceptual foundation for the research. It begins by exploring the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into University Social Responsibility (USR), particularly within the context of South African higher education. It then examines how universities use digital platforms to enact and communicate socially responsible practices. The review further introduces the concept of web governance, focusing on its ethical dimensions and operational implications. By tracing these interconnected themes, the literature review establishes a clear link between ethical web governance and USR, highlighting how digital governance functions as both a management tool and a strategic expression of institutional values. This structured approach not only clarifies the theoretical grounding of the study but also illuminates a critical research gap at the intersection of ethics, governance, and digital communication in universities.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the literature on university social responsibility and web governance, specifically looking at the South African context and higher education within that context. The review is used to highlight the gap this study aims to fill. Literature was sourced from the Wits library databases including, but not limited to, Ebsco, ResearchGate, ProQuest, SpringerLink and Sage. The following keywords were used during the search for literature:

- “University social responsibility and South Africa”
- “Corporate social responsibility in higher education”

- “University social responsibility and ethical governance”
- “Web governance and university social responsibility”
- “University social responsibility and website disclosure”
- “Web governance “+ “policies”
- “Disclosure of social responsibility”, and
- “Internet governance policies”.

Searches were refined to full text only and while literature spanning the last two decades or so was reviewed, the primary focus was on literature published since 2010. The gap identified during the search was the dearth of literature on web governance and university social responsibility within South African university contexts, particularly.

The following themes were identified through the review of the literature, each of which will be discussed the sections to follow:

- corporate social responsibility versus university social responsibility
- disclosure of USR initiatives
- accountability
- strategic planning
- web governance and ethics, and
- internet governance.

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility vs University Social Responsibility

One of the foundational distinctions in this study is between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and university social responsibility (USR).

To understand the differences between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and university social responsibility (USR), it is important to define the terms. Jorge and Peña (2017, p. 304) define CSR, as set out by the European Union Green Paper approved in 2001, as the process “whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stake-holders on a voluntary basis”. The paper goes on to define USR as “the capacity of the university to disseminate and implement a body of principles and general and specific values, by means of four key processes—management, teaching, research, and community engagement to respond to the needs of the university community, and

in this framing, their “country” as a whole” (Garde et al., 2013, p. 710, as cited by Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017, p. 304). While some literature makes clear distinctions between corporate social responsibility and university social responsibility, where USR is not seen as a legal requirement when compared to CSR (Huang & Do, 2021), other researchers see them in the same light, with both hoping to accomplish what is in the best interest of their stakeholders (Asemah et al., 2013). Expanding on the stakeholder theory of corporate social responsibility, a theory developed by Edward Freeman in the 1980s (Freeman & Reed, 1983), the assumption was made that organisations have obligations to their stakeholders in a similar way that universities would have obligations to certain stakeholders within society.

Langrafe et al. (2020) conducted research on how using the stakeholder theory could add value in higher education institutions. The research concluded that catering to the needs of stakeholders gave institutions a competitive advantage. The principles of the theory used in the study included: exchange of knowledge, mutual trust, involving stakeholders in the decision making and strategic planning processes. This research would be guided by some of these principles to determine the level of university social responsibility and the involvement of all stakeholders in contributing to the elevation of the society as a whole.

Research conducted by Kouatli (2019) shows how USR is becoming a third dimension of university activities, in addition to the existing teaching and research dimensions. Both corporate social responsibility and university social responsibility could fall under the same umbrella of social responsibility, encompassing both organisations and universities, although the implementation strategies are different. Kouatli (2019) further distinguishes the link between CSR, USR and sustainability. Where CSR might see sustainability as the development of products with the environment in mind, USR extends beyond this to include society as a whole and links teaching, research, student life and use of technology.

The key link between corporate social responsibility and university social responsibility is that both corporates and universities seek stakeholder relationship building and engagement (Aversano et al., 2020). CSR and USR are becoming almost interchangeable when referring to institutions of higher learning, with some universities adding CSR as part of their curriculum (Ahmad, 2012). Universities define university social responsibility in different ways, further differentiated by whether the institution is in a developed or underdeveloped country. Universities in the United States have already started including subjects around sustainability

into their curricula and their initial role of merely being vehicles to create socially responsible individuals has now expanded to the legal and moral upliftment of society (Ali et al., 2021). While CSR is still viewed as something extra that corporates would need to engage in, USR is being seen as a fundamental part of university administration. The search for literature highlights a lack of research on university social responsibility within the South African higher education context. This could indicate that universities in South Africa are not taking social responsibility as seriously as the US, UK, and others. Or it may mean that work in this domain is not (or has not yet) filtering through into the academic literature. Consequently, the aim of this study is to make such a contribution to the knowledge base about USR from a South African higher education perspective.

In summary, while CSR and USR share core principles of stakeholder accountability and social contribution, USR is uniquely positioned within educational institutions to shape both internal culture and external impact. This conceptual clarity forms the basis for understanding how socially responsible practices can be embedded in university systems, including through digital platforms.

2.2 Disclosure of Social Responsibility Initiatives

A key aspect of USR is how effectively institutions communicate their social responsibility initiatives. This section explores the concept of disclosure, specifically how universities use their websites to highlight their contributions to societal development, and the implications of such visibility.

The disclosure of social responsibility initiatives by universities is uneven. In his paper, Ismail (2019) highlights his research on universities in Egypt and the work done by other researchers around how universities disclose their USR initiatives through their websites, but that the levels of disclosure varied. Universities are increasingly seen as competitive environments, with each one trying to entice top scholars into selecting their institution to further their education. As such, there may advantages to publicly sharing USR initiatives, as disclosure of a university's social responsibility enhances the reputation of the institution and gives it a competitive edge (Asemah et al., 2013).

Nejati et al. (2011) (as described in (Asemah et al., 2013), performed a content analysis on the websites of the top 10 universities in the world as ranked by Times Higher Education (THE). The research concluded that all 10 universities took their social responsibilities seriously by reporting their initiatives on their websites. The only way that universities can encourage their students to be more socially responsible is by keeping them informed and expose them to USR initiatives (Ahmad, 2012). There are factors that affect the disclosure of information: the larger an institution, the higher the pressure from society to provide more USR information; an institution with a faculty offering programmes related to social responsibility will offer more information; private universities disclose more than public ones; older institutions offering quality education and research disclose more on their website (Garde Sanchez et al., 2021).

It is interesting to note that according to Nejati et al. (2011), the top 10 universities ranked by Times Higher Education actively report on their university social responsibility initiatives through their websites, highlighting a clear recognition of the importance of USR in institutional identity and public engagement. The extent of the disclosure, however, varies based on some factors like institutional size, pressure from society, public vs private status, the university's age and reputation.

Wanderley et al. (2008) also reported that country of origin and the industry or sector influenced what information was disclosed on organisations' websites. The paper highlights the positive reactions evoked by stakeholders when messages on corporate ethics are shared. Chen and Vanclay (2021) talk about full disclosure where stakeholders are made aware of projects, whether they are progressing, successful, or not successful, and the impact the project may have on them (the stakeholder) and society. From the literature, it would appear that disclosing social responsibility on a university's website is key in terms of giving an institution some kind of competitive advantage.

Overall, the literature indicates that universities that actively disclose their USR efforts online gain reputational and competitive advantages. However, the extent and quality of disclosure vary significantly, suggesting a need for more consistent governance frameworks to guide these practices. While the presence of a dedicated webpage on university social responsibility may serve as a signal of transparency and institutional values, it does not, in isolation, constitute evidence of a university's authentic commitment to USR. As Asemah et al. (2013) and Kouatli (2019) suggest, visibility through digital platforms can be performative if not supported by

meaningful governance practices and stakeholder engagement. This study recognises this distinction and therefore does not assess commitment based solely on online presence. Instead, it evaluates how ethical web governance practices such as content accuracy, inclusivity, and governance structures reflect underlying values and operationalise social responsibility. The qualitative data gathered from institutional stakeholders provides further insight into whether these digital efforts are symbolic or substantively aligned with USR objectives.

2.3 Accountability

Accountability is a core tenet of both governance and social responsibility. This section reviews how universities are expected to be transparent and answerable to multiple stakeholders, and how these expectations are reflected in their institutional behaviours and policies.

Accountability is a foundational principle of good governance and is particularly relevant in the context of higher education institutions. It encompasses the obligation of institutions to explain and justify their actions to stakeholders and to be held responsible for their performance and decisions. Bovens et al. (2014) argue that public accountability operates through multiple mechanisms—such as transparency, oversight, and responsiveness—which together ensure that public institutions align their conduct with societal expectations. In the digital realm, this includes clear communication practices, accessible information, and feedback mechanisms. In the context of university social responsibility (USR), accountability ensures that institutions do not merely state their commitment to social goals but actively demonstrate them through policy, practice, and performance.

Universities are accountable to staff, students, alumni, and society in general, and their policies and procedures need to align to the values of transparency, integrity, and ethics (Ismail, 2019). Asemah et al. (2013) further emphasises that it is the institution's role to encourage ethical behaviour during their interactions with stakeholders. By acting ethically and being socially responsible, universities are being good role models (Ahmad, 2012). Comoli et al. (2021) argue that universities are responsible for clarifying their decisions, policies, performance, and actions because they are seen as social institutions who need to have shared values and aims with their stakeholders (e.g., the university community and society more broadly). Chen and Vanclay (2021) explain how social impact can be viewed as either positive or negative, so universities need to understand how their actions could affect different stakeholders in different

ways. The literature leads one to conclude that ethical behaviour plays a significant role in how a university is perceived and that transparency in organisational matters is key.

Thus, accountability reinforces the ethical obligation of universities to be transparent and responsive to stakeholder needs. It also serves as a bridge between USR principles and governance practices, including how institutions present themselves digitally.

2.4 Strategic Planning

For USR to be impactful, it must be embedded in institutional strategy rather than treated as an add-on. This section discusses how universities incorporate (or fail to incorporate) social responsibility into their long-term planning and governance documents.

The literature states that for social responsibility to be effective, it needs to be integrated as a strategy into the long-term planning of an institution (Nardo et al., 2021; Ramos-Monge et al., 2019). Past research conducted by Nardo et al. (2021) analysed strategic plans from 20 Italian public universities and concluded that very little attention was paid to addressing social responsibility and sustainability issues. MuijenHeidi (2004), in her research, further proposed two strategies, a compliance strategy and cultural-change strategy, as a way to integrate CSR into organisations. Chen and Vanclay (2021) state that social responsibility must be embedded into policies at a university and into the teaching and research components. Costa et al. (2021) further elaborates that universities need to include Sustainable Development Goals within strategic planning exercises to enable clear evaluation of how social responsibility is institutionalised in all activities. The paper emphasises that university social responsibility needs to be treated as a commitment by university management and should form part of institutional governance documents. It would seem that while many aspects of governance are added to policies, web governance may not be enjoying the same importance.

In conclusion, strategic planning that integrates social responsibility, and by extension web governance, demonstrates a university's commitment to sustainable, ethical, and inclusive growth. When USR is institutionalised in this way, it becomes measurable, accountable, and actionable.

2.5 Web Governance and Ethics

This section focuses on the emerging field of web governance, particularly in relation to ethical standards. As universities grow their digital footprints, questions of control, responsibility, and ethical content management become increasingly significant.

Governance plays a key role in ensuring the sustainability of universities through social responsibility (Huang & Do, 2021). The accuracy of website content is important, especially when risks like reputational damage exists. Musthaler and Musthaler (2008) define web governance as the process of implementing decisions in relation to content, data, or applications added to an organisation's website. Ethics and corporate governance are linked, and the culture of organisations should display ethical traits. Di Miceli da Silveira (2021), in their research, made the link between decision makers and their responsibility for creating an ethical culture for an organisation, which filters through all operations, policies, and procedures of the university. The literature emphasises the link between ethics and policies and procedures. A concept closely related to web governance is internet governance, although differences between the two do exist.

In the context of higher education, ethical web governance ensures that digital platforms reflect an institution's commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and public accountability. While many universities have established some form of digital policy or IT governance, few have formalised web governance in ways that align with social responsibility goals. DeNardis and Raymond (2013) highlight that this lack of institutionalised frameworks reflects a broader problem in the digital governance landscape, where internet governance remains fragmented, inconsistently applied, and insufficiently responsive to ethical concerns. As a result, web governance is often reactive and technical rather than strategic and value-driven.

In sum, the literature supports the view that ethical web governance is a crucial extension of university governance. By anchoring web management practices in ethical principles, universities can protect their digital integrity and align more closely with USR goals.

2.6 Internet Governance

To contextualise web governance, this section briefly introduces the broader concept of internet governance. It highlights the global structures and debates that inform how digital spaces are regulated and managed.

Internet governance is defined as policy or infrastructure relating to the exchange of information over the internet covering themes such as internet resources control, internet protocol design, intellectual property rights, internet security, and infrastructure management and communication rights (DeNardis, 2010, p. 2). The research implies that internet governance transcends borders and is a global phenomenon. While the terms of internet governance and web governance may indicate the same umbrella of focus, web governance focusses on websites while internet governance looks at the internet in general. For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on web governance.

In conclusion, the literature review explored different concepts, like university social responsibility, web governance, disclosure of information on websites, the accountability of the university to its stakeholders, and ethics. Clear gaps exist in terms of university social responsibility at South African universities. The goal of this study is to expand on these different elements, focussing primarily on web governance at universities, which is an area within which very little research exists. Equally limited are studies that focus on South African universities and that link web governance to social responsibility content added to university websites. This study aims to make such a contribution.

While internet governance concerns global infrastructure and standards, web governance focuses more narrowly on institutional-level policies and practices. Recognising this distinction is vital in understanding how ethical digital conduct is developed and applied within universities.

The literature reviewed in this chapter establishes a clear theoretical and conceptual basis for exploring the relationship between ethical web governance and university social responsibility. It highlights gaps in the South African higher education context and underscores the need for integrated, strategic approaches that embed ethical principles in digital governance. These themes directly inform the conceptual framework and methodological design in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 3

THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS

This chapter explores the theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks that underpin this study. A thorough grasp of appropriate theories is essential for building a solid basis for the study, and analysing the outcomes. By engaging with established academic theories and models, this chapter positions the research within a wider framework, ensuring alignment with existing literature while also identifying areas of contribution.

The relationship between ethical web governance and a university's social responsibility represents a significant area of investigation that incorporates technology, ethics, and higher education. Research in this field often integrates concepts from various disciplines, including information ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and digital governance. Ethical web governance relates to the principles and practices that promote the fair, transparent, and accountable use of the internet. In the context of universities, this view expands to encompass the management of their digital footprint and data, ensuring adherence to values such as privacy, inclusivity, and integrity. The application of frameworks such as stakeholder theory, which highlights the necessity for addressing the diverse needs and interests of all stakeholders, and the triple bottom line approach, which evaluates social, environmental, and economic impacts, is common in examining how universities can synchronise their web governance strategies with their overarching social responsibilities. This line of research is vital for comprehending how universities can utilise ethical web governance to strengthen their position as socially responsible organisations in the current digital landscape.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a structured way to explain key concepts, variables, and relationships that is meant to guide a study. It serves as a roadmap, helping researchers define what they are investigating and how different elements of the study relate to each other. Leshem and Trafford (2007) allude to the importance of a conceptual framework in the research process noting that it is “the current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” (p. 95), implying that this could change as the research progressed (Leshem & Trafford, 2007).

The research further highlighted the importance of concepts in a study and to use a “conceptual framework as a device that makes sense of their data” (p.99).

Figure 2, below, represents the conceptual framework developed by the researcher, linking ethical web governance and university social responsibility through shared principles and values. Fairness is the central value that connects the two core concepts together with several shared principles.

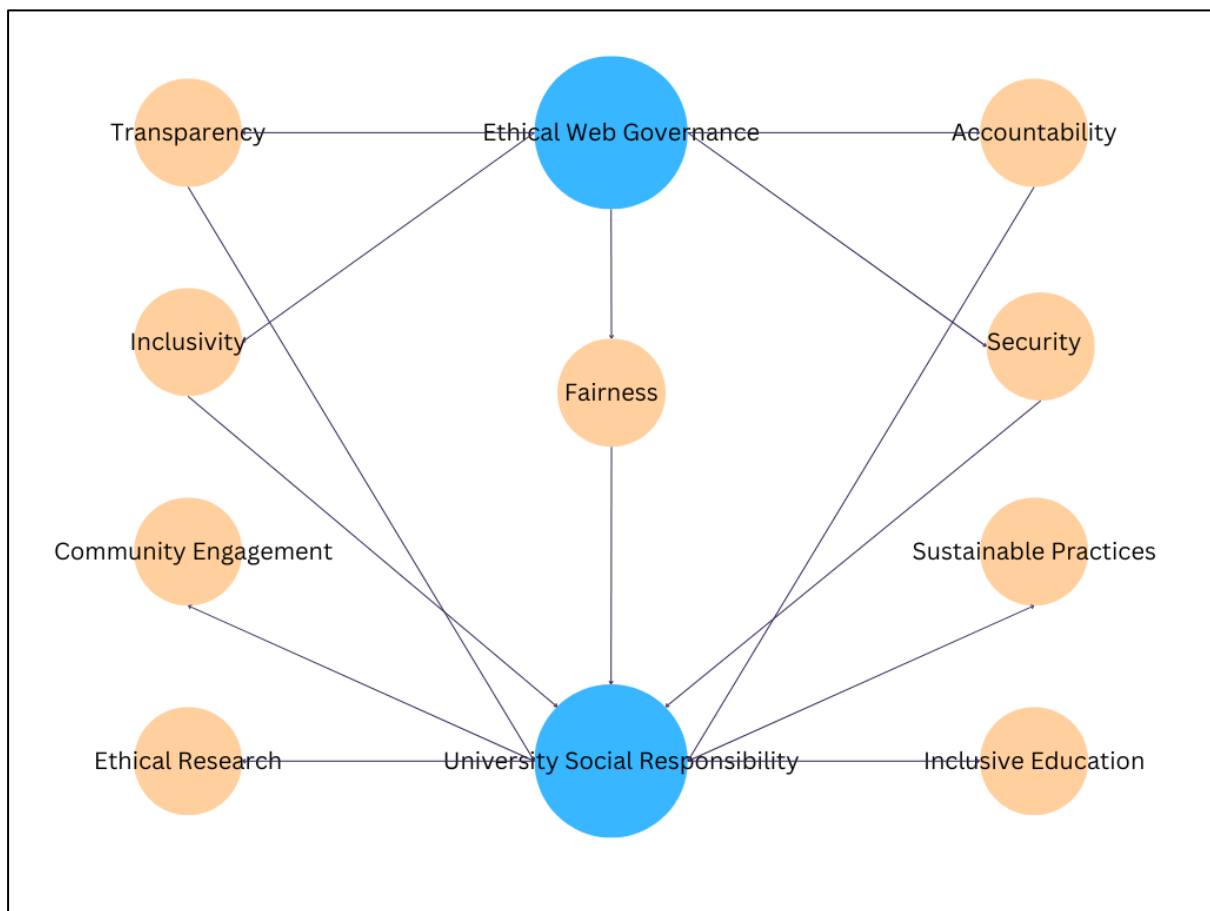


Figure 2: Conceptual framework diagram that illustrates the relationship between Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility (USR) (Framework developed by researcher).

The relationship between ethical web governance (EWG) and university social responsibility (USR) can be understood through the interconnected components depicted in the diagram above (see Figure 2). At its core, ethical web governance represents the guiding principles and policies aimed at ensuring ethical practices within the digital realm, particularly in web related activities. On the other hand, university social responsibility emphasises a university’s commitment to ethical, sustainable, and inclusive practices that benefit society. The diagram

highlights several intermediary components that link EWG and USR, emphasising their mutual influence.

Ethical web governance contributes significantly to university social responsibility through key values such as transparency, fairness, accountability, and security. Transparency, a foundational element of EWG, fosters trust by ensuring openness in processes, policies, and practices. This openness directly enhances inclusivity and community engagement by enabling broader participation and collaboration. Similarly, fairness, centrally positioned in the framework, supports equitable and just practices. It is intricately linked to principles like accountability, inclusivity, and ethical research, ensuring that web policies reflect broader ethical standards.

Accountability, driven by ethical web governance, establishes frameworks for responsibility in online actions and digital policies. It connects directly to security and sustainable practices, reinforcing a university's ethical obligations. Security, as another critical aspect of EWG, ensures the responsible management of digital interactions and systems, building trust among stakeholders and contributing directly to the goals of USR.

Several outcomes of ethical web governance align closely with university social responsibility. Inclusivity is enhanced by ensuring equitable access to digital resources and participation in the digital environment, aligning with USR goals such as inclusive education and fostering diversity. Community engagement, supported by EWG, promotes active collaboration with stakeholders, ensuring that digital tools and policies address community needs. Additionally, sustainability principles embedded in EWG extend to university wide initiatives, reinforcing the alignment of EWG with USR in achieving long-term societal and environmental benefits.

Ethical web governance also underpins ethical research practices, ensuring fairness and transparency in academic activities. This connection is integral to a university's mission and its broader societal responsibilities. Furthermore, the inclusivity driven by EWG supports inclusive education, providing equitable access to knowledge and digital resources for diverse learners.

The diagram in Figure 2 illustrates the bidirectional relationship between ethical web governance and university social responsibility, with other components serving as crucial bridges. These components translate governance principles into actionable social responsibilities, enabling universities to achieve ethical, sustainable, and inclusive outcomes that benefit both the digital ecosystem and the wider community.

Within the context of this study, the conceptual framework not only served to clarify how ethical web governance influences or interacts with university social responsibility but also helped to guide the interview questions, shape the methodology and provide a framework for interpreting the findings.

3.2 Analytical Framework

SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) is a framework used to identify an organisation's competitive advantage and to develop strategic planning. Research by Zhang et al. (2020) emphasises that SWOT analysis will help to leverage strengths to capitalising on new opportunities, while identifying weaknesses that potentially could turn to threats to an organisation. The use of SWOT analysis in this research draws on some of the advantages of using the framework, which include (Zhang et al., 2020):

- It is relatively simple and practical in use
- It allows the researcher the option to focus on key issues
- It is a helpful technique to determine if an organisation's strategy is effective
- It helps develop concrete lists of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that can guide the institution into proper strategic planning.

Some other advantages of using the framework from a researcher point of view is that it will support develop and enhancement of strengths identified through the study, while offering measures for reversing possible weaknesses. Ultimately, the framework will help the researcher develop concrete objectives for the future based on the research findings. So, in terms of this study, research into both internal and external factors that affect Wits will help us understand the university's competitive advantage. Helms and Nixon (2010) highlight that the use of a SWOT analysis remains a major strategic tool where competencies and problems can be linked to a plan of action for an organisation.

The conceptual framework (Figure 2) in this study provides a theoretical lens for understanding the link between ethical web governance (EWG) and university social responsibility (USR). It maps out the core concepts such as transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and fairness and illustrates how these values connect EWG practices to broader social responsibility outcomes. The framework serves as a visual and narrative tool to guide what the study examines and why these concepts matter in the higher education context. This study acknowledges that web governance and communication strategy are closely linked but conceptually distinct. While communication strategies determine how messages are crafted and delivered to stakeholders, web governance refers to the structural and ethical mechanisms that shape how those messages are approved, published, and maintained online. Ethical web governance encompasses decision-making authority, role clarity, content accountability, and policy alignment—elements that ensure that institutional communication is consistent with a university's social responsibility commitments. By distinguishing between these two domains, the study affirms that it is the governance structures—not the messaging tactics themselves—that underpin ethical alignment and institutional credibility.

In contrast, the analytical framework - SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) - is a practical tool used to assess the findings from a strategic perspective. It helps break down the data (from policy documents and interviews) into categories that highlight institutional capabilities and challenges.

Together, these frameworks operate in a complementary way: the conceptual framework identifies what the key issues and values are, while the analytical framework examines how these issues manifest in practice and offers a structured method for analysing the implications. By aligning the theoretical insights (conceptual framework) with a strategic analysis (SWOT), the study achieves both depth and practical applicability. This combined use strengthens the study's ability to move from theory to practice and propose actionable recommendations.

In conclusion, the conceptual and analytical frameworks presented in this chapter provide a comprehensive foundation for the study. Together, these frameworks guide the research design, inform the development of interview questions, and shape the interpretation of findings. By bridging theoretical understanding with practical analysis, the study is positioned to offer meaningful insights and recommendations for enhancing ethical digital governance within South African higher education institutions.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to explore the relationship between ethical web governance and university social responsibility in the South African higher education context. It begins by explaining the qualitative research design and its appropriateness for this study. The chapter then details the sampling strategy, data collection methods—including policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews—and the analytical techniques employed to interpret the data. Finally, the chapter addresses key limitations, researcher positionality, and ethical considerations. The aim is to provide transparency and rigor in the research process, ensuring that the findings are both credible and contextually grounded.

4.1 Research Design

This research sought to investigate whether a relationship exists between ethical web governance and a university's social responsibility. It adopted a qualitative research methodology by using policy analysis and the SWOT analysis framework.

This study employs policy analysis as a core methodological approach to examine the content, structure, and underlying values embedded in university web governance policies. Policy analysis is defined as the systematic examination of public or institutional policies to understand how they are formulated, implemented, and to explore their potential or actual impacts (Dunn, 2018). It involves interpreting not just what a policy says, but also the context in which it was developed and the assumptions it carries. In this study, policy analysis was used to evaluate official web governance documents from twelve South African higher education institutions. The goal was to identify recurring and contrasting themes, assess the extent to which ethical and social responsibility considerations are integrated, and compare policy alignment across institutions. This approach is well-suited for exploring institutional governance in a qualitative study, as it enables the researcher to investigate how formal documentation reflects (or fails to reflect) ethical and strategic commitments to university social responsibility.

While ethical web governance encompasses several interconnected dimensions—technical, administrative, and ethical—this study treats it as a unified analytical construct. Its core values (fairness, transparency, accountability, inclusivity) form the foundation for evaluating how universities manage digital responsibility in alignment with social values.

Qualitative research is more flexible and open-ended, allowing participants to reveal their own thoughts about a subject without the researcher imposing their concepts and opinions on them (Azungah, 2018). Qualitative research provides a nuanced understanding of complex issues by focusing on the meanings and experiences of individuals and is an invaluable methodology for exploring topics where detailed, context-rich data is essential for uncovering deeper insights and informing effective strategies. Azungah (2018) further elaborates that qualitative research can employ both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis. The deductive approach uses a framework comprising of themes for the coding process, while the inductive approach uses the participants' experiences and raw data to derive concepts and themes. For this study, the deductive approach was used.

4.2 Data Collection

Data collection methods included: i) sourcing of grey literature like web governance policies from the other 25 higher education institutions (Wits was excluded due to no policy being in place) in South Africa, and ii) conducting semi-structured interviews with specialists within the University of the Witwatersrand.

The decision to collect web governance policies from multiple universities in South Africa, while conducting interviews exclusively at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), has several advantages. Collecting web governance policies from other universities provided a comparative perspective and situated the research within the broader South African higher education landscape. By examining multiple policies, this study ensures that its findings are not limited to the context of Wits but reflect broader institutional practices and challenges within South Africa.

These policies offered valuable insights into the presence or absence of governance frameworks across institutions. Understanding whether universities have formalised governance structures allowed for an assessment of the extent to which web governance was prioritised within different institutions. This also highlighted gaps and inconsistencies that may

exist across the sector. Furthermore, analysing these policies helps identify best practices and common challenges in web governance. National trends in policy design also emerged from the analysis, particularly regarding principles such as transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement.

The decision to focus interviews at a single university, on the other hand, allowed for an in-depth understanding of how governance issues are perceived, implemented, and experienced by staff in practice within one South African university.

Interviews provided firsthand accounts of gaps, challenges, and opportunities in web governance and social responsibility at Wits. These perspectives shed light on the practical difficulties faced by stakeholders and the ways in which governance frameworks, or in this case their absence, shape institutional operations. Interviews also captured perceptions from individuals who interact with web governance directly, adding qualitative depth to the policy analysis dimension of the study. Participants' insights contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of governance effectiveness and highlight areas where improvements may have been needed. This design enhanced the study's ability to make meaningful recommendations, grounded in both broad institutional practices and experiences within Wits University.

4.2.1 Policies from other South African public universities

Of the other 26 public higher education institutions in South Africa (including Wits), web governance policies were either found on the universities' websites through a site search or requested through the relevant university's Registrar's Office. Following extensive searches and follow-up emails, web governance policies were obtained for 12 of the 26 universities, as outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Policy availability from all South African public universities

Universities	Policy
1. University of South Africa	Available
2. Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Policy under review
3. Central University of Technology	No response to request
4. Durban University of Technology	No policy in place
5. Mangosuthu University of Technology	No policy in place

6. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	No response to request
7. North-West University	Available
8. Rhodes University	Available
9. Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	No policy in place
10. Sol Plaatje University	No policy in place
11. Tshwane University of Technology	Available
12. University of Cape Town	Available
13. University of Fort Hare	Available
14. University of Johannesburg	Available
15. University of KwaZulu-Natal	Available
16. University of Limpopo	No response to request
17. University of Mpumalanga	No response to request
18. University of Pretoria	Available
19. University of Stellenbosch	Available
20. University of the Free State	Available
21. University of the Western Cape	No policy in place
22. University of the Witwatersrand	No policy in place
23. University of Venda	No response to request
24. University of Zululand	No response to request
25. Vaal University of Technology	Available
26. Walter Sisulu University	No policy in place

4.2.2 Interviews with key staff at the University of the Witwatersrand

4.2.2.1 Sampling Strategy

This research used a purposive sampling strategy. The strategy for the participant selection method needed to align with the overall logic and aims of the study (Punch, 2004 as cited by Campbell et al., 2020). The reason for adopting purposive sampling is that certain individuals within the University of the Witwatersrand hold expert views on the research topic and seeking the views of random individuals would not have served any purpose to the researcher or the study. Campbell et al. (2020) highlights that purposive sampling is used to select participants who can add the most value in terms of information, while effectively using the limited resources of the researcher. Denny and Weckesser (2022) further add that selection of certain participants is made based on the qualities, knowledge, and experience they possess. The researcher understood what was being sought in terms of the research objectives and made

selections based on these objectives. The sample size is also irrelevant with purposive sampling and is based on data saturation (Denny & Weckesser, 2022), removing the pressure from the researcher of reaching a target for a sample when no new data is available. While with purposive sampling it is hard to draw inferences from a sample to a larger population (Barratt et al., 2014), this is not a significant drawback within the parameters of this study as its major focus was on a single university.

4.2.2.2 Criteria for Selection

Individuals involved in governance or web governance, digital marketing and communications, IT ethics, compliance, and social responsibility initiatives were selected for interviews.

The target population for this study were:

- Current employees of the University of the Witwatersrand
- Between the ages of 26 and 60
- Specialists with in-depth knowledge of the subject area

4.2.2.3 Contact and Recruitment

Formal email invitations were sent out to all identified staff and included a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) outlining the study's purpose, significance, format, and duration ([see Appendix A](#)). Emails were initially sent out to 18 potential participants. Some of these participants did not immediately respond to the request or were unwilling to commit to taking part in the research. While making sure no coercion took place, reminder emails were sent and/or phone calls made to reiterate how their insights would contribute to the research and to the institution as a whole. It was also important to point out that interview times were flexible and prioritised according to the participant availability. A total of 10 interviews were eventually conducted. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to scheduling of interviews, using a Participant Consent Form ([see Appendix B](#)).

4.2.2.4 Interview Questions

A total of ten questions covering aspects of both ethical web governance and social responsibility formed part of the interview schedule ([see Appendix C](#)). The interview schedule, covering the main aspects of the study, provided a structure for each interview but allowed for

some flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview schedule was tested before it was implemented on actual participants to eliminate any confusion.

4.2.2.5 Interview Structure

The format of the interviews followed a semi-structured route to allow for both guided and open-ended responses. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes online over Microsoft Teams based on staff availability. Consent was obtained prior to recording and transcription of interviews.

4.2 Data Analysis

An initial content analysis of available web governance policies was conducted using thematic coding, which was used to inform the questions comprising the interview schedule. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants. Each interview was recorded on Microsoft Teams after permission was requested from each participant. Transcription services were not available on Microsoft Teams at the time of interviewing participants so recordings were placed through a free software called NoScribe. The reason for the use of this particular software was that transcriptions were not placed in the cloud but rather uploaded onto a desktop version of the software. Transcriptions never left the researchers computer and thus was the privacy of the data and participants were safeguarded. Analysis of transcribed material began shortly after interviews had been conducted. Thematic analysis was used to group together similar themes into categories. Qualitative analysis was iterative meaning that another round of analysis was conducted before coding began, which paved the way for further data collection if the need arose (Bryman & Bell, 2019). The initial interpretation of the data was added to a memo. Coding was used to identify similar concepts and group them into the categories.

4.3 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into web governance in South African higher education contexts, several limitations are to be noted:-

4.3.1 Limited Sample Size and Scope

The study was intentionally conducted within a single university, but web governance policies were considered from all South African universities. By using this mixed approach, the researcher was able to gain in-depth insights from the primary sources while making sure that

the findings are based on national level governance trends. While this does somewhat limit the findings and recommendations to focus primarily on Wits University, this was the intention of the researcher. Chapter 7 does, however, provide recommendations to other institutions with different governance structures and policies. Future work could build upon this and expand the sample of interviews to include several institutions in order to validate and compare perspectives.

4.3.2 Subjectivity in Participant Responses

The qualitative nature of the research means that findings are based on participants' perspectives and experiences, which may be influenced by personal biases, roles, or institutional familiarity. As self-reported data may contain a subjective bias due to how each participant interprets and views their experiences, it was still necessary to take precautions against bias. It is for this reason that secondary sources were used and a representative diverse sample was incorporated to ensure that all relevant views and opinions are considered.

4.3.3 Evolving Digital Landscape

Web governance is a rapidly changing field influenced by technological advancements, regulatory changes, and user expectations. The findings reflect the situation at the time of the study, but future developments may require updated governance approaches and warrant further research.

4.3.4 Focus on Internal Stakeholders

The study primarily gathered perspectives from Wits University staff and web administrators, potentially overlooking the viewpoints of other key stakeholders such as students, alumni, or prospective applicants. Including these voices may have provided a more holistic understanding of web governance's impact, but it was not possible owing to the scope and time limitations imposed on a 50% master's study like this one.

By recognising these limitations, future research can refine and expand upon the study's findings, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to institutional web governance.

4.4 Researcher Positionality

While the researcher was aware that conducting research in the field, environment and institution where she works could lead to bias, every effort was made by the researcher to remain independent and non-biased during any interviews conducted and data collected, and approval of the participants was sought before any transcribed data was published.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The necessary ethical clearance and approval for conducting the research was sought from the University of the Witwatersrand (Protocol number: WSG-2023-45) ([see Appendix D](#)). Any participation in the research was voluntary and participants were informed that they were allowed to exit the process at any time. Potential participants were informed and thoroughly briefed on the purpose and objectives of the research while maintaining their privacy by not including their details into the research report. Participants were made aware of the use of their personal information and any confidentiality clauses. Participants were able to request a copy of the research report to verify that their views were captured correctly. Data was stored on a OneDrive account on the cloud with the researcher being the only person to have access to the data. The data will be stored for a period of two years after the completion and conferment of the degree.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter outlines the analysis and findings of the study, drawing from two key data sources: web governance policies from 12 South African universities and in-depth interviews conducted at Wits University. The chapter explores both areas in detail, identifying key themes, areas of alignment, and potential discrepancies between policy intentions and actual experiences. By integrating these perspectives, the study offers a nuanced analysis of governance challenges and opportunities within the sector.

5.1 Content from Web Governance Policies

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyse the content of web governance policies obtained from twelve South African universities. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the process began with familiarisation—reading and re-reading the policies to gain a holistic understanding of their structure and language. Initial codes were then generated based on recurring concepts related to governance principles, such as “security,” “compliance,” and “accessibility.” These codes were reviewed, grouped, and refined into overarching themes that reflected shared institutional priorities and ethical considerations.

Figure 3 represents the outcome of this analytical process, visually mapping the overlap of key themes identified across the twelve policies. Themes such as User Responsibilities, Access and Security, Confidentiality, Accountability, and Legal Compliance emerged from consistent references in the documents. Other themes like Inclusivity and Sustainability were less frequent but was considered significant for reflecting broader social responsibility values. The final themes were selected based on their relevance to ethical web governance and their alignment with the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3.

Of the 26 public higher education institutions, 12 of these had web policies in place. The contents of the policies at the different institutions varied but there were instances of overlap as shown in Figure 3 below.

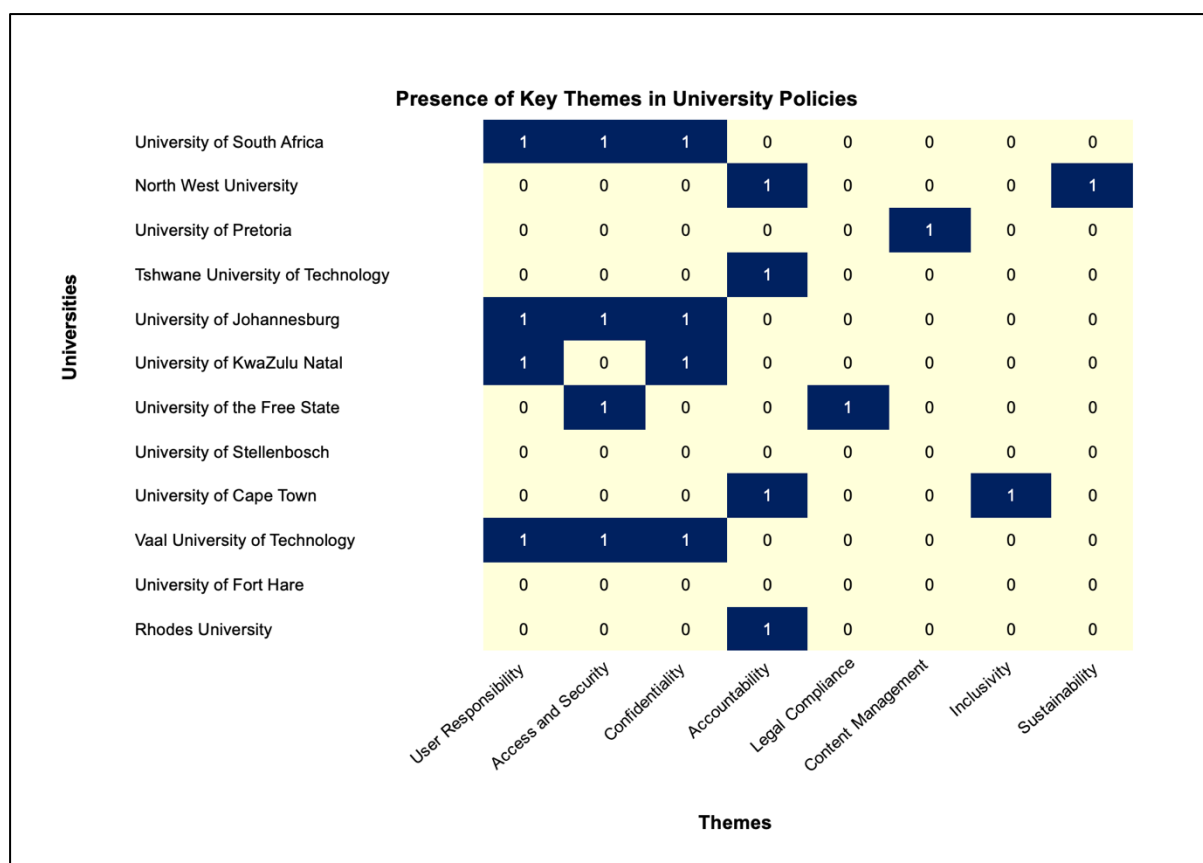


Figure 3: Overlap of key themes from web governance policies from 12 South African universities

5.1.1 Overview of Key Themes that emerged from University Web Governance Policies

The analysis examines key themes present in the web governance and policy documents of 12 universities from across South Africa. These themes -- **User Responsibilities, Access and Security, Confidentiality, Accountability, Legal Compliance, Content Management, Inclusivity, and Sustainability**—reflect core priorities in ensuring ethical, secure, and inclusive digital practices (see Table 2 below). They span foundational aspects such as user behaviour and data protection, to broader institutional commitments like environmental sustainability and inclusivity.

Table 2: Description of Themes in Policies

Theme	Description
User Responsibilities	Defining acceptable user behaviour, delineating responsibilities, and highlighting prohibited activities.
Access and Security	Ensuring digital systems and information are secure while providing equitable access to resources.
Confidentiality	Protecting sensitive data and mitigating breaches.

Accountability	Mechanisms to hold stakeholders responsible for compliance, transparency, and governance.
Legal Compliance	Guiding the ethical use of web tools, content, and branding through legal frameworks.
Content Management	Addressing quality control, website accessibility, and governance of web content.
Inclusivity	Promoting equitable access to digital tools and diversity in educational and administrative practices.
Sustainability	Focusing on environmentally conscious practices and the long-term viability of digital systems.

5.1.2 Analysis of Common Themes in University Policies

This section examines the key themes identified in the web governance policies of twelve South African universities. The analysis highlights shared priorities and concerns across some South African institutions, focusing on critical areas such as user responsibilities, security, and inclusivity. These themes reflect the collective efforts of these universities to address digital governance challenges while ensuring ethical, secure, and sustainable use of online platforms. By identifying these commonalities, the study aims to provide a framework for understanding best practices and areas requiring improvement in web governance across the South African higher education sector.

The analysis of university web governance policies reveals distinct patterns and priorities among South African institutions. By evaluating the presence of key themes, the following can be assumed:

5.1.2.1 User Responsibilities

This theme is consistently present across the majority of universities that have policies in place, underscoring its foundational role in web governance. Policies clearly outline acceptable and prohibited behaviours, emphasising the ethical use of digital systems. Institutions like the **University of South Africa**, **University of Johannesburg**, and **University of KwaZulu-Natal** prominently feature user responsibilities to ensure compliance and accountability among staff and students.

5.2.1.2 Access and Security

Regulations around access and security are highly prevalent in the policies that were analysed, highlighting the critical need for safeguarding digital assets. Universities prioritise controlling

access to systems, preventing unauthorised use, and ensuring secure environments for users. For instance, the **University of Cape Town** and **Rhodes University** emphasise robust security frameworks, complemented by mechanisms for monitoring and auditing.

5.2.1.3 Accountability

Accountability is a central component of several institutions' policies, particularly those of the **University of the Free State** and **University of Cape Town**. These policies establish governance structures to hold stakeholders responsible for compliance, ensuring that web practices meet ethical and operational standards.

5.2.1.4 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a key concern in most of the policies that were analysed, with several universities emphasising the protection of sensitive information, including personal and institutional data. Institutions such as the **University of Stellenbosch** and **University of Fort Hare** highlight the importance of safeguarding data and addressing breaches through appropriate measures.

5.2.1.5 Legal Compliance

Many universities incorporate legal frameworks into their web governance policies. Institutions like the **University of Pretoria** and **Tshwane University of Technology** align their policies with national and international standards, ensuring adherence to legal and ethical principles.

5.2.1.6 Inclusivity

Inclusivity is less frequently addressed, though it is notably present in the policy of the **University of Cape Town**. This theme focuses on equitable access to digital resources and fostering diversity within the university community.

5.2.1.7 Sustainability

Sustainability appears primarily in the policy of **North-West University**, where it intersects with broader governance goals. This theme promotes environmentally conscious practices and supports long-term digital and societal benefits.

5.2.1.8 Content Management

Content management, including quality control and accessibility, is emphasised in policies from the **University of Pretoria** and **Rhodes University**. This theme ensures that web platforms are user-friendly, accurate, and aligned with institutional branding.

The analysis shows that universities prioritise operational themes such as **User Responsibilities**, **Access and Security**, and **Confidentiality**. However, broader societal commitments like **Inclusivity** and **Sustainability** are less consistently integrated into policies. This suggests a gap between technical governance and social responsibility, which could be bridged through future policy development or revision.

By addressing these gaps and promoting inclusivity and sustainability, universities can better align their digital practices with global ethical standards and societal expectations.

Table 2 outlines the distribution of these themes across university policies, highlighting areas of overlap and divergence among institutions, with several key patterns emerging, as shown below.

User Responsibilities and **Access and Security** are among the most consistently addressed themes across universities. This underscores a shared commitment to regulating user behaviour and safeguarding digital systems. Universities such as the **University of South Africa**, **University of Johannesburg**, and **Vaal University of Technology** prominently feature these themes. **Confidentiality** is also common, reflecting widespread concerns about data protection and privacy.

Themes related to **Accountability** are well represented, notably in institutions such as the **University of the Free State** and **University of Cape Town**, which emphasise governance, compliance, and transparency. Fewer universities explicitly address **Inclusivity** and **Sustainability** in their policies suggesting opportunities for universities to expand their policy frameworks to reflect evolving priorities in digital governance. While **Inclusivity** is highlighted in the **University of Cape Town**, **Sustainability** is primarily noted in **North West University**, it does indicate a gap in embedding these broader societal commitments into policy frameworks. Several institutions, including the **University of Pretoria** and **University of Stellenbosch**, focus on **Legal Compliance** and **Content Management**, reflecting their emphasis on maintaining regulatory and content quality standards.

5.1.3 Analysis of Unique Themes and Overview

In addition to the common themes, several universities have included unique themes in their policies, reflecting their distinctive approaches to web governance and alignment with institutional priorities. These unique themes provide insight into specific focus areas that are less universally addressed.

5.1.3.1 Interception and Monitoring

Universities: University of South Africa, University of Johannesburg

This theme emphasises monitoring user activities and intercepting unauthorised access to ensure the integrity and security of digital systems. Policies under this theme focus on balancing privacy with the need for proactive oversight of digital environments.

5.1.3.2 Website Accessibility

University: University of Pretoria

This theme addresses the design and management of websites to ensure usability for diverse groups, including individuals with disabilities. By focusing on accessibility, the university promotes inclusivity and equity in the digital space. Website accessibility underscores a commitment to creating a digital environment that serves all users equitably, aligning with global best practices like WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines).

5.1.3.3 Communication Clarity

University: Tshwane University of Technology

This theme emphasises the importance of clear, concise communication in digital platforms, ensuring users understand policies, procedures, and expectations. Communication clarity bridges the gap between technical and non-technical users, fostering better compliance and engagement with institutional guidelines.

5.1.3.4 Corporate Identity

University: University of the Free State

Policies addressing corporate identity focus on aligning web governance practices with the institution's branding and reputation. This includes consistency in visual elements and

messaging across digital platforms. Emphasising corporate identity ensures a unified and professional presence, enhancing the university's public image and reinforcing its values.

5.1.3.5 Brand Standards

Universities: University of South Africa, University of Pretoria

This theme revolves around maintaining consistent branding across digital platforms, including the use of logos, colours, and messaging. Clear brand standards foster a cohesive institutional identity, which is critical in digital communication and marketing.

5.1.3.6 Language Policy

University: University of the Free State

This unique focus incorporates multilingualism and equitable language representation in web governance. It reflects the institution's commitment to cultural diversity and accessibility. A language policy promotes inclusivity by ensuring that digital resources are accessible to diverse groups, aligning with South Africa's multilingual ethos.

5.1.3.7 Technology Framework

University: University of Fort Hare

This theme emphasises the infrastructure, systems, and tools required for effective web governance. Policies outline the technology stack and its management, including data backup and recovery. A robust technology framework ensures resilience and reliability in web operations, enhancing institutional efficiency and preparedness.

5.1.3.8 Privacy and Proprietary Rights

University: Rhodes University

This theme focuses on safeguarding user privacy and protecting proprietary content, ensuring that digital platforms respect intellectual property rights and personal data. Privacy and proprietary rights policies reinforce ethical governance by addressing both legal and moral responsibilities in the digital space.

The inclusion of these unique themes demonstrates how universities tailor their policies to address specific challenges and priorities that include but is not limited to:- proactive risk management, inclusivity and accessibility, institutional identity and communication, and infrastructure and privacy.

The analysis reveals that while common themes address operational and technical priorities, unique themes provide a nuanced perspective on each institution's values and challenges.

5.2 Deductions from Common and Unique Themes in Policies

The analysis of common and unique themes in South African university web governance policies highlights significant trends, priorities, and gaps. These observations reveal the shared values among institutions while also identifying areas where specific universities have adopted unique approaches. These findings provide critical insights into the current state of web governance and its alignment with broader institutional goals and societal expectations.

One of the most prominent deductions is the emphasis on operational priorities. Common themes such as user responsibilities, access and security, and confidentiality emphasises the focus on safeguarding digital assets and mitigating risks. This approach suggests that universities prioritise a punitive stance, focusing on protecting systems from misuse and ensuring accountability. However, this emphasis often comes at the expense of proactively fostering inclusivity and innovation in the digital space.

Inclusivity emerges as a key, yet unevenly prioritised theme. While some universities emphasise inclusivity through website accessibility, language policies, and inclusive education, these themes are not consistently addressed across all institutions. For example, the University of Pretoria highlights accessibility, and the University of the Free State includes a language policy. However, the limited representation of these themes across the 12 universities indicates inconsistent efforts to align digital governance with broader social responsibility objectives, particularly in addressing equity and diversity.

An emerging trend is the growing integration of branding and identity into web governance policies. Unique themes, such as brand standards, corporate identity, and presentation consistency, demonstrate that some universities view digital governance as a strategic tool for building public trust and reinforcing their institutional reputation. Institutions like the University of Cape Town and Rhodes University reflect this trend, suggesting a shift towards using web policies as a means of reputation management and stakeholder engagement.

Another key area of focus is security, which remains a cornerstone of web governance across most universities. Common themes such as monitoring, access control, and technology frameworks highlight the universal importance of mitigating cybersecurity risks. Universities

recognise the critical need to build trust in their online systems, ensuring that their digital environments are safe and resilient. This emphasis underscores the shared understanding of the increasing prevalence and sophistication of cyber threats.

Sustainability, however, appears to be an underrepresented theme, with only North West University explicitly addressing it in its policies. This limited focus indicates a missed opportunity to incorporate long-term environmental and digital sustainability into governance frameworks. As sustainability gains traction globally, its minimal representation in web governance suggests that universities have yet to fully embrace its relevance to their digital strategies.

Some universities demonstrate differentiation through their emphasis on technical and procedural clarity. For instance, themes like technology frameworks, content governance, and communication clarity - particularly evident at the University of Fort Hare - show a deliberate effort to leverage advanced technical systems. These unique approaches position such institutions to adapt effectively to evolving digital landscapes, though these efforts are not widely replicated across all the policies that were reviewed for this study.

Legal compliance emerges as a foundational theme, with universities uniformly prioritising policies that align with regulatory standards. However, there is a growing need to expand this focus to address emerging ethical challenges, such as artificial intelligence governance and digital ethics.

The fragmented adoption of unique themes, such as language policies, privacy, and proprietary rights, highlights the potential for shared best practices. Universities can learn from one another by adopting successful governance models and integrating innovative approaches into their own policies. A lack of unified strategies, however, leads to inconsistent practices and missed opportunities for collective progress.

The balance between operational and ethical goals in web governance remains a challenge. Operational themes such as security and accountability often dominate, while ethical themes like inclusivity and privacy receive less consistent attention. Institutions like the University of Cape Town have demonstrated efforts to integrate these dimensions, but such practices are not yet widespread. To address this gap, universities need to better align ethical considerations with

operational priorities, ensuring that governance frameworks meet both technical and societal needs.

South African universities are making progress in developing web governance policies that address critical operational concerns. However, greater emphasis on inclusivity, sustainability, and strategic alignment is needed to create holistic governance frameworks. By building on both common and unique themes, universities can develop comprehensive, ethical, and forward-looking digital governance policies that reflect their societal responsibilities.

5.3 Number of Institutions Reporting on Social Responsibility

Universities serve as critical institutions that not only advance knowledge but also promote ethical practices and social well-being. As part of their digital presence, many universities implement web governance policies to ensure compliance, accountability, and operational efficiency. Simultaneously, others maintain dedicated social responsibility pages to communicate their commitment to societal and environmental issues, such as inclusivity, sustainability, and community engagement. These two elements—web governance policies and social responsibility initiatives—represent distinct yet interconnected aspects of how universities manage their digital ecosystems and align their operations with broader institutional values. While communication is a visible expression of governance, this study considers it one among several interlinked components that collectively uphold institutional credibility and social responsibility.

Investigating the link between universities with web governance policies and those that maintain dedicated social responsibility pages offers an opportunity to explore how these two dimensions interact. A key question is whether the presence of web governance frameworks correlate with a stronger emphasis on social responsibility. Such an inquiry is essential to understand whether universities view web governance merely as a technical and regulatory tool or as a mechanism to advance broader ethical and societal goals. By examining this connection, the study sheds light on how digital governance strategies can either support or hinder universities' social responsibility objectives.

This exploration is particularly significant in the South African context, where universities are expected to address unique socio-economic and cultural challenges (Boughey & McKenna,

2021), while navigating global standards. Understanding the relationship between web governance and social responsibility can reveal how institutions balance operational priorities, such as security and compliance, with their ethical obligations to foster inclusivity, sustainability, and community engagement (Asemah et al., 2013).

The graph below (see Figure 4) provides insight into the presence of social responsibility content on university websites:

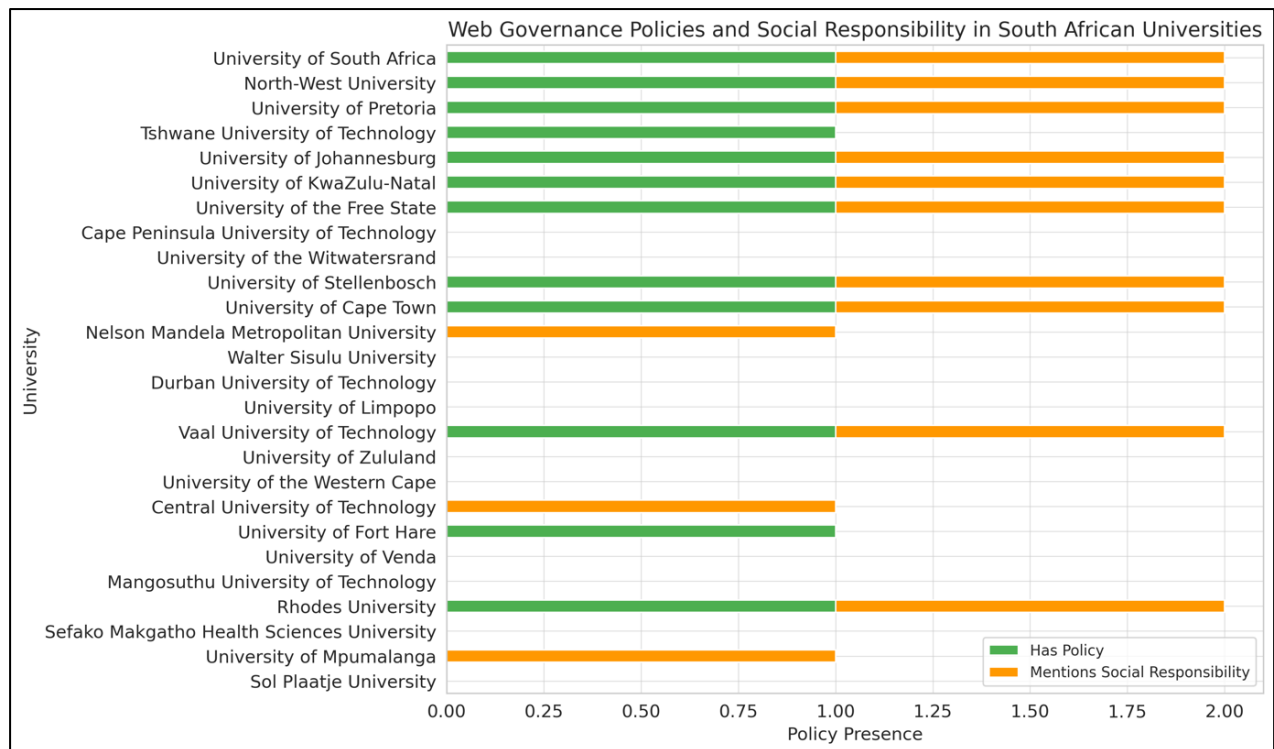


Figure 4: The presence of web governance policies and dedicated social responsibility websites at South African universities

There is a distinct connection between the presence of web governance policies and the existence of social responsibility pages among universities. Out of the 13 universities with a dedicated social responsibility page, 10 (**approximately 77%**) also have a web governance policy in place. This suggests that institutions with established digital governance frameworks appear to be more likely to prioritise and showcase their societal commitments through public facing platforms. The alignment between these two elements highlights the potential role of web governance in facilitating the communication and integration of social responsibility initiatives.

Despite this connection, the overall presence of social responsibility pages remains limited. Only **50% of the universities** in the study (13 out of 26) have such pages, which reflects a considerable gap in how institutions publicly communicate their commitments to societal and ethical goals. This absence could indicate that many universities either do not prioritise social responsibility initiatives or lack the mechanisms or capacity to present these efforts effectively in the digital space.

It is noteworthy that among the 13 universities with no social responsibility page, some may still have web governance policies in place. This reveals a disconnect where governance frameworks are not leveraged to advance or communicate ethical and societal goals. The absence of a dedicated page in these cases may reflect an operational focus on digital security, compliance, and internal processes, rather than external engagement and transparency.

It is also worth noting that not all universities with a social responsibility page have web governance policies. Of the 13 institutions with such pages, three (approximately 23%) lack a formal digital governance framework. This suggests that while these universities recognise the importance of societal engagement, they may not have a structured approach to managing their digital platforms. This gap could potentially limit their ability to ensure consistency, accountability, and sustainability in their online initiatives (Di Miceli da Silveira, 2021).

Overall, the data highlights a mixed landscape where universities differ in how they integrate web governance and social responsibility. While some institutions successfully align these two dimensions, others either lack one of the components or fail to connect them effectively. This indicates missed opportunities for institutions to leverage their digital platforms to enhance transparency, build trust, and promote their societal contributions.

5.4 Findings from Interviews

To gain deeper insights into the intersection of web governance and social responsibility within universities, interviews were conducted with identified experts across different departments at the University of the Witwatersrand. These experts included administrators, technical staff, policy developers, and academic staff who are directly involved in the formulation, implementation, or oversight of web governance policies and social responsibility initiatives. The purpose of these interviews was to explore their perspectives on the alignment between

digital governance frameworks and societal commitments, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced in these areas. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how the university operationalises their web governance strategies in the absence of a web governance policy and translate their social responsibility objectives into practice.

The themes identified from the interviews were chosen using several criteria. The first being how the responses aligned with the primary focus of the research, which included university social responsibility and web governance. Topics like social responsibility, transparency, and content management naturally emerged because they were explicitly mentioned in the questions and participant responses. Ideas and concerns that were repeatedly raised by participants were prioritised as key themes. Other themes selected was based on the depth of discussion around a particular question, areas where participants either unanimously agreed or expressed contrasting views, or themes that could inform actionable recommendations.

5.4.1 Overview of Key Themes from Interviews

The role of web governance policies within universities has grown increasingly significant as institutions aim to align their online presence with their broader mission of social responsibility (Huang & Do, 2021). Drawing insights from the interviews conducted with ten key stakeholders at the University of the Witwatersrand and an analysis of key themes, the researcher explores whether a distinct relationship exists between web governance policies and university social responsibility. The findings indicate that the two areas are intrinsically linked, as web governance provides the framework to communicate and uphold the values of social responsibility while addressing ethical, environmental, and societal challenges. While the interview data represents one South African university, the contextual realities of the South African higher education sector (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) means that these findings are likely to apply to many other universities in the sector.

5.4.1.1 University Social Responsibility and Community Engagement

A dominant theme across all interviews was the perceived importance of universities embracing their social responsibility beyond teaching and research. Many participants highlighted the university's obligation to positively influence society (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) and provide support to its students and surrounding communities. Participant 1 emphasised,

"Our research is about changing things, I would hope. We have a responsibility to at least get the best out of [students] and put an effort into it."

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, who noted,

"Social responsibility must become ingrained in our everyday activities. It's part of what we do."

Participant 4, described social responsibility as

"... not just research, but action—engaging with communities, addressing social inequities, and helping students develop into responsible individuals."

Universities were consistently recognised as institutions that should act as drivers of societal change and contributors to community development. Several participants emphasised the university's obligation to engage with real-world issues and create impactful solutions to societal problems. Participant 5 added that

"Universities should solve problems. Don't go and look for a formula to calculate complex things when you don't have a formula to deal with simple stuff. The focus must be on community challenges"

Some participants also stressed the role of practical initiatives, such as offering internships and promoting environmental awareness. Participant 7 argued,

"As an institution, we must prepare students not just academically, but for life. This means teaching them skills like financial literacy and supporting them in accessing work opportunities."

Additionally, environmental sustainability was noted as a priority. Participant 8 mentioned,

"With climate change looming, universities should be at the forefront of sustainability efforts. It's our responsibility to instil these values in students."

However, some participants voiced concerns that some efforts might feel insincere. Participant 10 reflected,

"It sometimes feels like we're ticking boxes rather than making real change. We need more than just good intentions—we need coordinated efforts and follow through."

The analysis highlights the strong consensus among participants regarding the crucial role of universities in upholding social responsibility and community engagement. Beyond their core functions of teaching and research, universities are seen as key drivers of societal change, with a duty to address pressing social challenges and support both students and surrounding communities (Salvioni et al., 2017).

While several participants emphasised the importance of practical initiatives, such as community outreach programmes, internships, and sustainability efforts, to ensure that social responsibility is not just an abstract concept but an integral part of institutional operations, some participants expressed concerns about the authenticity and effectiveness of existing social responsibility efforts.

By fostering genuine engagement and integrating social impact into their strategic frameworks, institutions can play a transformative role in shaping not only academic outcomes but also broader societal progress.

5.4.1.2 Challenges in Measuring Impact

Some participants highlighted the difficulty of evaluating the impact of social responsibility initiatives, which often lack clear metrics or defined outcomes. Participant 2 noted,

"How do you measure the impact? And I don't even know how you would start making a difference."

Participant 6 added that,

“We put out so much good work, but it’s hard to say whether it’s reaching the people it’s meant to help.”

Similarly, Participant 5 emphasised that while impactful work is happening,

"There’s no system in place to track or measure it. We’re doing great things, but we don’t know how to quantify their effects."

Participant 4 even asked the question,

“Do we even have metrics to evaluate the success of our initiatives? I don’t think we do.”

Suggestions for improvement included integrating impact assessments into departmental planning. Participant 6 proposed,

"Every department should include social responsibility projects in their annual plans, with specific goals and metrics to evaluate success. This will ensure accountability and consistency."

Participant 9 pointed out that impact evaluation isn’t just about data but also about storytelling:

"Beyond numbers, we should focus on sharing the human stories behind our initiatives—the lives changed and the communities transformed."

The analysis reveals a significant challenge in evaluating the impact of social responsibility initiatives within Wits University. Many participants expressed concerns about the absence of clear metrics and structured systems to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. Without defined outcomes, it becomes difficult to measure whether initiatives are truly making a difference or reaching their intended beneficiaries.

The findings indicate a need for universities to develop more structured and transparent approaches to assessing social responsibility efforts.

5.4.1.3 Communication and Awareness

A recurring concern was the limited communication about the university's social responsibility initiatives, both internally and externally. Many participants lamented missed opportunities to showcase impactful work. Participant 3 remarked,

"It seems like all this amazing stuff happens, and we just don't know about it. It's not shared widely enough."

While participant 8 added

"Why aren't we highlighting the incredible work being done in our health sciences or the community outreach programs? It's gold, but no one knows about it."

It was not just the external communication that some participants focused on, with participant 4 indicating that

"The TV screens and the website are great, but we're not updating them consistently or using them strategically."

Participant 7, in turn, suggested that,

"We need to use every available platform—social media, websites, newsletters—to communicate our initiatives and celebrate our successes."

Others pointed out gaps in accessibility, particularly for postgraduate students and external stakeholders. Participant 5 noted,

"If you're not on campus, it's easy to feel excluded. There's a lot happening, but the information doesn't always reach everyone."

Practical suggestions included better use of digital tools and public forums. Participant 10 proposed,

"Why not hold monthly showcases on campus or online, where students and staff can present their community projects? This would make our work more visible and inspire others to get involved."

The analysis highlights a significant gap in the communication and awareness of the university's social responsibility initiatives. Despite impactful work being done, both internally and externally, there is a lack of dissemination, leading to missed opportunities for recognition and engagement. Many participants expressed frustration over the limited visibility of these efforts, emphasising the need for a more proactive approach to showcasing achievements.

The findings stress the importance of a cohesive and well executed communication strategy that works with the university's social responsibility endeavours. By enhancing visibility and accessibility, the university can not only celebrate its contributions but also inspire greater participation and support for its social responsibility efforts.

5.4.1.4 Ethical Web Governance and Its Role in Trust

The connection between ethical web governance and institutional trust was another significant theme. Some participants emphasised that an accurate, transparent, and well governed website is essential to maintaining the university's credibility. Participant 2 observed,

"Ethical web governance is the backbone of an organisation's credibility, trust, and sustainability."

Participant 7 shared that

"Ethics are critical in everything we do, especially when working with people's lives and emotions. Now, more than ever, ethics matter in web governance".

Participant 8 linked this directly to user experience, saying,

"If our website is outdated or inaccurate, it's not just a bad look—it's a breach of trust with our stakeholders." and that "Accurate content is key. It's the cornerstone of building trust with our users."

Participant 6 added,

"Our web content should reflect our commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and ethical conduct. It's not just about information; it's about values."

Participant 9 shared the same sentiments relating to content, stating that

"Having consistent and up-to-date content sends a clear message to our stakeholders that we are reliable and trustworthy."

Participants also discussed the challenges of balancing flexibility with control. Participant 4 noted,

"Academics value their freedom and don't want to feel constrained by overly prescriptive policies. But at the same time, there needs to be a framework to ensure consistency and accuracy."

The findings highlight the crucial role ethical web governance plays in fostering institutional trust. A well maintained, transparent, and accurate website is not merely a digital presence but a reflection of the university's values, credibility, and commitment to its stakeholders. Ensuring ethical oversight in web governance is essential for building trust, as it reassures users of the institution's integrity and reliability (Di Miceli da Silveira, 2021).

While consistency and accuracy in content management are fundamental to building trust, institutions must also navigate the challenge of balancing structured governance with the need for flexibility. Striking this balance will be key to maintaining both academic freedom and an ethical digital presence.

5.4.1.5 Accountability and Training in Content Management

The university's decentralised approach to content management raised concerns about accountability and oversight. Participant 6 argued,

"Before anyone gets access to manage content, they must be trained and understand their responsibilities. You can't hold people accountable if they've never been properly equipped for the role."

Participant 10 added,

"There should be clear guidelines on who is ultimately responsible for content. Is it the web editor, the head of school, or someone higher up? Right now, it's ambiguous."

Participant 3 emphasised the understanding of roles and responsibilities by stating,

"We can't expect good governance without making people aware of their roles and providing them with the right tools and training."

Participant 9 suggested that implementing a training and certification process for web editors could improve quality control,

"You wouldn't let someone publish in an academic journal without proper training. Why should it be any different for our website?"

Participant 7 added to this by saying that

"Accountability structures need to be built into the system, so there's no question about who's responsible when something goes wrong."

The analysis stresses the importance of clear accountability and comprehensive training in content management. A decentralised approach, while offering flexibility, can lead to vagueness in responsibility, making it crucial to establish well defined roles and oversight

mechanisms. Without proper training and clear guidelines, maintaining content quality and governance becomes challenging.

To enhance accountability, institutions should implement structured training programmes and processes for web editors, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to ensure accuracy, accessibility and security compliance, legal adherence and brand consistency. Embedding accountability structures within the content management system could also help create a culture of responsibility, ultimately safeguarding the university's reputation while providing a seamless user experience.

5.4.1.6 Transparency and Risk Mitigation

Participants acknowledged the tension between transparency and managing institutional risks. Participant 3 explained,

"Transparency isn't as complex as we make it if we're honest. But we need to weigh the risks and have mitigation plans in place."

Participant 2 agreed with this sentiment, saying that

"Transparency isn't about saying everything—it's about being honest while also considering the risks and mitigating them appropriately."

Examples included reporting on student pass rates or programme quality in ways that were accurate but also sensitive to reputational concerns. Participant 5 shared,

"We need to be transparent about our challenges, but also frame them in the context of what we're doing to address them."

Participant 6 took a bolder stance by stating

"Balancing transparency and reputation is crucial. You can't compromise one for the other."

The analysis highlights the delicate balance between transparency and risk mitigation in institutional governance. While openness fosters trust and credibility, it must be approached with careful consideration for potential reputational risks. Transparency should not equate to full disclosure of all information, but rather to honest and responsible communication that upholds institutional integrity.

To achieve this balance, universities must implement clear strategies for presenting sensitive information in a way that maintains credibility, while also demonstrating proactive efforts to address challenges.

5.4.1.7 Lack of a Comprehensive Web Governance Policy

The limited attention to web governance in policies, contrasted with its perceived operational importance by staff, mirrors the findings of DeNardis and Raymond (2013), who highlight the fragmented nature of internet governance and the lack of institutional frameworks that adequately support ethical digital management.

The absence of a formal web governance policy was highlighted as a critical gap that impacts operations and the reputation of the university. Participant 1 commented,

"People don't appreciate policies until something goes wrong. Then they ask, 'What does the policy say?'"

Participant 2 added,

"A policy would safeguard staff and users and give assurance that we're doing the right thing."

Participant 9 agreed by stating,

"We don't have a web governance policy, but we should. Without it, everyone is doing their own thing, and it's damaging our credibility."

Many participants felt that such a policy would enhance transparency and accountability. Participant 6 remarked,

"A web governance policy isn't about stifling creativity—it's about setting standards and ensuring quality. It's a tool to protect the university's reputation."

Participant 5 added,

"A policy would safeguard staff and users and give assurance that we're doing the right thing."

Participant 10 concluded that,

"Instituting a web governance policy is not cheap, but it's necessary to ensure consistency and accountability."

The lack of a comprehensive web governance policy presents a significant challenge to the university's operational efficiency and reputation. Without clear guidelines, inconsistencies in content management and accountability can undermine trust and credibility. A formal policy would provide a structured framework to ensure transparency, quality, and consistency while safeguarding both staff and users.

Implementing a web governance policy is not about restricting creativity but about setting clear standards that support institutional goals. Although developing such a policy requires time and resource investment, it is a necessary step to enhance accountability, mitigate risks, and maintain the university's digital integrity (Vale et al., 2022).

5.5 Thematic Comparison Between Web Governance Policies and Interviews

The comparative analysis between the themes derived from the interviews and the web governance policies highlights several overlaps and distinctions. While both sources emphasise accountability, inclusivity, and ethical content management, there are notable differences in priorities and operational approaches.

5.5.1 Commonalities Between Policies and Interview Insights

Accountability emerged as a key theme in both the policies and interviews. Several universities prioritise accountability to ensure accurate and ethical content management across their platforms. Similarly, interview participants expressed the importance of regular audits and clear accountability structures. For instance, Participant 9 noted, "Without accountability mechanisms, institutional trust deteriorates," aligning closely with the accountability measures in web governance policies. While many policies include references to security and compliance, the interviews revealed gaps in practical accountability and user engagement. This gap aligns with Bovens et al. (2014), who emphasise that meaningful accountability in governance requires not just rules, but also mechanisms for user feedback and institutional responsiveness. The lack of clear digital communication channels or ethical review processes on websites may indicate a failure to close this loop.

Inclusivity also resonated across both the policies and interviews. Policies frequently emphasise creating accessible platforms for diverse users, a sentiment echoed by participants who highlighted the exclusion of postgraduate and non-residential students due to poor outreach. Participant 5 advocated for inclusivity, stating that "digital access for all students is a fundamental equity issue," underscoring the shared commitment to ensuring broader accessibility.

Confidentiality and security were similarly prioritised. The analysis identifies security as prevalent across institutions, reflecting the importance of safeguarding sensitive information. Participants echoed this theme, particularly regarding protecting student and alumni data to maintain trust.

5.5.2 Divergences Between Policies and Interviews

Despite these overlaps, differences arise in focus and execution. Legal compliance, for example, is prominently featured in governance policies but received limited attention in interviews. While participants expressed concerns about ethical practices, there was less emphasis on adherence to specific legal standards, suggesting a potential gap in operational awareness.

Content management also revealed contrasting perspectives. Policies emphasise standardising and managing online content, yet interviewees were more concerned with the consequences of

poor content management, such as reputational harm and user disengagement. This suggests a disconnect between strategic governance intentions and perceived on the ground challenges.

Communication strategies further highlight divergence. Interview participants placed significant emphasis on storytelling and engagement as tools to foster trust and awareness. Participant 3 noted, "The narrative approach is what gets people to connect," while policies often address communication indirectly through broader governance principles like accountability or inclusivity.

A key observation is the gap between policy design and practical implementation. Participants frequently cited challenges in applying policies, including their complexity and lack of actionable guidance. Participant 9 emphasised, "Policies need to be simplified and translated into clear actions," highlighting the need for governance frameworks to be both accessible and operational. The comparison between policy themes and interview responses reveals a disconnect between documented governance practices and lived organisational experiences. This supports Garde Sánchez et al. (2021), who argue that universities often articulate socially responsible intentions but struggle to embed them consistently across their operations and digital communications. Interview participants noted the absence of dedicated USR reporting mechanisms on institutional websites, echoing the literature's concern about superficial or fragmented USR disclosures (Nejati et al., 2011).

Another discrepancy lies in sustainability. Although mentioned in interviews as a growing priority, sustainability appears inconsistently across governance policies, suggesting an opportunity for universities to integrate environmental responsibility more explicitly into their digital strategies.

In conclusion, this chapter presented the findings from both the policy document analysis and the semi-structured interviews conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand. The themes that emerged illustrate a complex but meaningful intersection between ethical web governance and university social responsibility. While the analysis revealed areas of strength—such as existing ethical values embedded in digital policies—it also highlighted significant gaps, including a lack of formalised web governance structures and limited alignment with USR principles. The interview findings further validated these observations, providing practitioner insights that reinforced the need for cohesive digital governance that reflects institutional ethics. These findings set the stage for the next chapter, which interprets these results through

the lens of the conceptual and analytical frameworks and situates them within the broader scholarly discourse.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 5 through the conceptual and analytical frameworks introduced in Chapter 3, while also drawing connections to the relevant literature discussed in Chapter 2. The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between ethical web governance (EWG) and university social responsibility (USR), and to consider the broader implications of the findings for institutional policy and governance practices in higher education.

The conceptual framework proposed a link between EWG and USR based on values such as transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and ethical integrity. These values were tested against the findings from the analysis of web governance policies and interviews. The SWOT analytical framework was used to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within current governance practices.

Although the document analysis may initially appear separate, it plays a crucial role in grounding the study's findings. These documents—ranging from web policies to public-facing content—offer a formalised expression of the university's ethical commitments and governance structures. By comparing this with the interview findings, the study was able to identify both consistencies and disconnects between policy and practice. For instance, although policy documents from 12 universities commonly reflect commitments to inclusivity and transparency, interview data collected solely from Wits University highlight challenges in operationalising these values. These insights are institution-specific and not presented as universally representative. The policy analysis thus enriches the study's central argument by providing an institutional context against which stakeholder perceptions can be interpreted. Findings from the document analysis and interviews revealed that while some elements of EWG such as access, user responsibilities, and technical compliance are commonly addressed in institutional policies, critical values such as inclusivity, ethical oversight, and transparency are often underrepresented. This supports the literature's argument that universities tend to communicate their social responsibility superficially rather than integrating it meaningfully into their digital governance frameworks (Garde Sánchez et al., 2021).

The interviews further exposed a disconnect between policy and practice. Although staff recognised the importance of ethical digital practices, they pointed to resource constraints, lack of formal web governance frameworks, and inconsistent implementation. These observations are consistent with Bovens et al. (2014), who highlight that meaningful accountability is not achieved through policy alone but requires operational mechanisms that facilitate transparency and responsiveness.

The SWOT analysis contributed to understanding institutional readiness and gaps. For instance, while technical compliance is generally strong, there is little evidence of cross-departmental collaboration or integration of EWG into broader strategic planning. These weaknesses reflect what De la Cruz Ayuso and Gutiérrez-Goiria (2021) describe as the adoption of social responsibility merely as a symbol, where institutions endorse ethical values in principle but fail to embed them structurally.

By framing the findings through both the conceptual and analytical lenses, the study shows that EWG can act as a digital extension of USR, but only when supported by a holistic, values-driven approach that includes training, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement. This interpretation also affirms the relevance of developing formalised EWG policies that are responsive to ethical concerns and socially inclusive in design.

6.1 Mapping findings against the conceptual framework

Table 3 provides a systematic matching of findings to the conceptual framework used in this research. In aligning empirical observations with theoretical concepts, the table demonstrates how the study findings map onto proven models and theories. A detailed explanation of key finding follows on from this table.

Table 3: Key findings mapped against conceptual framework

Key Findings	Mapped Concepts from Framework
Ethical web governance enhances social responsibility reporting	Ethical Web Governance, Transparency, Accountability
Ethical web governance as a trust-building mechanism	Ethical Web Governance, Security, Fairness

University social responsibility extends beyond academics	University Social Responsibility, Community Engagement, Sustainable Practices
Universities must promote ethical behaviour	Ethical Research, Inclusive Education, University Social Responsibility
Transparency in governance and reputation management	Transparency, Accountability, Ethical Web Governance
Unethical web content and its impact on reputation	Security, Ethical Web Governance, Accountability
Need for a centralised web content approval process	Ethical Web Governance, Security, Accountability
Adherence to legal and ethical standards	Security, Ethical Web Governance, Fairness

Insights from both web governance policies and stakeholder interviews suggest that the presence of formal governance structures may support more credible and coherent reporting of social responsibility initiatives. While the presence of a social responsibility webpage may indicate an institutional awareness of ethical expectations, it does not, in itself, confirm effective policy communication or genuine commitment to university social responsibility. This study recognises that visibility alone can be performative if not supported by meaningful, accurate, and regularly updated content. Stakeholder insights revealed concerns about outdated information and limited interactivity, suggesting that effective communication depends not merely on the existence of a webpage, but on the extent to which digital platforms reflect and operationalise institutional policies. Ethical web governance, therefore, must prioritise substance over symbolism, ensuring that online representations of social responsibility are grounded in transparency, accountability, and actionable policy. These policies provide a structured framework that ensures consistency, quality, and ethical compliance, ultimately enhancing the university's reputation and engagement with its audience. Universities without such policies may struggle with inconsistent and less credible reporting, impacting their ability to effectively communicate their social responsibility efforts.

Ethical web governance is seen as the responsible management and oversight of a website, ensuring that content aligns with the institution's values and legal standards. It includes maintaining the credibility, trust, and sustainability of the institution. While some participants emphasised that proper web governance is crucial for maintaining the reputation and trustworthiness of the university's website, this perception alone does not definitively indicate

that the institution actively prioritises social responsibility. It is important to consider that a lack of visible communication or reporting on social responsibility initiatives does not necessarily imply an absence of underlying action.

USR involves the university's commitment to ethical behaviour, accountability, and transparency, contributing positively to society beyond its academic mission. The main areas of focus include financial sustainability, climate change, governance, and creating high-level critical skills. The university's role extends to contributing to societal wellbeing. This supports the research done by Kouatli (2019) that shows USR has become another dimension to the teaching and research activities of universities. Majority of the participants agreed that the university's mission extends beyond the academic agenda.

Asemah et al. (2013) in their research emphasised that it was the institution's role to encourage ethical behaviour during their interactions with stakeholders. The university already has in place programmes and community outreach by various departments (e.g., pharmaceutical studies, physiotherapy), which if reported on consistently, can be an effective way to foster social responsibility among students and staff. Incorporating ethics and social responsibility into the curriculum, both at the beginning and end of a student's academic journey, was also suggested by interview participants, to instil these values.

Transparency is essential for building trust and accountability. However, it must be balanced with the need to protect the university's reputation and manage sensitive information appropriately. This can be achieved through clear communication of policies, regular updates, and involving stakeholders in the governance process, ensuring that content is accurate, respectful, and reflective of the university's values. Previous research has shown that disclosure of a university's social responsibility enhances the reputation of the institution and gives it the competitive edge required to attract top-performing students (Asemah et al., 2013). All participants agreed that reporting on social responsibility was key to creating transparency and building trust and elevating the status of the university.

Other aspects (beyond those covered in the literature review) that came out strongly during the interrogation of web policies and the interviews were around ways to handle unethical practices and content management. The university's reputation is closely tied to the content it publishes. Unethical practices can severely damage trust and credibility, not just of the website, but of the

institution as a whole. Students, staff, alumni, and the broader community need to trust that the information provided is accurate, ethical, and reflective of the university's values.

The lack of a centralised approval process for web content is identified as a significant challenge that can lead to the publication of unverified or unethical content. Publishing unverified information, failing to protect sensitive data, and allowing biased or harmful content to be posted can damage the university's reputation and trustworthiness. The implementation of a comprehensive web governance policy that includes clear roles and responsibilities, regular training for web editors, and a system for monitoring and approving content before it goes live can help in safeguarding the reputation of the university. Importantly though, this would have to be implemented in a sensitive and considered manner within the university environment where academic freedom is valued, to avoid unwanted resistance from stakeholders.

Adhering to laws and regulations such as data protection (e.g., POPIA) is essential. Unethical content can lead to legal repercussions. Unethical content can harm users, whether through misinformation, offensive material, or breaches of privacy. Protecting users from such harm is a fundamental responsibility of the university, which could be better realised through the development and implementation of a web governance policy.

While this study acknowledges a conceptual distinction between internal and external responsibilities—where internal responsibilities relate to governance structures, policy compliance, and stakeholder communication within the university, and external responsibilities pertain to community engagement, societal impact, and transparency to the public—it is important to note that ethical web governance operates at the intersection of both. Digital platforms function as dual-facing tools that serve internal governance needs (such as content accuracy, data security, and internal stakeholder engagement) while simultaneously fulfilling external obligations (such as public disclosure of social initiatives, sustainability efforts, and community partnerships). Rather than being a source of analytical inconsistency, the overlap between internal and external responsibilities reflects the integrated nature of web governance in higher education. This convergence underscores the argument that ethical web governance is not just a technical function, but a strategic enabler of university social responsibility (USR), uniting operational integrity with societal accountability.

This study reiterates the need for universities to integrate ethical web governance into their overall social responsibility plans. Clear policies, accountability culture, and integrating ethical considerations into digital governance will not only protect institutional reputation but also promote the university's role as a responsible and transparent institution in the global academic and social sphere.

6.2 Using the SWOT Framework to conclude the discussion

To provide a structured analysis, this section incorporates a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to assess the current state of web governance within the university. This approach helps to identify areas of success, challenges that need to be addressed, potential improvements, and external risks that may impact web governance practices. The SWOT analysis offers a strategic framework for understanding the university's position and informs the recommendations presented in the next chapter.

6.2.1 Strengths

Several strengths emerged from the interview data. The participants emphasised the importance of social responsibility within universities, highlighting that Wits has a strong ethical foundation with its commitment to addressing social and environmental issues, indicating a broader societal impact. The university uses various platforms like websites and social media to communicate its initiatives, ensuring broad reach and engagement. There is an understanding of the decentralised nature of university governance, which can help in addressing issues related to content management and policy implementation.

The university plays a significant role in fostering social responsibility among students and staff, with initiatives like community outreach and sustainability education. There is a clear recognition of the importance of ethical behaviour and accurate content, which is crucial for maintaining the university's credibility and trustworthiness. The participants recognised the need for comprehensive policies and procedures to guide ethical behaviour and content management, essential for effective governance. Through research, sports programmes, and sustainability projects, the university makes a difference to its stakeholders and community.

The university contributes to society beyond its academic mission, highlighting the importance of research, community engagement, and initiatives like the entrepreneurship hub and teaching

and learning in advancing the public good. The Wits. For Good slogan used throughout the cements this statement. The success of alumni in their careers is seen as a key indicator of the university's impact, with tracking alumni achievements providing insights into the effectiveness of the university's social responsibility initiatives. There is also a belief that social responsibility comes naturally to people in South Africa due to the community-based spirit and the concept of Ubuntu.

6.2.2 Weaknesses

The participants identified several weaknesses within the university's current structure and practices. One major issue is the lack of centralised accountability, which can lead to inconsistencies and errors. This problem is compounded by the absence of a Web Governance Policy, resulting in gaps in managing and monitoring web content effectively. There is also a potential for unethical practices in web governance, highlighting the need for stronger controls and oversight.

The decentralised nature of content creation and the lack of oversight can lead to miscommunication and the dissemination of inaccurate information. Without a centralised approval process, this decentralised approach can result in inconsistencies and potential violations of ethical guidelines. Additionally, there is an acknowledgment of the difficulty in measuring the impact of social responsibility initiatives, which can hinder the ability to assess and improve these efforts.

Financial constraints further limit the university's ability to communicate its social responsibility initiatives more broadly. There is also a challenge in getting people to report their activities, as many do not see their efforts as newsworthy or do not have the time to write about them. The lack of professional web writers and editors exacerbates this issue, making it difficult to effectively communicate these initiatives.

Participants in this study seem to feel that the university's research could address more practical societal problems. Interviewees expressed a sense that there is a need for greater links between practical issues that concern local communities and research endeavours at the university. Some interviewees implied that university websites should be used for more than just celebrating the achievements of (certain) individuals.

6.2.3 Opportunities

The development of a Web Governance Policy for Wits creates several opportunities to address existing gaps and provide clear guidelines for content management. Implementing measures to ensure transparency in web governance can improve trust and credibility among stakeholders, thereby enhancing the university's reputation. Establishing regular audits and reports will help monitor changes and maintain the integrity of web content. Similarly, by promoting social responsibility initiatives more effectively the university's reputation and community engagement could be further enhanced. Regular training for staff and academics on web governance and ethical responsibilities are essential to improve compliance and content quality, as are clear mechanisms for reporting content that violates ethical guidelines, such as a referral system or an integrity hotline.

A framework for accountability is important to ensure that those who post content on official Wits platforms are aware of their responsibilities and that there is oversight. A web governance policy can safeguard both staff and users by providing clear guidelines for... and ensuring that the university's actions are transparent and responsible. Balancing ethical governance with freedom of expression and academic freedom is also crucial.

A policy alone is not enough to ensure effective web governance, though. It needs to be part of a broader effort that includes training, communication, and regular reviews. Conducting awareness campaigns and educational sessions can ensure understanding and implementation of policies. Moreover, integrating ethics and social responsibility into curricula (where possible) and HR processes can make them a part of everyday activities. Developing a Wits policy can also help ensure the protection of user data and compliance with legal standards like the POPIA Act. Additionally, by addressing gaps in website accessibility these site could be made more inclusive for people with disabilities. Other actions could include leveraging AI to manage and filter content to help ensure that inappropriate or outdated content is identified and addressed, and using local radio stations to communicate with communities in their mother tongues as a means to make information more accessible. Finally, the web governance framework should be transparent and publicly available, allowing stakeholders to understand the guidelines and processes in place.

6.2.4 Threats

Without proper oversight, there is a risk of content violating ethical guidelines, which could harm the university's reputation. Resistance from staff or departments in adopting new policies or guidelines could hinder effective governance. Furthermore, any lapses in ethical web governance or social responsibility initiatives could lead to significant reputational damage. The decentralised nature of content management can make it difficult to ensure consistency and compliance across all departments and faculties. On the other hand, though, there is also a concern that too much pressure to comply with narrowly defined ethical standards can lead to self-censorship among academics and other users. A web governance policy is seen more as an internal management and risk management tool, rather than something that directly impacts the trustworthiness of the website from an external perspective. Unethical practices can significantly damage the university's credibility. While a web governance policy can streamline processes and enhance the quality of content, it may also slow down the publication process and require careful management to avoid negative impacts or unnecessary delays.

Overall, the integration of conceptual insights and empirical evidence in this chapter underscores the importance of ethical web governance as both a strategic and moral imperative in higher education. The findings reveal that while foundational elements of governance exist, there remains a critical need for alignment with the broader values of university social responsibility. This alignment calls for intentional policy design, institutional leadership, and capacity-building to bridge the gap between ethical aspirations and operational realities. These conclusions provide a springboard for the final chapter, which consolidates the study's contributions and presents actionable recommendations for advancing ethical web governance in the South African higher education context.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarises the key findings of the study and reflects on their implications for institutional web governance. It revisits the research objectives and questions, highlighting how the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between ethical web governance and university social responsibility.

The research conducted on the relationship between ethical web governance policies and a university's social responsibility reveals a significant and multifaceted connection. Ethical web governance is not merely a set of guidelines for managing online content; it is a crucial framework that supports the broader mission of the university to act responsibly and ethically in all its activities.

In South Africa, where universities play a crucial role in societal development (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), the association between ethical web governance and university social responsibility is particularly significant. By implementing robust ethical web governance policies, universities can enhance their social responsibility efforts, build trust and credibility, ensure legal compliance, promote inclusivity, and support their educational and social goals. This integrated approach not only benefits the university but also contributes positively to the broader community and society.

Web governance policies create a transparent environment for sharing a university's social responsibility initiatives by establishing clear guidelines, ensuring accountability, promoting openness, facilitating regular updates, building trust through consistency, and enhancing engagement. These policies help ensure that the information shared on university websites is accurate, accessible, and reflective of the institution's commitment to advancing the public good. Moreover, these policies help maintain the integrity, trustworthiness, and effectiveness of the university's online presence, supporting its broader mission and social responsibility goals. In conclusion, ethical web governance policies are integral to a university's ability to fulfil its social responsibility.

7.1 Answering the Research Questions

7.1.1 How is ethical web governance associated with university social responsibility in South Africa?

As the findings from this study shows ethical web governance is strongly associated with university social responsibility (USR) in South Africa, creating a framework that not only upholds institutional integrity but also amplifies the visibility and impact of socially responsible initiatives. The integration of web governance policies with USR reflects a dynamic relationship where the principles of ethics, transparency, and inclusivity serve as the foundation for how universities account for their actions and communicate their commitments.

Drawing on the findings of this study, web governance policies contribute significantly to transparency, a cornerstone of USR, by providing mechanisms for ethical content management and clear accountability structures. Universities use their websites as primary platforms to showcase their social responsibility initiatives, from sustainability projects to community outreach programmes. Governance frameworks ensure that this content is accurate, relevant, and accessible, thereby building trust among stakeholders. Policies such as those on content audits and ethical communication, as highlighted in the interviews, help ensure that institutions provide reliable information and avoid reputational risks.

Policies that emphasise legal compliance, inclusivity, and access ensure that the university remains accountable to its various stakeholders. By providing platforms for regular updates and feedback, governance policies enable universities to measure and demonstrate the outcomes of their social responsibility initiatives effectively. The importance of alumni outcomes, community engagement, and stakeholder feedback, as discussed in interviews, underscores how web governance supports accountability while fostering ongoing improvement.

7.1.2 How do web governance policies create a transparent environment to share a university's social responsibility initiatives?

The analysis of web governance policies across universities, alongside themes from interview transcripts, reveals how governance frameworks create a transparent environment for communicating social responsibility initiatives on university websites. Web governance policies play a central role in shaping ethical, accessible, and accountable platforms that foster

trust and enhance visibility for a university's commitment to social responsibility. However, the extent of their effectiveness depends on alignment with practice, accessibility, and communication strategies.

A key strength of web governance policies lies in their ability to create accountability and transparency. The presence of clear guidelines for ethical content management, as shown from the analysis of university policies in Chapter 5, ensures that information shared on institutional websites is accurate and aligns with the institution's values. For example, the heatmap data (see Figure 3) shows that themes like accountability and security appear prominently in the policies of several South African universities, indicating a shared commitment to maintaining integrity in digital spaces. These governance mechanisms serve as safeguards, preventing misinformation and enhancing institutional credibility.

Participants from the interviews echoed these sentiments, emphasising the role of regular content audits and transparency in fostering trust among stakeholders. As Participant 9 remarked, "Without accountability mechanisms, institutional trust deteriorates." This reflects the value of governance frameworks in bridging policy commitments with transparent practices, allowing universities to demonstrate their social responsibility reliably.

7.1.3 How do web governance policies provide for the university to account for its actions?

Web governance policies play a crucial role in enabling universities to account for their actions, particularly in the context of their social responsibility commitments. By establishing clear guidelines, ethical standards, and mechanisms for oversight, these policies ensure that universities maintain credibility and demonstrate accountability to their stakeholders.

The policies serve as the foundation for ethical content management, ensuring that all publicly available information aligns with institutional values and that the information is accurate. For example, regular content audits, as highlighted by Participant 9, ensure that outdated or incorrect information is removed, maintaining trust in the institution's communications. These audits also create a structured process for assessing whether the university's actions, as represented online, reflect its stated commitments.

Transparency is central to holding universities accountable for their social responsibility initiatives. Governance policies enable the structured and consistent publication of reports, updates, and case studies that demonstrate the university's progress. Participant 2 argued that

transparency is built on "honesty and openness in communication," a principle embedded in governance frameworks that require regular updates to digital content.

7.2 Recommendations

This section outlines actionable recommendations derived from the analysis of interview data and web governance policies, addressing gaps and opportunities in digital governance and university social responsibility. The recommendations are designed to enhance institutional practices, improve policy implementation, and foster accountability and inclusivity. This chapter also identifies areas for future research to deepen understanding and develop innovative strategies for effective web governance in the higher education sector. By combining practical guidance with forward looking insights, this section aims to support continuous improvement and collaboration among universities.

7.2.1 Recommendations for Wits University

Based on the analysis of both the interview data and the web governance policies of other South African universities, specific recommendations are proposed to address key challenges and enhance Wits University's digital governance and social responsibility efforts.

7.2.1.1 Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Web Governance Policy

A consistent theme across the analysed policies is the presence of structured web governance frameworks at many universities in the country, covering areas such as user responsibilities, access, security, and content management. Wits currently lacks a similar comprehensive policy, as revealed through the interviews, resulting in inconsistencies in digital operations and limited accountability. It is recommended that Wits develop a web governance policy that integrates best practices from peer institutions. This policy should clearly define roles, responsibilities, and standards for web content creation, ethical digital practices, and mechanisms for compliance and enforcement. Drawing from the emphasis on inclusivity and confidentiality in other universities' policies, Wits should incorporate provisions ensuring equitable access and vigorous data protection measures.

7.2.1.2 Strengthen Training and Capacity Building

A recurring issue raised in the interviews was the insufficient training of staff tasked with managing web content, resulting in inconsistent implementation and oversight. Other universities' policies often highlight the importance of empowering staff to effectively execute

web responsibilities. Wits should establish regular training programmes tailored to the roles of different users. These programmes should address legal compliance, content quality control, and the use of analytics to monitor performance. Learning from universities that emphasise accountability in their policies, Wits could also implement ongoing evaluation of staff competencies to ensure continuous improvement.

7.2.1.3 Enhance Communication and Visibility of Social Responsibility Initiatives

The analysis revealed that many institutions actively use their web platforms to communicate their social responsibility initiatives, aligning with themes of accountability and transparency. Wits, however, has not effectively leveraged its digital channels to showcase its contributions to social responsibility, as noted in the interviews. It is recommended that Wits adopt a proactive communication strategy that highlights its initiatives on its website and social media platforms. This would not only increase visibility but could also foster community engagement and improve perceptions of the university's role in addressing societal challenges. Metrics for measuring the impact of these initiatives should also be developed and publicly reported to enhance transparency and accountability.

7.2.1.4 Prioritise Inclusivity and Accessibility in Digital Platforms

The theme of inclusivity emerged strongly in the web governance policies of other institutions, with many universities emphasising equitable access to digital tools and services. Similarly, interviews at Wits highlighted the need for more accessible digital systems to support diverse user needs. Wits should ensure that its web content adheres to accessibility standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), to accommodate individuals with disabilities. In addition, the university should explore strategies for improving digital literacy across its community, ensuring that all stakeholders can engage effectively with its online platforms.

7.2.1.5 Incorporate Sustainability into Digital Practices

Sustainability, a theme emphasised in the governance policies of several universities, largely resonates with Wits who has a dedicated Pro Vice Chancellor for Climate, Sustainability, and Inequality. To align with global and national trends, Wits should adopt environmentally conscious practices in its digital systems. This could include optimising server efficiency, reducing electronic waste, and promoting sustainable use of digital tools. Sustainability efforts should also be reflected in the university's governance policy, highlighting Wits' commitment

to environmental issues. A policy could potentially enhance the visibility of the work already done by Wits.

7.2.1.6 Foster Collaboration with Peer Institutions

The comparative analysis of web governance policies from 12 universities highlights opportunities for shared learning and collaboration. Wits should actively engage with peer institutions to exchange best practices and develop solutions for common challenges. Collaborative initiatives could include joint training programmes, research projects, or shared technology solutions to streamline web governance processes and reduce costs.

7.2.2 Recommendations for Other Universities

For other South African universities, the recommendations are drawn from the analysis of their web governance policies and aim to address systemic issues in the higher education sector.

Universities should adopt or revise their web governance frameworks to ensure alignment with best practices and national priorities. Policies should emphasise key themes such as user responsibilities, confidentiality, and sustainability while being flexible enough to accommodate the unique needs of each institution. Universities should also establish accountability structures that clearly define ownership and oversight for web governance processes. This will help minimise inconsistencies and foster a culture of transparency and ethical compliance.

Additionally, universities should actively promote collaboration and knowledge sharing across institutions. Sharing best practices and lessons learned in web governance and social responsibility can accelerate improvements in the higher education sector. Lastly, universities should integrate sustainability and inclusivity into all aspects of web governance. Digital systems and content must be designed to minimise environmental impact and support long term viability.

7.3 Further Research and Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research, particularly in the field of web governance and its intersection with higher education and institutional social responsibility. While this study focused on a single university and an analysis of policies from

other institutions, there is significant scope for further investigation to deepen understanding and enhance practice in this field.

One potential area of future research is the comparative analysis of web governance implementation across institutions. While this study analysed policies, a broader exploration of how these policies are implemented and operationalised at different universities could provide valuable insights. Researchers could examine the effectiveness of governance frameworks, identifying best practices and common barriers to successful policy execution. Furthermore, comparative studies could explore the influence of institutional size, resources, and regional contexts on governance practices and their outcomes.

Another opportunity lies in the evaluation of web governance's impact on institutional reputation and stakeholder engagement. Future studies could investigate how effective governance, particularly in areas like accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability, influences perceptions among key stakeholders, including students, staff, and external partners.

While this study identified gaps in the visibility and impact of social responsibility initiatives, future studies could explore how universities can leverage web platforms to enhance their societal contributions. This could include investigating innovative uses of technology to support community engagement, improve equity, and address pressing societal challenges such as climate change and digital inequality.

Another area of further research could explore how advancements in artificial intelligence and big data analytics could transform governance frameworks. For example, researchers could explore how AI-driven tools can enhance content management, accessibility, or cybersecurity, while addressing ethical considerations tied to their use.

By pursuing these research opportunities, future scholars could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of web governance in higher education. Such efforts will not only support the continuous improvement of digital governance practices but also enhance the role of universities as socially responsible and innovative institutions in the digital era.

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APPENDICES

1. Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet



A South African Perspective on Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is done and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read through the following information and I will be happy to clarify anything you read or need more information. Take the time to decide whether you want to participate in the study or not.

Who am I and what this study is about

I am Pam Moodley, a staff member working as a Web Technical Lead and Designer, in the Marketing Department of Wits University. This research is in partial fulfilment of completing my Masters of Management in Management and Governance at the Wits School of Governance.

The aim of the study is to try to determine if any relationship exists between web governance and a university's social responsibility. While research has been conducted on governance in general at higher education institutions, there is a significant lack of research in the field of web governance and its role in higher education. As a member of the University's web team managing content on a public facing platform, I believe this research can significantly contribute to this field of study in South Africa.

What will taking part involve?

Before the commencement of any participation, consent forms will be signed. One on one interviews will be conducted at a time and place of your convenience. The interviews will be recorded. General themes for the interview include:

- Perceptions of web governance

- Pros and cons of web governance
- Importance of university social responsibility
- Determining links between web governance and higher education institutions

Why have you been invited to take part?

The study aimed at using participants from within the University. You were identified as an expert in the field of governance and policy and were recommended by other colleagues from the University.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you have every right to refuse to participate if you so wish. You will also be able to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

What are the possible risks and benefits to taking part?

It is not anticipated that there are any risks to participation in this study beyond those encountered in everyday life. A benefit will be your contribution to this and future research.

Will taking part be confidential?

While anonymity cannot be guaranteed during the data collection process as I will be conducting the interviews. Anonymity can be guaranteed through any further write up's and in the research report. Any information shared with the during the interview will be kept anonymous. Recorded interviews and signed consent forms will be saved to my personal cloud account with the only source of access being myself. The data will be saved for a period of 5 years after the conferment of the degree.

Who should you contact for further information?

Researcher: Pam Moodley (Phone: 0835077053, pam.moodley@wits.ac.za)

Supervisor: Danie De Klerk (danie.deklerk@wits.ac.za)

Thank You

2. Appendix B – Participant Consent Forms



A South African Perspective on Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility

Consent to take part in research

I, _____ (Full name), voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Please tick

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind. ☐
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. ☐
- I understand what my participation involves. ☐
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. ☐
- I agree that anonymity cannot be guaranteed during my interview but will be guaranteed through the write ups and research report. ☐
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded. ☐
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's research report. ☐
- I understand that signed consent forms, original audio recordings and transcripts of my interview will be retained and stored securely in the cloud with only the researcher having access. ☐
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information. ☐

Signature of research participant

Date:

Signature of researcher

Date:

3. Appendix C – Interview Schedule



A South African Perspective on Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility

Interview Guide

Preamble: Permission to record

Section 1: Ethical Web Governance

1. What do you understand by ethical web governance, and do you think it is important for an organization?
2. How can ethical web governance impact the reputation and trustworthiness of a website?
3. Can you suggest ways to handle issues related to content that may violate ethical guidelines or community standards?
4. What role does transparency play in ethical web governance? How can organisations demonstrate transparency to users?
5. Can you provide examples of unethical practices in web governance and explain how you would avoid or correct these?
6. Give an example of a specific content guideline that might be included in a web governance policy to maintain ethical standards.

Section 2: University Social Responsibility

1. What does university social responsibility mean to you and how do you believe universities can contribute to society beyond their academic mission?
2. In your opinion, what are the key social and environmental issues that universities should address?
3. How can universities foster a culture of social responsibility among students, staff, and the community?
4. How would you measure the impact of university social responsibility initiatives?
5. In what ways does a university communicate its social responsibility initiatives?

Overall:

1. In your opinion, do you think that a web governance policy could affect the way a university reports their social responsibility initiatives on a website?

4. Appendix D – Ethics Clearance Certificate



SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE: WSG-2023-45

PROJECT TITLE: A South African perspective on Ethical Web Governance and University Social Responsibility

INVESTIGATOR

Yogasthrie Moodley

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

School of Governance

DATE CONSIDERED

27 May 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL

Minimal Risk

EXPIRY DATE

Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 11 August 2023

CHAIRPERSON *Rekgotsofetse Chikane*
Rekgotsofetse Chikane

cc: Supervisor:

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature _____

Date _____/_____/_____

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES