

# Driving Change Through Education: UPES' Vision for Sustainable Impact and Community Empowerment

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Dr. Ram Sharma, Vice Chancellor, UPES

Academic institutions have long been viewed as birthplaces of changemakers. A shining example of such an institution is UPES which is harnessing the transformative power of education to foster social impact. With a diverse range of initiatives spanning sustainable development, digital empowerment, skill-building, and community outreach, UPES has set a benchmark in leveraging its academic ecosystem for greater good.

In this insightful interview with *TheCSRUniverse*, Dr. Ram Sharma, Vice Chancellor, UPES, explores the university's innovative CSR programs, from the impactful Srijan Social Internship program to the transformative DigitalDhaam initiative, while highlighting its pioneering efforts in sustainability and community development. Through their Learning Centres, UPES Skills Academy, and ESG-focused programs, the university showcases how education can transcend classrooms to build empowered and resilient societies.

*Scroll down to know how UPES is charting a roadmap for meaningful change and inspiring a culture of leadership, empathy, and innovation among its students, faculty, and surrounding communities.*

***Q. UPES has been at the forefront of impactful CSR activities. What is the overarching vision behind these initiatives, and how do they align with UPES' mission to build a better world?***

**A.** Being a not-for-profit institution, UPES does not directly fall into the ambit of CSR regulations. However, we are deeply committed to fulfilling our social responsibility through impactful initiatives. Our efforts are twofold – firstly, through direct monetary contributions towards initiatives that create social impact, and secondly, by leveraging human resources. As an academic institution, we utilize our greatest strength – our people – to drive initiatives that foster societal impact.

Our Srijan Social Internship program enables first-year students to work with social sector organisations, fostering empathy and leadership skills while directly benefiting communities.

We have partnerships with 1230 NGOs, and over 5,000 students have undergone internships, with a collective contribution of 2 lakh human days to impactful projects.

Our CSR activities directed at schools and communities not only address immediate local needs, but also lay the foundation for a resilient, empowered, and sustainable society.

***Q. Can you elaborate on the concept of Learning Centres (LearnShalas) in government schools? What specific educational outcomes have you observed, and how have these centres transformed the learning experience for children?***

**A.** UPES has adopted 5 schools in neighbouring villages to impart primary as well as higher education and computer literacy. We have created vibrant learning spaces in government primary schools such as Kandoli and Misraspatti to provide an engaging and nurturing environment for children. These centres are filled with colourful and interactive materials designed to inspire curiosity and creativity. We've seen a significant improvement in learning outcomes, with children becoming more engaged and eager to participate in classroom activities.

***Q. The UPES Skills Academy focuses on uplifting support staff with communication and digital skills. Could you share insights into the academy's curriculum and the impact it has had on the personal and professional growth of participants? How do you plan to expand this initiative further?***

**A.** At the UPES Skills Academy, we've designed training programs that include communicative English, computer literacy, and soft skills such as non-verbal communication and social etiquette. Programs like *Project Grow* and the *Skill Development Program* have helped our support staff feel more confident and empowered in their roles. For instance, many of our housekeeping staff have improved their workplace communication significantly. We plan to expand this initiative by incorporating advanced IT skills and offering similar programs to members of our surrounding communities. So far, 22 of our support staff have received training under Project Grow, and nearly 60 of them have been trained under the Skill Development Program.

***Q. How has the DigitalDhaam program empowered teachers, students, and homemakers in nearby villages, and what challenges were faced during its implementation, and how have you overcome them? Could you share specific success stories from this initiative?***

**A.** Through our *DigitalDhaam* program, we've been able to bridge the digital divide for teachers, students, and homemakers in nearby villages. While initial challenges included technological apprehension and limited access to resources, we overcame these by hosting hands-on workshops tailored to the community's needs. One success story that stands out is a group of students who, after participating in the program, used digital tools to create impactful presentations and improve their academic performance, unlocking new opportunities for growth.

***Q. How has the DaanUtsav initiative influenced the university's staff and students in terms of fostering empathy and social responsibility? Are there plans to expand this festival beyond the university?***

**A.** The *DaanUtsav*, being conducted in partnership with Goonj (NGO) since 2022, has truly brought our community together by fostering empathy and a culture of giving back. Every year, our students and staff actively participate in donation drives and other outreach activities, which instill a strong sense of social responsibility. We are exploring ways to expand this initiative by partnering with local NGOs and involving nearby schools and villages to amplify its impact beyond our campus. In the past, we have had the opportunity to support an old age home – Cheshire Home – and a slum in Dehradun by providing winter clothing. Many of our student volunteers are engaged in these projects.

***Q. How does UPES ensure sustainability remains central to its CSR initiatives, and what roles do students and faculty play in driving these efforts for long-term social and environmental impact?***

**A.** At UPES, sustainability is a critical focus, and every institutional action is evaluated for its environmental footprint. One noteworthy example is the elimination of all RO systems across campus. RO systems produce three times more waste water during the process than the drinking water produced. This waste water creates a significant burden on our water resources and is not sustainable given that we face seasonal water shortage despite Uttarakhand being a water surplus state. After conducting extensive water quality testing, it was determined that the water at the campus was potable without filtration. This change has resulted in saving **30 million litres of water annually**.

Besides, the Himalayan Institute for Learning and Leadership (HILL) at UPES is dedicated to fostering sustainable solutions for the complex challenges faced in the Himalayan region by promoting collaboration between academia, R&D institutions, and local communities.

Recently, UPES, in collaboration with Mahindra University and Aspire Impact, announced the launch of the ESG, Sustainability, and Impact Specialist Program (ISP), an Executive Education initiative designed to cultivate the next generation of Chief Impact Officers. This innovative program aims to equip professionals with the skills necessary to lead their organisations in achieving Net Zero transitions, Carbon Neutrality, and Circularity, while optimising the balance between Risk, Return, and Impact. A centre of impact is also being envisioned at UPES in collaboration with Aspire Circle, further solidifying UPES commitment to fostering social leadership and initiatives. These partnerships enable us to address educational, environmental, social, and economic challenges comprehensively.

***Q. As a leader in higher education, what role do you believe universities like UPES should play in community development and addressing social issues, and how does UPES exemplify this responsibility?***

**A.** Our philosophy centres on creating measurable impact across multiple dimensions, including education, research, innovation, societal well-being, environment, economy, and policy. We believe universities like ours should act as catalysts for community development by integrating education, research, and outreach. Initiatives like Srijan social internships align with this mission, embedding the idea of impact into the university's core operations. We have been engaging students in meaningful social projects, cultivating a sense of responsibility and leadership.

***Q. Looking ahead, what are the future plans or upcoming projects for expanding your CSR initiatives? Are there new areas of focus or innovative programs in the pipeline?***

**A.** The university plans to continue expanding its partnerships and initiatives, particularly in ESG and sustainability, to further amplify its impact on society. This mission aligns with our vision to establish UPES as a 'university for impact', addressing pressing social issues and driving positive change.