

Aleksandra GAWEL*

Poznań University of Economics

Business collaboration with universities as an example of corporate social responsibility – a review of case study collaboration methods

Abstract: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept which is gaining in popularity and is being included in the strategies of more and more companies. Social and environmental concerns, as well as cooperation with stakeholders which is also linked to the concept of sustainable development, are becoming part of the mission statements of numerous companies. The question arises, however, whether CSR is merely a strategic concept, or if it is accompanied by specific actions. The aim of this article is to answer the following questions: What does CSR really mean in hard economic times? Is cooperation between business and stakeholders just a declaration included in company strategies as an element of CSR, or is it an actual practice implemented in everyday activities? What barriers exist to such cooperation? The above issues will be discussed on the basis of the relationship between business and academia in respect of stakeholders and the social dimensions of CSR.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section describes the corporate social responsibility that relates to the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations which society has of companies, and which indicates the activities of companies which fulfil these stakeholder expectations. Universities are one of the business stakeholders within the social responsibility approach, an external and secondary stakeholder which is not critical to a company's survival. The second section discusses the case study method as a teaching method whereby collaboration between universities and business is required to develop and apply this method during the educational process. University-business collaboration in this field gives an opportunity to fulfil the postulates of social responsibility through its impact on the quality of education. The next part of the paper analyses the case study of university-

* E-mail: aleksandra.gawel@ue.poznan.pl.

business collaboration in preparing case studies for educational purposes in Poland. Specific problems are discussed which indicate the constraints on collaboration between businesses and universities. The last section comprises conclusions and discussions. The main point of the discussion is that, on a declarative level, corporate social responsibility is a common element in companies' business strategies, but on an operational level collaboration with stakeholders as part of CSR does not easily transform into practical action.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, university-business collaboration, case study method.

JEL codes: M14, L14, I23.

1. Universities as stakeholders in business within the corporate social responsibility approach

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as an ethical commitment to act in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner while taking into account the interests of all stakeholders [Tari 2011]. Research into corporate social responsibility concentrates on business ethics, environmental responsibility, social responsibility and the stakeholder approach [Lockett, Moon & Visser 2006].

Several dimensions of CSR are described in the literature. Principally, corporate social responsibility refers to the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic expectations which society has for companies and it includes those activities of companies which fulfil these expectations [Tari 2011]. The above dimensions combine to create a pyramid of corporate social responsibility, at the base of which are economic responsibilities which include profitability, effectiveness and the strong competitive position of a company. Next come the legal and ethical responsibilities, with philanthropic responsibilities being at the top of the pyramid [Carroll 1996].

In the literature on CSR other categories in the aspects of corporate social responsibility are also sometimes distinguished, such as the stakeholder, social, economic, voluntary, environmental and ethical dimensions, but the ones most frequently cited are the environmental, ethical, stakeholder and social dimensions [Tari 2011].

When analysing the references to the definitions of CSR dimensions, the most frequently used are the stakeholder and social dimensions, the economic dimension, the voluntary dimension and the environmental dimension [Dahlsrud 2008].

Economic responsibilities mean that companies must make a profit and fulfil the needs of their customers; legal responsibilities refer to a company pursuing its economic mission within the framework of the law; ethical responsibilities are connected with respecting moral norms; and discretionary responsibilities, connected with philanthropy, mean companies undertaking certain actions which, although not required by law, are expected by stakeholders as a manifestation of good citizenship [Galbreath 2010]. The environmental responsibilities of companies relate to their care for the natural environment and the social dimension refers to the building of a relationship between business and society. Approaches from the perspective of the responsibility to stakeholders are based on the interaction between companies and such stakeholders as, for example, employees, suppliers, customers and communities [Dahlsrud 2008].

When analysing the social responsibilities of companies towards stakeholders, it is worth noting that particular groups of stakeholders influence the situation of a company differently, so the relationships between companies and particular stakeholders are also different. Corporate stakeholders can be categorised into groups according to different criteria [Galbreath 2010]:

- External stakeholders, such as the government or the community; and internal stakeholders, such as the instrumental, rational and moral needs of employees,
- Primary stakeholders, who are critical to a company's survival, e.g. suppliers and employees; and secondary stakeholders, who are not directly involved in company activities and are not critical to the company's survival, e.g. the media.

From the above division one can infer that executives are likely to pay particular attention to those stakeholders whose attitudes most directly influence the situation of companies, i.e. internal and primary stakeholders.

It is worth noting that implementing a strategy of corporate social responsibility not only generates extra costs but also provides economic benefits to companies. The most important economic advantages of adopting CSR as a business strategy include lowering costs, lowering risks, enhancing the company's image, building a competitive advantage, and creating a win-win situation [Carroll & Shabana 2010]. This means that companies ought to be interested in implementing CSR not only as a reaction to external pressure, but also to obtain measurable economic benefits.

One particular example of the relationship between companies and stakeholders is the relationship between business and academia. In a knowledge-based economy the economic and social significance of universities is un-

questionable, as universities not only educate societies but are also responsible for generating new solutions as part of their research and development activities, including relationships with the environment as well as businesses.

A particularly important, or even key, position in the relationship between business and academia is occupied by the concept of Triple Helix innovation. In 2000 the concept of Triple Helix was developed, where innovation was treated as the result of a university-government-industry relationship [Etzkowitz & Dzisah 2008; Papagiannidis, Etzkowitz & Clouser 2009]. Since that time the idea of the Triple Helix has become very popular and is still being developed. According to this concept innovation is inspired, created and introduced onto the market as a result of cooperation between universities, companies and government, each of which is one element of the helix.

The relationship between business and academia in respect of CSR can be evaluated from two points of view. The first approach is the stakeholder dimension. There are several factors which make universities stakeholders in business. The main factor is that through educating students universities supply companies with potential future employees. Research and development activities conducted at universities can be used by companies as part of their knowledge and technology transfer. Moreover, the activities of universities make a particular area more attractive to live in and to conduct business. From the point of view of companies, however, universities are mostly external and secondary stakeholders, and any relationship with academia does not usually directly affect the situation of the companies themselves.

Another approach to the relationship between business and academia is connected with the social dimension of CSR. Both universities and companies ought to strive to satisfy social needs, and their cooperation in this respect can improve the level of economic development in a region, the level of innovation, and the level of educational development in society.

2. The case study method – the possibility of collaboration between university and business to enhance the teaching process and to fulfil the postulate of social responsibility

The theoretical discussion presented above indicates that cooperation between companies and universities ought to exist and intensify because it constitutes a significant part of corporate social responsibility. The aim of this paper, how-

ever, is not merely to present a theoretical discussion of the issue, but also to observe practical cooperation between business and academia and to point out the difficulties and benefits connected with this relationship.

Collaboration between universities and companies when preparing case studies seems to be a perfect opportunity for the practical implementation of the concept of corporate social responsibility. The case study method is a teaching method which requires universities to enter into a relationship with companies, which later will be subjected to analyses in the form of case studies.

The case study method can be used both for academic and teaching purposes. As a teaching method it involves describing a specific business situation and encouraging students to analyse and comprehensively evaluate it [Little, Brookes & Palmer 2008]. This analysis focuses on the factors which influence the relationship between a studied entity and its surroundings, as well as thoroughly examining one particular case which exemplifies certain more general phenomena [Flyvbjerg 2011].

The use of case studies has been popularised by schools of law and by the MBA approach to managerial education [Jaques 2008] and the origins of this method can be traced back to Harvard University, where since the early 1920's, it has been common practice to invite business people to lecture halls in order to discuss the problems which they have encountered in their business operations [Wolfe 1998].

A case study presents a specific problem or event based on a real-life situation. It usually includes an event, the people involved in this event, and the circumstances which have an impact on it [Roselle 1996]. Employing the case study method in the teaching process involves analysing qualitative and quantitative data, taking decisions regarding the most appropriate actions and recommendations, as well as sharing and discussing those decisions with other learners [Cranston 2008].

A case study is considered to have the following features [Jaques 2008]:

- providing an opportunity to analyse the real-life functioning of an organisation,
- stimulating thinking about possible alternative solutions,
- providing examples of appropriate and inappropriate, productive and unproductive as well as useful and useless behaviours,
- encouraging discussion on alternative activity options for companies,
- providing an opportunity for applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations,
- functioning as a starting point for future actions.

A teaching approach which makes use of the case study method can be described as:

- student-oriented, as it involves encouraging students to reflect on what they are being taught [Gregory & Jones 2009] – solving each of the cases analysed during the teaching process depends on a variety of factors connected with the characteristics and expectations of particular groups of students,
- problem-oriented, as certain problems are introduced at the beginning of the teaching cycle and they are later used to create a context and to motivate learners [Prince 2004] – in the case study method, when analysing specific business situations, the problem which a company is facing is identified and possible decision options are explored,
- teamwork-oriented, as students cooperate in small groups in order to solve a problem [Prince 2004] – in the case study method students are expected to find solutions to problems in groups and then to share their thoughts and conclusions with other groups of students.

In order to use the case study method in university education cooperation between business and academia is essential, as it is companies which, by sharing their experiences, are the source of the information that is necessary for preparing case studies as well as their use during the didactic process. Without the information obtained from companies the case study method cannot be used for educating university students.

Companies which support the idea of corporate social responsibility ought to show interest in cooperating with universities in respect of sharing the information which is needed to prepare case studies as well as appreciating their use in the didactic process. Corporate social responsibility is thus implemented through creating relationships with stakeholders, i.e. with universities and students, who are potential employees. It must be noted, however, that the group of stakeholders with which a company establishes a relationship when collaborating on case studies would be, according to the criteria of Galbreath [2010], external and secondary stakeholders. This means that cooperation with such stakeholders would not be essential to a company's survival and development.

At the same time, however, by sharing their experiences companies can help in the development of university education as a social objective, thus implementing the social dimension of CSR.

3. Collaboration between a university and business – a case study on experiences in Poland

The conviction that companies ought to be involved in the educational processes of managerial training was one of the basic ideas of the project entitled “Transfer of experiential and innovative teaching methods for business education”, realised within the Leonardo da Vinci, Transfer of Innovation¹ programme in the years 2010–2012. The project is coordinated by the Poznan University of Economics in Poland, and the partners include Navigator Consulting Advisors LLP (United Kingdom), ISM University of Management and Economics (Lithuania), Wielkopolska Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Poland), and Elmfield House Associates Limited (United Kingdom).

The idea of the project is based on the observation that the managers of many companies are not satisfied with their employees’ abilities. An analysis of teaching materials and good practice leads to the conclusion that the case study method, employed by the best higher education institutions worldwide, is a highly effective tool which can bridge the gap between theory and practice. A specific objective of the project is to incorporate the case study method in business education within the consortium and to encourage its extensive use amongst trainers and educators.

The principal aim of the project, i.e. the transfer of innovative and experiential teaching methods which will enhance the quality of business education, will be achieved through the realisation of intermediate objectives, which include, amongst others, training 30 instructors in respect of preparing case studies and teaching notes as well as preparing a minimum of 6 case studies relating to running a business and testing them on a pilot group of students.

An essential step in the realisation of the project was establishing cooperation with local companies in order to explore their business situation, which would then become the basis for preparing case studies. This project provides an opportunity for companies to implement the postulates of corporate social responsibility in a very concrete fashion . It enables companies to collaborate with the world of academia and at the same time the regional dimension of the project means that companies can influence the quality of university teaching in their area.

Cooperation between business and academia, however, encounters certain problems. The most essential step which is necessary to begin case study

¹ Project number: 2010-1-PL1-LEO05-11462.

preparation is establishing cooperation between representatives of business and academia. For the purposes of this project cooperation was established in two ways; partly through using the personal contacts of university teachers, and partly through organising an official meeting between university and local business representatives. The companies whose representatives attended the meeting were all members of the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which is one of the partners in the project. During the meeting the university representatives presented the project and their expectations connected with cooperation with companies, as well as an example of a case study in order to acquaint the business people with the nature of this teaching method.

In the course of the discussion which followed, the business representatives themselves mentioned the issue of their social responsibility. They thought that their active participation in this undertaking was not only beneficial to their image, but was also an obligation resulting from corporate social responsibility.

Later, however, some problems arose. The group of business people who had cooperated with university staff before had quite a favourable attitude towards participating in the project and were willing to share the necessary information and collaborate on preparing a case study based on their companies.

The other group of business people, those for whom this was their first contact with the university, had varied attitudes to cooperation. Some of them declared that they were not interested in any cooperation immediately after the meeting. Others, even though they initially expressed interest in cooperation, eventually backed out of the project. Yet another group did not give a definitive answer, understanding that silence is interpreted as refusal. A number of companies, though, agreed to embark on the project and decided to reveal their business situation for the purposes of educating students.

Consequently, the majority of the case studies of companies which were produced for the project are a result of personal acquaintanceships between business and university representatives. Of the companies who were invited to take part in the project and who had had previous contacts with academics, approximately half agreed to cooperate and they contributed to the preparation of the case studies. On the other hand, of the total number of approximately 100 companies whose representatives had been invited to the introductory meeting, about 20 accepted the invitation, out of which, regardless of their initial declaration, two firms eventually decided to participate in the project.

These differences in the responses to the invitation to cooperate show that forging relationships with stakeholders is not easy, particularly as regards external or secondary stakeholders. A key factor in forming relationships between business and academia is mutual trust and this takes a long time to

build. The difficulties involved in enlisting companies for cooperation with universities indicate that although the concept of corporate social responsibility is popular, undertaking actual and practical interactions with stakeholders requires not only including this idea in a company's development strategy, but also implementing this strategy in the form of operational actions.

The above example, which illustrates the problems that affect cooperation between business and academia, provokes questions regarding the causes of those problems and the major barriers to cooperation. The representatives of both businesses and universities indicate that the fundamental problem is a lack of proper communication between the two groups, caused by the dissimilarity of these two environments. Academics and business people often feel that they speak different languages.

Another issue are the differences in the objectives and priorities of business and academia. Universities are institutions which serve the public and are financed from the state budget. Their aim is to conduct research and teaching, and the measure of success is the number of publications and university entrants. In contrast, companies are profit-oriented, striving to obtain the best market position. In order to achieve this companies have to satisfy the needs of customers in the best way possible whilst at the same time gaining a competitive advantage over their competitors. This disparity of objectives means that the worlds of business and academia may not appreciate the mutual benefits of cooperation.

Universities and companies differ also in their approaches to publicising information about their activities. The aim of academia is to disseminate the results of research to the widest possible audience in the form of published articles, monographs or conference papers. Companies, on the other hand, tend to treat a lot of information relating to their activities as confidential data which should not be made public.

A significant issue in the context of the preparation of case studies is companies' concerns about the disclosure of sensitive data relating to their operations or about the possible damage to their image as a result of revealing problems that they have faced.

Conclusions and discussions

An important dimension of corporate social responsibility is creating and maintaining relationships between companies and stakeholders. Universities are one example of stakeholders, even though from the point of view of com-

panies they are external and secondary stakeholders, which means that cooperation with them is not a key factor for a company's survival and growth. However, the role of the relationship between business and academia is significant in the sense that, on the one hand, it fulfils the social dimension of CSR, i.e. educating society, and on the other hand such cooperation may lead to the development and introduction of market innovations.

On the declarative level, corporate social responsibility, including creating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders, is a common element in companies' business strategies. On the operational level, however, such declarations do not easily transform into practical actions. One example of an operational action through which the concept of corporate social responsibility may be implemented is cooperation between companies and universities in respect of the teaching process. Educating students, as an element of social responsibility, is not only one of the fundamental tasks of universities, but is also relevant to companies as it concerns their prospective employees.

The project entitled "Transfer of experiential and innovative teaching methods for business education", realised within the Leonardo da Vinci, Transfer of Innovation programme coordinated by the Poznan University of Economics, Poland, involved establishing cooperation with companies in order to obtain information about their business activities. This information was going to be the basis for constructing case studies which could be used in educating students. The participation of companies in this project provided them with an opportunity to establish cooperation with universities as well as to have an influence on the content and methods of student education. Thus it provided an opportunity for the practical implementation of the concept of corporate social responsibility in its social and stakeholder-related dimensions.

On a practical level, however, establishing relationships between companies and universities was never going to be easy, which may be due to the diverse interests and objectives of the two sides. The personal relationships between representatives of business and academia, and the mutual trust between them, was observed as playing a crucial role.

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