

“More Than a University”: The Impact of CSR Initiatives on Business Students’ Perceptions as Future Managers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given that research into attitudes to responsible management in education is still in its infancy, this chapter explored business students’ experiences in relation to award-winning corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of their university and mandatory curriculum on responsible management, based on the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME). Drawing on a qualitative study, focus groups were conducted with 107 students who were asked about their awareness, perceptions, and impact of the ethical, environmental, and social practices that their university implements. The findings suggested strong awareness and pride of its ethical standards, while many students’ choice of university was influenced by their institution’s sustainability practices. However, while students enjoy an immersive experience in CSR and ethics education, some doubted that this prepares them to face ethical quandaries in the real world. The chapter highlights a number of important orientations for the future development of university curriculum in relation to CSR.

INTRODUCTION

In light of the financial meltdown that begun in 2008 and the numerous corporate scandals, the loss of ethical and corporate values has enforced business managers and leaders to become aware that what they do has an impact on society and the environment (Caroll & Brown, 2018). Universities now have a crucial role to play in optimising the way society is managed and in attaining the objective of ensuring major improvements in people’s lives. However, as higher education is becoming a highly competitive industry and a diversified sector, it becomes important for universities to reinvent themselves in response to new challenges and opportunities. Today’s strong universities stand out by their ability to follow their vision and to preserve their identity, even amid significant shifts on the global higher education market (e.g., the increased internationalisation, marketization, deregulation of universities) (Burcea & Marinescu, 2011).

Facing increased competition, universities have now further realised the role of responsible management education and CSR, as a powerful source of competitive advantage (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The implementation of socially responsible initiatives by universities, depicts an improvement in the management of the institutions (Loureiro & Gonzalez, 2012), thus serving as a catalyst for future professionals that leads to future changes worldwide. From this view, students’ perceptions and experiences with regards to CSR represent a valuable input for universities, in order to develop sustainability and responsibility marketing strategies adapted to improve student satisfaction, attract new students and prevent student withdrawal (Vázquez & Lanero, 2016). This realisation has been reflected in the way that CSR and ethics are communicated and taught in business schools. Whilst sceptic perceptions of business education suggest that it is inadequate to take on the challenges facing future business managers (Ghoshal, 2005; Kashyap, Mir & Iyer, 2006; MacLellan & Dobson, 1997; Pfeffer 2005), numerous other scholars consider that it is necessary to give greater importance to ethical values and CSR policies in universities (Arlow, 1991; Bampton and 2005; Block & Cwik 2007; Gaa & Thorne 2004). The main rationale behind such favourable arguments towards CSR-oriented values in universities, is that education is a key driver of students’ moral and ethical development and that the students of today will become the top managers and policy makers of the future (Armstrong, Ketz & Owsen, 2003; Williams, Agle & Gates, 2018). Business schools are faced with an increased responsibility to produce graduates who act in an ethical, transparent and responsible manner and instigate ethically acceptable operations when joining or creating a company (Cornelius et al. 2007; Pfeffer and Fong 2004; Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly & Mumford, 2009; Wymer & Rundle-Thiele, 2017).

Having recognised that students need a more thorough understanding of CSR and business ethics, one of the largest modern UK HE institutions heavily relying on practical action to responsible management education is the Faculty of Business and Law of Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Met). Manchester Met aimed to differentiate itself and thus generate a competitive position through a combination of high quality responsible management education and social responsibility practices. In 2010, Manchester Met affirmed participation to the United Nations’ Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), a series of principles that encourage practical action to incorporate business ethics, environmental and sustainable development issues within curricula and student engagement activities. Since then, the Business School’s mission has been to develop socially and environmentally responsible early-career professionals for successful careers in management. The Business School building exceeded the ‘excellent’ rating of the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) - the world’s leading sustainability assessment method for master planning projects, infrastructure and buildings - and had been acknowledged through a number of awards, including No1 Greenest University by the People and Planet League. Other initiatives included the launch of the Sustainable and Ethical Enterprise Group, the recognition of the Centre for Enterprise as a Centre of Excellence by the Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs. As part of its commitment to PRME, Manchester Met initiated a series of lectures and dedicated modules (such as, ‘Business Ethics and Sustainability’ ‘The Responsible Marketer’, ‘The Responsible Accountant’ and ‘Responsible Enterprise’) delivered to all management undergraduates and postgraduates introducing them to Responsible Management, aiming to develop deeper understanding and appreciation of CSR. All of the Faculty’s programmes, postgraduate and undergraduate, now have as one of their *compulsory* learning objectives an intention to make students aware of the importance of CSR, sustainability, and ethical issues in modern business practice – all drawing on the UN Global Compact and the PRME Initiative.

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