The Perception Of Romanian Students Regarding The Corporate Social Responsibility Practices Identified In The Tertiary-Level Education Sector

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Abstract

Due to the ascending responsible trends, companies, institutions and even individuals have the opportunity, nowadays, to reconceive their practices and, therefore, contribute to the development of collective wellbeing. In this regard, corporate social responsibility may be perceived as an appropriate instrument. Corporate social responsibility extends beyond traditional business practices by establishing a positive behavior based on ethical, legal, and philanthropic principles, willingness to educate individuals, to support and sustain the environment, society and future generations. Universities and businesses alike should be able to provide coherent explanations to the emerging realities of the environment and society. The higher-level educational institutions’ primary function is to consider and fulfill the expectations of the society in which it operates. Hence, forming professionals in a responsible manner has to become one of the main objectives of the academic environment. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the social responsibility of a reputable university located in Bucharest, from a legitimate stakeholder perspective, respectively, the student. Hence, a quantitative approach, namely a questionnaire, has been used in order to collect primary data. Findings reveal that an effort has been made in the Romanian academic context to promote and encourage responsible practices.

Keywords: social responsibilities, undergraduates, university

JEL Classification: I20, I21, I23
1. Introduction

Nowadays, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important feature of the business environment, especially in the developed countries (Zainee & Puteh, 2020). Several researchers and practitioners have sustained the relevance of the CSR concept, respectively enabling organizations to exploit their potential, considering the economical, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 2009). Corporate social responsibility practices facilitate the interactions between firms and society (Halkos & Nomikos, 2021). Therefore, the concept illustrates the transition from an individualistic and (only) profit-oriented organization, to collectivism and common wellbeing (Tarigan, Susanto, Hatane, Jie, & Foedjiawati, 2021). The responsible management approach has changed the way of doing business (Buallay, Fadel, Alajmi, & Saudagara, 2021). Developed countries have designed strategies, actions, and principles for founding and running enterprises that are significantly more systematic, reliable, and reassuring to both, entrepreneurs and stakeholders, than the former (Ugwuozor, 2020).

For emerging countries, universities or higher education institutions may be perceived as possible solutions used to promote and further contribute to developing responsible businesses (Ugwuozor, 2020). Currently, organizational responsibility education inside official academic programs represents a preeminence requirement for European states (Vázquez, Lanero, & Licandro, 2013). Hence, universities should be focused on the education of future professionals who will be capable to adequately respond to the growing social and environmental demands of modern economies (Buallay, Fadel, Alajmi, & Saudagara, 2021). For instance, multinational companies represent the main players which put effort in integrating CSR in their business strategy (Ahmed, Zehou, Raza, Qureshi, & Yousufi, 2020). Therefore, through the corporate domain the need of workers trained in responsible management competencies has increased significantly. Corporate social responsibility describes a complex process which includes several factors such as organizations, individuals and institutions (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). Thus, the interest in CSR has straightened out the private and non-profit domains, including governments, the local communities, social categories, and other institutional players (Kamal, 2021). Consequently, responsible behavior of businesses, institutions and individuals is gaining traction and should be taught in the higher education system (Ugwuozor, 2020).
2. Literature review

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The expectations of current and challenging business and social environments have determined universities, as high-level educational institutions, to reflect on their own duties, respectively to educate future professionals based on responsible principles and create the necessary skills (for example, consciousness, sustainable perspectives, competences, knowledge) and values required for the long-term development (Fonseca & Lobo Fernandes, 2021). In the past decades, several studies have revealed a growing tendency among universities in incorporating CSR in their strategy and aims, due to the fact that social responsibility education has proven to be a useful tool in creating positive changes at individual level, namely a shift in terms of attitudes, beliefs and values of students (Heath & Waymer, 2021). Considering the Romanian academic context, the integration of CSR education into the official academic curriculum is still a work in progress task (Burcea & Marinescu, 2012). The understanding of the CSR is approached in a tangential manner (Bucur, 2021). Most often, CSR is treated as an optional subject. Frequently, it is mentioned briefly to students during marketing, entrepreneurship or management courses, without surprising the essence and components of CSR. Universities should be socially responsible on their own in order to increase the comprehension and applicability of corporate social responsibilities practices among students (future professionals). Therefore, a proper evaluation of the CSR comprehension and applicability in higher levels of education can be made starting from legitimate parties of interests, respectively Romanian students. The sensory experience of the world is referred to as perception (Konovalova & Pachur, 2021). This appreciation of an individual entails both sensing environmental cues and taking action in response to them. Humans obtain knowledge about the features and aspects of the environment that are vital to their existence through the perceptual activity (Konovalova & Pachur, 2021). There have been identified three stages in the development of adults, respectively young adulthood, middle adulthood and late adulthood (Cavanaugh, 2012). Students aged between 18 and 24 are considered as young adults. Individuals at this stage are centered on several aspects such as: obtaining and affirmation of independence and autonomy; definition of identity and expending social intercourse (Cavanaugh, 2012). At this beginning phase of adulthood, they,
usually, strive to leave their ancestral home. Thus, they may be oriented to higher education and job opportunities (Schneider & Bullock, 2008).

3. Methodology
A survey based on a questionnaire administered to a representative sample of respondents has been the quantitative method used for collecting primary data. The questionnaire has been sent to 110 students (18-24 years old, undergraduates, and marketing specialization) that are currently studying at a prestigious university from Bucharest in order to obtain at least 100 valid answers. Further, an analysis of the collected data has been provided, outlining the essential matters. Therefore, several aspects have been evaluated in order to fulfill the aim of the study such as: the students understanding of the corporate social responsibility concept; the undergraduates’ perception regarding the CSR approaches of universities and their own responsible behavior.

4. Results and Discussion
   A. Students understanding of the CSR concept
Most of the respondents claim that they are familiar with the corporate social responsibility notion, while 21% admit that they were not aware of this term before participating in this study (Fig.nr.1). Based on the answers provided for this question, students experience two issues when referring to CSR, namely they do not understand it properly and some are not interested in its applicability.

Additionally, they tend to associate more the concept with the philanthropic and ethical dimensions, rather than the economical and legal responsibility (Fig.nr.2). This result outlines the
fact that students do not understand properly the applicability of the term and might not be familiar with the conceptual framework of CSR. Therefore, while they might perceive CSR as a useful tool for establishing common wellbeing, respectively helping individuals in need, they might not be aware of the economic value of CSR, namely building strong relationships with legitimate stakeholders. Consequently, considering students perception, corporate social responsibility is specific more to the marketing and public relationship domains and less to businesses and responsible management (Fig.nr.3). Therefore, CSR might be perceived by young adults as a marketing instrument that can be used to increase sales or create a positive brand or company image among stakeholders. In consequence, the concept is less viewed as a proper way of doing business following responsible management practices.

![Fig. 2. The four CSR types of responsibility distribution](image)

![Fig. 3. CSR and associated domains](image)

Therefore, corporate social responsibility is considered by the majority of undergraduates more as characteristic of non-profit organizations (NGOs), rather than an aspect of for-profit companies (Fig.nr.4).
When it comes to social responsibility, the majority of students, on the other hand, recognize that not only companies, but also individuals, should be held accountable (Fig.nr.5). This result outlines the young adults’ willingness to offer support and participate actively in the process of creating positive changes at social and economic levels. Additionally, it is acknowledged that achieving general wellbeing can be accomplished through a collaborative effort.

**B. Students’ perception regarding the CSR approaches of universities**

Generally, students tend to express a positive opinion regarding the social responsibilities of the university where they are currently enrolled (46%, respectively 35% have agreed and 11% have strongly agreed with the stated affirmation, namely *The university where I am currently studying is socially responsible*) (Fig.nr.6). Several factors contribute to this overwhelmingly positive perception of the university's CSR policies, including: the ability to influence and develop
expected professional skills and long-term career plans (53%); the encouragement of shared feedback and opinions (60%); the safety of the higher education environment, respectively the lack of discrimination (61%) practices; and the understanding of the proper academic behavior (60%).

**Fig. 6. Students’ perception regarding the social responsibility of a prestigious university from Bucharest**

On the other hand, this particular university can strengthen its CSR efforts by focusing on fostering a sense of community among students. 56% stated that they feel integrated in academic collective, while 44% declared that they were not able to fit in with an educational social group (Fig. nr.7). Despite the fact that the majority of undergraduates are enthusiastic about the university community, the difference between these individuals and those who believe the contrary is not considerable (9%). As a result, an effort should be made to promote student involvement in building a collective organization. Hence, reinforce the importance of membership and communities.

**Fig. 7. Students’ opinion regarding the universities' formed collective**

Additionally, certain ambiguity can be identified while assessing students' perceptions concerning the internship opportunities provided by the university (50% believe that the
university does not offer such facilities, while 50% claim the opposite) (Fig.nr.8). Indeed, the analyzed university does offer such opportunities for undergraduates (for instance, unpaid and short-term collaborations with banks). As a result of these findings, two aspects emerge: these possibilities are not properly communicated to students and some variety is recommended among these internship proposals (there is a possibility that the offered opportunities are not attractive for students).

![Fig. 8. Students’ opinion regarding the universities' internship opportunities](image)

Furthermore, undergraduates stated that procedures have been established at the university level in terms of contractual requirements, guaranteeing a high-quality learning environment, fulfilment of moral obligations, and effective communication between the parties. These CSR policies demonstrate, in the students’ opinion, the significance placed on undergraduates’ preparation, the effort put in to develop an academic team, and the establishment of a climate of trust between the two parties involved in the educational process. The time allotted to resolving student concerns, as well as the process of offering feedback and consultation, can be used to indicate the university's improvement area (Fig.nr.9).

![Fig. 9. Stakeholder (students) evaluation of CSR practices](image)
In terms of environmental (Fig.nr.10) and philanthropic (Fig.nr.11) policies, students seem not to be aware of the projects developed and sustained by the university in this regard. Therefore, the majority of the responses gathered are from the neutral zone (neither agree, nor disagree), revealing the uncertainty related to the analyzed subject. Thus, such initiatives should be promoted more efficiently among undergraduates.

![Fig. 10. Stakeholder (students) evaluation of CSR environmental practices of the university](chart1.png)

![Fig. 11. Stakeholder (students) evaluation of CSR philanthropic practices of the university](chart2.png)

**C. Students own responsible behavior**

57% of undergraduates claim to be socially responsible individuals (Fig.nr.12). In contrast, most individuals (75%) are not activating in NGOs (Fig.nr.13) or students unions (61%) of the university. On the other hand, the majority of students have sustained that they have been involved, to some extent, in socially responsible activities, organized by the university (52%) and by themselves (67%).
Additionally, through the present study two main reasons has been identified as barriers for establishing a higher engagement in CSR activities among students, respectively lack of time (33%) and inefficient communication (26%) of these corporate social responsible projects developed by the university (Fig. nr.14).
5. Conclusions

Corporate social responsibility developed into an intense debated subject, changing the way of doing business. In developing countries, such as Romania, some uncertainty regarding the applicability and usefulness of the concept in business can be identified. Therefore, efforts should be made in order to facilitate the understanding of the notion. To some extent CSR applied in the business environment is sustained and encouraged by the European Union.

Universities and businesses alike should be able to provide coherent explanations to the emerging realities of the environment and society. Universities' primary function is to consider and fulfill the expectations of the society in which it operates. Hence, forming professionals in a responsible manner has to become one of the priorities of the academic environment. Moreover, if individuals can link a concept to a specific event, there is a good chance they will be able to grasp it more easily and use it in their daily lives. As a result, the key components of the academic environment should apply responsible management principles in order to educate others in this regard.

Students represent important stakeholders of the tertiary-level education sector. In consequence, for universities, the most significant factors in ensuring the quality of higher education are represented by the academic personnel and designed study programs. These institutions might utilize corporate social responsibility in order to meet the expectations of their legitimate parties of interest and improve the standard of offered educational services. Several CSR initiatives have been identified in the Romanian academic context. As a result, despite the fact that the notion is relatively new, universities have made some effort to integrate and set an example in terms of responsible behavior.

The findings of the present paper were consistent with other theoretical approaches used to analyze the Romanian higher-level education system from a corporate social responsibility perspective, such as Burcea and Marinescu (2012). Considering the outcomes of this study, Romanian students benefit from a conventional learning environment (for example, contractual obligations are fulfilled by prestigious universities, the educational services have been perceived as qualitative, to some extend students have the possibility to acquire professional skills). Starting from the examined reputable university, from undergraduates’ perspective, some recommendations can be developed, for instance: strengthen student relationships, strive to form
an academic collective based on principles such as mutual assistance, information sharing and opened communication; provide opportunities for relevant trainees for these stakeholders; efficient dissemination of CSR actions meant to address social causes or issues; trigger engagement through relevant social causes for the students.

Moreover, the conducted research acknowledged several characteristics of Romanian undergraduates. These individuals, for example, appear to be more eager to do more for others, offer assistance, and be actively involved in responsible activities. However, because they find it difficult to find time for such activities, this willingness is not fully exploited (lack of organization and prioritization). Another factor that could explain the low level of participation in CSR practices may be considered the lack of motivation. Furthermore, universities should place a greater emphasis on presenting the CSR concept as a whole. Undergraduates who participated in the study demonstrated that they are familiar with some aspects of the CSR notion, but not with the concept overall. Interesting is the fact that they perceive themselves mostly as socially responsible individuals even though they associate the term more with humanitarian initiatives, rather than economical ones, and they declare that they are not collaborating with an NGO or activating in a student union. Hence, this self-assessment of social responsibility arises, mostly, from one's own initiatives and not through the university opportunities. This result may indicate that they do not resonate with the social actions sustained by the prestigious university or they are not aware of these.

Furthermore, this paper focused on the investigation of students' perspectives of Romanian universities' social responsibility, is limited by its goal and the size of the population investigated. However, the findings can be used to generate working hypotheses for further research using larger samples from several Romanian universities.

References


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