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Corporate social responsibility and universities: A study of top 10 world universities' websites

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There is a growing interest in social responsibility of the corporations among academicians and practitioners. Companies now are not only expected to be responsible to their shareholders but to society in general. Universities, as the centers of knowledge generation and sharing, play a very important role in solving world's problems by ensuring a sustainable tomorrow. However, it is questionable whether world leading universities are concerned about CSR and if they do, to what extent they are committed to their social responsibilities. This research elaborates on this issue by exploring the website content and annual reports of the world top 10 universities. The findings of this research show that world leading universities are committed to their social responsibility and they provide sufficient information on most of the core areas of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Key words: Corporate social responsibility, University, social responsibility communication.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in social responsibility of organizations during the past few decades. As organizations do not operate in vacuum, their activities will impact their surroundings which include their stakeholders, society, and other influenced parties. We can argue that the responsibility of addressing global issues ideally involves everyone, since everyone is in some way impacted. Regardless of who created the problems, everyone and everything is directly or indirectly affected by these issues and thus all need to take responsibility in some way. We are all responsible for our future generation and cannot apply the existing resources for our well being at any cost. Everyone should strive for a sustainable tomorrow, where the focus is to meet the needs of today without compromising the ability to meet our needs in the future, as well as creating opportunities for tomorrow. Undoubtedly, all humans have moral obligations to preserve the planet and there is no excuse for doing nothing to improve the environmental state of

the globe. This also applies to institutions of higher education (Christensen et al., 2009).

Organizations such as companies or universities are usually responsible for the severe environmental degradation we have witnessed (Alshuwaikhat and Abubakar, 2008; Haden et al., 2009; Hoffman and Woody, 2008). With a growing attention and focus on university world ranking, more and more universities are setting their KPIs on the number of publications, number of postgraduate students, etc. without sufficient focus on the applicability of the produced research and whether or not it will be of any help to the bottom billion. Similar to corporations, the question of what motivates universities to commit to their social responsibilities exists. However, in the lack of any specific law obliging universities to consider social responsibilities as their core policies, and any incentive for considering social practices as a KPI for universities' performance measurement, the social practices of universities seem to be more voluntarily-based and still unexplored. Therefore, the question that strikes one's attention is are world leading universities concerned about CSR and if yes, to what extent are they currently involved in society-relation activities and committed to

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their social responsibilities. To answer this research question, this study seeks to look more in depth onto the social roles and responsibilities of universities worldwide by examining the issue among 10 universities through analyzing their website content. Organizations are social constructions, influenced by the decisions of individuals who work there (Hall, 2004; Jabbour, 2010). Since education provides awareness and many organizational decision makers were once a student in universities, it is important to know how universities regard CSR. In the lack of significant previous studies which comprehensively discuss the issue among several universities from different regions, this paper tackles this issue and provide an image of the CSR status among world leading universities.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Since the second half of the 20th century, a long debate on the issue of corporate social responsibility has been taking place. The field has been growing significantly and today a good number of theories, approaches and terminologies on CSR exist (Garriga and Melé, 2004). Various definitions have been offered for CSR. Simply put, CSR requires the firms to commit to balancing and improving environmental and social impacts without damaging economic performance. This in turn, leads to a move from the conventional view of the firm, where the main responsibility of the firm is to provide goods and services to society (Chamberlain, 1973; Friedman, 1968, 1970, cited in Williamson et al., 2006), to one which sees firms as contributing to the welfare of society (Carroll, 1979; Steiner and Steiner, 1997, cited in Williamson et al., 2006). This is specifically so true for universities where contribution to knowledge and well-being of society is of great importance. Along with the objective of this research to examine the commitment of world leading universities to social responsibility, next we review the core CSR issues as introduced by the draft of ISO 26000, famous for ISO CSR (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

Organizational governance

Organizational governance is the system by which an organization makes and implements decisions in pursuit of its objectives. Organizational governance in the context of social responsibility has the special characteristic of being both a core subject on which organizations should act, and a means of increasing the organization's ability to implement socially responsible behavior with respect to the other core subjects. Effective governance should be based on incorporating the principles and practices of accountability, transparency, ethical behavior, respect for stakeholder interests and respect for the rule of law into decision making and implementation (ISO/DIS

26000, 2009).

Human rights

Human rights are the basic rights to which all human beings are entitled because they are human beings, with an intrinsic desire for freedom, peace, health and happiness. An organization has the responsibility to respect human rights, including in its sphere of influence (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

Labor practices

The labor practices of an organization encompass all policies and practices relating to work performed within, by or on behalf of the organization. Labor practices include the recruitment and promotion of workers; disciplinary and grievance procedures; the transfer and relocation of workers; termination of employment; training and skills development; health, safety and industrial hygiene; and any policy or practice affecting conditions of work, in particular working time and remuneration (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

The environment

The decisions and activities of organizations invariably have an impact on the natural environment, no matter where they are located. These impacts may be associated with the organization's use of living and non-living resources, the generation of pollution and wastes, and the implications for the organization's activities, products and services on natural habitats. To reduce their environmental impacts, organizations should adopt an integrated approach that takes into consideration the wider economic, social and environmental implications of their decisions and activities. Environmental responsibility is a precondition for the survival and prosperity of human beings. It is therefore an important aspect of social responsibility. Environmental issues are closely linked to human rights, community involvement and development, and other social responsibility core subjects (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

Fair operating practices

Fair operating practices concern ethical conduct in an organization's dealings with other organizations. These include relationships between organizations and government agencies, as well as between organizations and their partners, suppliers, contractors, competitors and the associations of which they are members. Fair operating practice issues arise in the areas of anti-corruption,

responsible involvement in the public sphere, fair competition, promoting social responsibility in relations with other organizations and respect for property rights (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

Consumer issues

Organizations that provide products or services to consumers and customers have responsibilities to those consumers and customers. These responsibilities include providing education and accurate information, using fair, transparent and helpful marketing and contractual processes and promoting sustainable consumption (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

Community involvement and development

Community involvement and development are both integral parts of broader sustainable development. Community involvement – either individually or through associations seeking to enhance the public good – helps to strengthen civil society. Organizations that engage in a respectful manner with the community and its institutions reflect and reinforce democratic and civic values. Community involvement goes beyond identifying and engaging stakeholders in relation to the impacts of an organization's operations; it also encompasses support of and identification with the community. Above all, it entails acknowledging the value of the community. An organization's community involvement should arise out of recognition that the organization is a stakeholder in the community having significant common interests with all members of the community (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

CSR in Universities

The concept of CSR has evolved during the past few decades. While the main focus has been put on large corporations at the beginning, later on with more evolved definitions, it went beyond large corporations and other organizations such as small firms also got involved in it. The growing importance and significance of CSR is being driven by owners, investors, managers, customers, and even employees. Therefore organizations are also monitored based on their responsible behaviors and reporting and are expected to show transparency and accountability. In their book entitled *'Corporate social responsibility'*, Crowther and Aras (2008) insisted that the central tenet of social responsibility is the social contract between all the stakeholders to society, which is an essential requirement of civil society. According to them, social responsibility is not limited to the present members of the society, but should also be expanded to its future members, as well as environment since it will have

implications for members of society, both now and in the future.

Organizations are not operating in vacuum and apparently their operation will affect their external environment. According to Crowther and Aras (2008, p.13), this effect can take the following forms:

- (i) "The utilization of natural resources as a part of its production processes
- (ii) The effect of competition between itself and other organizations in the same market
- (iii) The enrichment of a local community through the creation of employment opportunities
- (iv) Transformation of the landscape due to the raw material extraction or waste product storage
- (v) The distribution of wealth created within the firm to the owners of that firm (via dividends) and the workers of that firm (through wages) and the effect of this upon the welfare of individuals
- (vi) And more recently the greatest concern has been with climate change and the way in which the emission of greenhouse gases are exacerbating this."

In the context of universities, previous research shows that higher education institutions can cause "significant environmental impacts" (Jabbour, 2010). As argued by Alshuwaikhat and Abubakar (2008), many of them as a result of their large size, expressive movement of people and vehicles, high consumption of materials, and strong development of complex activities, may even be considered as "small towns". Therefore it is inferred that universities should be responsible toward society and their stakeholders. Stakeholders provide organizations with a range of resources such as capital, customers, employees, materials and legitimacy (Deegan, 2002). They also provide the "license to operate" to the organizations in return for the provision of socially acceptable, or legitimate, actions (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Guthrie and Parker, 1990; Suchman, 1995). To strengthen this social contract which allows organization to continue operations (Deegan, 2002), they need to be socially responsible. This can be an underlying reason why we would expect universities to be involved in CSR and reporting it to society. However, as discussed by Leal Filho (2000) although there is a high level of acceptance on the importance of pursuing sustainability - with its economic, social and environmental dimensions - there is a significant misunderstanding regarding the meaning this term, and a considerable portion of this terminological confusion is generated in university field. There are a number of studies which have tackled the issue of sustainability in higher education. A recent study by Wright (2010), examined how a cohort of university presidents and vice-presidents in Canadian universities conceptualize sustainable development, sustainable universities, the role that universities play in achieving a sustainable future, key issues facing the university, and

the barriers to implementing sustainability initiatives on campus. They showed that although the majority of participants were well versed in the concept of sustainable development, they were less familiar with the concept of a sustainable university. However, as the author mentioned, majority of them were dedicated to having their university become more sustainable. The participants also listed “financial predicaments”, “lack of understanding and awareness of sustainability issues amongst the university population”, and “a resistance to change” as the main barriers in the path of sustainability. Pollock et al. (2009) also insisted that “complex and ineffective governance, traditional disciplinary boundaries, and the lack of a shared vision at academic institutions often hinder university’s progress toward leading the world to a more sustainable and desirable future”. In another recent effort, Nejati et al. (2010) investigated the issue of environmental sustainability in universities by examining the website content of the world top ten universities. The authors showed that top ten world universities are aware of their environmental impacts and have taken necessary steps toward sustainability. Their findings, on the one hand, showed that all of the studied universities practiced “reduction of greenhouse gas emissions”, “reduction in the use of fossil fuels and increase in the use of renewable resources”, “running a specialized environmental centre/network”, and “increase of environmental awareness among staff and students”. The least practiced environmental behaviour among universities, on the other hand, was “minimisation of environmental impact due to travel” with only three universities having it as their written environmental policy. In the next section, the methodology applied in this research will be briefly illustrated.

METHODOLOGY

Similar to a related studies by Capriotti and Moreno (2007) and Nejati et al. (2010), this study used a content analysis methodology to analyze the websites of the top 10 world universities ranked by Times Higher Education (THE, 2009). One of the most suitable instruments to analyze contents of a website is content analysis, applied by many researches. A study on the Modern Hebrew literature on the web by Bar-Ilan and Groisman (2003) is a perfect example of this method applicability. Another example of applications of content analysis refers to research about websites of the Fortune 100 companies where content analysis is mentioned as a good approach for analyzing the website’s components in different issues such as characteristics, fields of action and reflection of the mission and vision in action (Perry and Bodkin, 2000). There has been another study using content analysis on ethical statements of Turkish companies that emphasizes on the justifiability of this method for evaluating ethical concepts of the companies such as vision, mission, ethical principles and other related issues (Halici and Kucukaslan, 2005). The application of content analysis in the mentioned research as well as other similar studies (Chatov, 1980; Cressey and Moore, 1983; Mathews, 1987; Stevens, 1992) shows that it is possible to analyze social communication and social reporting using content analysis method. Content analysis of companies’ annual report and CSR report has been a frequently used method in the study of corporate social

reporting in the social and environmental accounting literature since the 1970s (Milne and Adler, 1999). Overall, content analysis is argued to be a “distinctive approach to analysis” which seeks to quantify the content of a text in “a systematic and replicable manner” (Bryman, 2004, p. 181).

This research studied the content of the university official websites to analyze different aspects of the social communication and social reporting and tried to identify and match it with CSR core areas. To this end, we have reviewed all the related web pages of the universities (including news, media, department web pages, etc.) and not just direct links from the homepage. Based on the guidelines provided in the draft of ISO 26000 (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009), seven CSR core areas were selected and used. These areas included: organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, and community involvement and development.

The study sample included Harvard University (US), University of Cambridge (UK), Yale University (US), University College London (UK), Imperial College London (UK), University of Oxford (UK), University of Chicago (US), Princeton University (US), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (US), and California Institute of Technology (US).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that, though to different extents, leading universities of the world have all taken social responsibility seriously and announced this in their websites. However, there are differences in their reporting and the areas which covered. The findings show that all the 10 studied universities have covered areas of “organizational governance”, “human rights”, “labor practices”, “environment”, “fair operating practices”, and “consumer issues” (with *consumers* considered as *students* of universities) in their websites. While only in one of the core areas, not all the universities directly announce their involvement. Table 1 summarizes the research findings. As summarized in the table, all the ten studied universities cover the area of corporate governance in their websites. Content analysis of their websites shows that all of them managed to show accountability and transparency by providing facts and figures in the form of online and PDF reports accessible for all the visitors. This area of CSR (corporate governance) seems to be a requirement for the organization to show its accountability and respect to its stakeholders. In terms of human rights and labor practices, all the universities provide ample resources on employment benefits, compensation, and learning and development. They also discuss the aspects of diversity. Some universities have even moved further by indicating the importance of a healthy work/life balance for their staff.

In terms of environment, all the studied universities are somehow involved in preserving environment through different endeavors and initiatives. In some cases, universities have developed specific academic programs to tackle the environmental issues as well. In terms of fair operating practices, since it was not possible to measure the level of university’s ethical dealings with other

Table 1. Presence of CSR core areas on university websites.

Issues	Presence (%)		
	US	UK	Combined
Organizational governance	100	100	100
Human rights	100	100	100
Labor practices	100	100	100
The environment	100	100	100
Fair operating practices	100	100	100
Consumer (students) issues	100	100	100
Community involvement and development	83	75	80

organizations, the focus was put to identify contents which showed that university takes a responsible involvement in the public and promoted social responsibility in relations with other organizations. Overall, the study shows that all of the studied universities are involved in CSR issues to a certain level and announce this through their website content, specific pages designed for media, annual reports, etc. In the consumer issue category, in the context of universities we considered students' issues and explored the websites for contents providing education and accurate information for students who were enrolled or planning to get enrolled in the university. The study shows that all universities provide sufficient information on various aspects of pursuing education from admission procedure to cost of livings, as well as available financial resources for both current and prospective students.

Finally, two of the studied universities (one from US and one from UK) do not directly report involvement in community on their website. The rest, however, report this involvement through various activities such as providing grants for community projects, providing fund and support to generate and preserve affordable housing for low and middle-income residents, etc. In social reporting, it shouldn't be assumed that the reader will compile the available information to identify one implied area of involvement. Instead, organizations should clearly report it and make it available to the public. An issue which strikes attention is to what extent universities use the CSR metrics designed for a corporate environment and/or create their own CSR metrics. A review of our findings shows that while in areas such as organizational governance and community involvement and development, universities generally follow the routine CSR activities and reporting style as practiced by corporate world, in other areas they practice their customized CSR practices and have their own metrics and standards. For instance, in terms of human rights and labor practices, universities have customized the metrics to suit their needs by taking into consideration the nature of their operation and employees. Providing sufficient information on job opportunities and benefits, professional development for employees, etc. is a common practice among all the studies universities.

The question which rises is the reason behind such social responsibility practices of the universities, since one may argue that the entire rationale for a university is to serve society through education, so CSR is redundant in that context. As a matter of fact, organizations might practice CSR in order to make a better image in the society and legitimize their activities. In the case of universities, however, legitimization does not make sense since universities are largely supported by external stakeholders such as government, people, and NGOs, as long as they do not commit anything against the norms and standards of the society. Then, could the reason of practicing CSR by universities be the image making? While this is justifiable, the author believes that there is a larger reason which is beyond public relations. As Russo and Perrini (2010, p.208) discuss in a very recent paper, "at the beginning of the third millennium, the concept of CSR is gaining increasing momentum, progressing from its initial focus on the shallow considerations of 'temporary fashion' and 'window dressing' to a serious and critical concentration on corporate strategic orientation". In other words, nowadays organizations rarely practice CSR just as show-off, but rather combine in as part of their strategic direction. To verify this in the context of universities, the author studied the mission statement and vision of the case universities and interestingly, most of the studied universities indicate their passion and goal for sustainability and solving world problems through their mission statements, values and other contents reported on their websites. For example, a university in US has a specific office of sustainability where they tackled issues such as greenhouse gas reduction as well as climate change. In another instance, a university in UK puts a great focus on the term "global citizenship" on its website referring to it as the ways in which they actively seek to prepare their students to respond to the intellectual, social and personal challenges that they will encounter throughout their lives and careers. Among this university's strategies, contribution of research, teaching and learning to resolve problems at a global level, can be seen. Figure 1 shows a summary of the common practices of the studied universities under each CSR core area.

Therefore we can conclude that the university's role in



Figure 1. Common CSR practices of studied Universities.

the society is evolving. They are no longer just institutions of higher education and research, which grants academic degrees in a variety of subjects, but rather they are turning into institutions of higher education and research which train responsible humans, create cutting-edge knowledge to solve the issues and problems at a global scale and share the knowledge so that it can benefit the community. Nowadays universities not only move toward new horizons of knowledge, but also put efforts to utilize that knowledge, so that it does not gather dust and remain a theory within the pages of library books. European Union (EU) defines CSR as “a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment” (CEC, 2001). By replacing the term companies to organization, and considering the main goal of universities, it is rational for universities to practice CSR. Therefore in coming years, we might expect more socially responsible behaviors by universities worldwide. Above all, the findings of this research shows the world leading universities are mostly on the right track for their social reporting and the issues that they cover match with the core CSR issues introduced in the ISO 26000. However, there are always opportunities for improvement and these universities can

improve their reports by providing a more systematic approach to their CSR reporting using the ISO 26000 template so that comparability possibilities increase. Besides, these universities can take the lead by promoting their engagement in CSR and providing best practices to other universities, especially to the ones in the developing countries.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The study shows that all the top 10 world leading universities are, in some way or another, engaged in social responsibility and sustainability issues and announce it in their website content. This helps to form a central charter for public relations in communicating and creating mutual understanding, managing potential conflicts (Grunig, 1989) and to achieve legitimacy (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). This behavior can be utilized by promoting and providing a platform of best practices for less recognized universities. Considering the cultural and social differences of the nations, it is not correct to simply imitate the CSR plans and policies of the world-leading universities in other universities. However, it is always

helpful for other universities, especially the ones in developing countries, to have some best practices as their benchmark and adapt and customize that to their operating and social context. As such, universities in developing countries can put the world leading universities as their benchmark not only in academic areas, but also in issues of social responsibility and sustainable development.

A limitation of this study is lack of considering the effectiveness of social practices of universities. While this paper investigates universities social practices based on their website contents and reports, the perceptions of their stakeholders about these social practices are not measured. This is important, because if the practices might not meet the stakeholders' expectations or even create a negative impression that the university is doing this simply for the sake of promoting itself rather than as a commitment toward society. Recent studies show that the effect of CSR activities on evaluations of the company may be moderated by other factors (Ellen et al., 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Future studies can look into the effect of this practice on stakeholders' perception and loyalty on the universities. Besides, efforts can be made to explore more in details the reasons for practicing responsible behaviors by universities and relate that to their financial performance and image making. On the other hand, this study is limited to exploration of CSR activities among top world universities without any attention to the nature of universities as being public or private. It is an issue of question whether there are differences in social behavior of public and private universities and which ones are mostly concerned about their social reporting. While as a starting point in research of this kind, the scope of this study did not include such a comparison, future follow up studies may take this into consideration.

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