

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN INTEGRATING THE CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CONCEPT

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Abstract. *The corporate social responsibility is, in our vision, a requirement of strategic planning, in order to achieve the economic and social progress, an initiative on sustainable development. This progress cannot be conceived outside the educational progress that aims to form professionals able to have a pro-active approach to these fields of activity. Since the CSR practice in Romania is seen at European level as been mainly used for commercial reasons that for ethical ones, the approach of CSR as strategic planning tool is an essential challenge at national level. In order to achieve this objective, we consider that an adequate organizational framework needs to be created in order to achieve the national strategic objectives by involving organisations from economic, educational and social environment on a voluntary basis and ensuring the transparency and credibility of pro-active organisations in view of obtaining a well-deserved competitive advantage. The role of the universities could be that of a catalyst of the integration of CSR in what is concerning building skills and competences to support the theoretical knowledge.*

Key words: CSR, strategic planning, sustainable development, social development.

1. Introduction

The interdependence between university and socio-economic environment is unanimously recognized and accepted. The efficiency of the economic activity is definitely influenced by the education that determines qualification, professional and cultural training of the workforce.

The national economic environment is labelled by the reduced correlation of the „offer” and educational products with the requirements of the labour market. The disparity between these two sectors has a direct effect upon the development of the human resources in view of an optimum integration on the labour market and as a consequence, upon the growth and economic development.

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The European Union considers that CSR is a viable way to achieve the objective set up at the European Council in Lisbon, from 2000, that of „*to become the most competitive and dynamic economic system in the world, able to sustain economic development*” [1].

The European Union also sustains the modernization of the educational systems in all Member States in order to grant the assimilation of the required competences for running businesses in a innovation driven society and the availability to provide training methods [2].

Thus, at European level there is a sustained concern to find the most appropriate framework to define CSR and to set up indicators by which CSR can be transparently assessed.

This concern that takes place at European level is going to materialize by the publication of the ISO 26000 standard regarding the corporate social responsibility. The main goal of this standard is to foster assuming social and environmental responsibilities on the basis of common concepts, definitions and assessment methods. The ISO 26000 standard is developed in close cooperation with governmental organizations, employer’s associations and trade unions, associations of consumers and non-governmental associations from all over the world [3].

The United Nations, European Union and Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development are three of the most important institutions involved in the preparation of a definitive framework for CSR.

Through the Innovation and Competitiveness Programme, the European Union invites the European enterprises to present in their reports the modalities in which they contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon’s objectives.

At national level, according to the site ResponsabilitateSociala.ro, periodically updated with profiles of responsible companies, study cases, articles of professionals and news there are registered in the category of responsible companies a number of 46 companies, out of which 39 are active in education.

This site contains information regarding CSR programs realised by the companies that are activating in Romania, their strategies used and the achieved results.

The CSR programs are meant to promote a cause, to do marketing related to a cause, social marketing, to do charity, community volunteering, to promote social responsible business practices.

Out of the 117 displayed study cases, 35 are on education, 21 in environment protection, 42 on social, 7 on culture and 5 on human right protection. From their analysis it can be noticed the tendency of using this concept for commercial reasons, this being also the main accuse at European level to the slow start of CSR in Romania [4].

It is worth mentioning that, in our opinion, the social responsibility it is not just a simple tactic for image building, a publicity offer or a charity act but an essential feature for the development of human resources, of the institutions that will lead to a long term success for those organizations that are directly linked to the economical and social performances of their communities.

From the displayed study cases we have noticed the project CSR – „From theory to practice”. This program has started in 2004 and is taking place every year during March – May. This is a contest that aims to familiarize graduating students with the requirements of the business environment. Within the contest, on the basis of the themes proposed by the companies involved in the program, the students have to prepare economic projects. In order to realize these projects, they need to interact with representatives of real companies.

The project „From theory to practice” has won during the Award Festival Bucharest Business Week 2007m the „Prize for the best social responsibility program” at the Education category. The program has been recognized as being the most important social program from Brasov area that is supporting the young people.

The company Integrator Soft has been awarded to the Gala of Business Excellence 2008, organized by the Brasov Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the creative way of applying the social responsibility concept. The winners of the Gala have received their prizes in money, offered by Integrator Soft.

They have had, also the opportunity to set up meetings with the representatives of the participant companies. In the same time, they have received diplomas and recommendation letter from the organizers, that added value to their expertise [5].

This proves the fact that collaboration between companies and universities can have profitable and visible effects on short term for graduates and on long term for the economic and social environment.

Analysing the above-mentioned website, we have noticed that the promotion of CSR at national level is focused mainly on exchanging experiences and creation of good practices guidelines. We consider that this practice is welcomed.

We do sustain the necessity of implementing of a coherent planning process, at national level, based on viable objectives in order to solve the acute problems for universities, businesses and society and also to create an adequate organizational framework.

We will approach below CSR as a strategic planning tool, the proposal of an organizational framework to foster planning, CSR as a management model and proposals for promoting the transparency and credibility.

2. CSR – planning tool for the long term development

The integration of CSR at national level as tool for long term development having direct results in education, represents in our view, an important factor of social development and support of the scientific and economic progress.

Thus, we sustain the necessity of realising partnerships among companies – universities – non-governmental organisations on a voluntary basis. Using this cooperation, it should be prepared a long term strategy for the training of specialists able to:

- Pro-active approach economic, social and environmental development;
- Know the needs but also the local, national, European and world development trends;
- Efficiently cooperate within interdisciplinary teams;
- Access European funds to support these actions using the minimum of resources from the companies and obtaining maximum of benefits for it and at local and national level.

We consider competences as being products of the universities and companies.

Also consider that real progress, the business community, universities, governments and civil society should work together through new partnerships, dynamic.

Extent that they will be able to create a framework to analyze organizational stakeholders to meet their needs on a strategic development and to convince stakeholders of the benefits of their involvement could lead to the chance of success of this approach.

3. CSR – the framework

In order to set up CSR as a planning tool to sustain the long term economic and social development, we consider essential the creation of an appropriate organizational framework for:

- A coherent strategic plan for achieving specified objective;
- A transparent and credible promotion of the actions, meant to ensure a long term competitive advantage to the organisations that will involve themselves to achieve the CSR' objectives;
- Providing the possibility to measure the organisations behaviour;
- Monitoring, assessment and control of the achievement of the objectives;
- Refining the strategic objectives on the basis of the evolutions of the society or external factors.

In this regard, we propose to set up a CSR National Alliance (CSRNA) to activate in education and training, of a network type and that will have a multi-actors approach that will engage itself to achieve strategic objectives and unify social responsible organisations on voluntary basis. The creation of such a network, inspired after a European model [6], could join companies, social partners, education environment and representatives of interested ministries and gave them the opportunity to initiate projects at national level, to meet both the national but also the European priorities.

In our opinion, CSRNA could be established using the model of the European Alliance for CSR, alliance that was launched in March 2006 by the European Commission.

In order to realize the strategic planning, in our view, it would be necessary to set up a Managing Board of CSRNA, composed of representatives of the organisations that joined this association, representatives of ministries responsible to identify the main problems, directions and fields of actions. The involvement of regional development councils and advisory structures on the problems of education and training in such a structure would be in our opinion, an necessary approach.

Analysing the relevant setting up legislation of the ministries related to economy and education, we have concluded that their involvement in the strategic planning of CSR could provide coherence and substance to the planning process.

These institutions are:

- Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities (MMFES) and respectively the Directorate for Corporate Social Responsibility (DRSC) within the ministry, that identify and elaborate CSR policies;
- Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation (MECI) and respectively, the National Agency for Qualification in Higher Education and Partnership with Social and Economic Environment (ACPART).

To support our statement, we mention that MMFES fosters the active partnership among the public sector, civil society' organisations, companies, customers and suppliers, employees and their representatives, international organisations, local and national authorities. In this regard, the ministry is editing newsletters, organizing workshops, exhibits and other similar actions within the country and abroad. The dissemination and workshop organization expenditure can be funded from the budgetary allocations approved by the ministry [7].

ACPART, the other institution has the role of implementing the development policies and strategies of the Ministry of Education and Research. Its mission is to promote the openness policy of higher education institutions towards the socio-economic environment by initiating cooperation actions among higher education institutions, businesses and other institutions to develop specific partnerships, research of the labour force market, and development of the entrepreneurship universities in Romania and know-how transfer [8].

In order to achieve its mission, ACPART cooperates with the Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities, with national entities having responsibilities in what is concerning quality insurance in higher education and with other social partners.

4. Setting up the Actions Groups of CSRNA

In order to solve the identified problems, the exchange of experience, good practices manuals we propose to set up Action Groups using the European model of the CSR offices. The action should have the role of transforming an abstract strategy in measurable objectives.

The founding of these Action Groups could be realized at the initiative of one or more companies by generating projects to meet the identified problems, having a specific action area and well-defined goal, objectives and deadline. These projects could be financed from European funds, on a competitive base. The project co-ordinators could publicly debate the key objectives and expected results in order to implement the project together with their partners within the group (companies, universities, public authorities, social partners).

The main feature of these action groups should be: facilitation of solving the identified problems and exchange of experience, preparing good practices manuals for the cooperation among business, academic and social partners in order to enhance the efficiency of the efforts of all actors involved in a certain CSR theme.

5. CSR- management model

In order to approach CSR as a planning tool of the long term development for obtaining the socio-economic progress, CSRNA should define certain elements specific to the strategic management.

This could be:

- Definition of the vision;
- Definition of the mission and the conditional components for achieving the vision;
- Adopting the fundamental values that will include the ethical coordinates that will be applied for different action lines when implementing the strategy;
- Definition of the strategic objectives and formulating policies required to be applied to achieve the objectives;
- Setting up the performance key indicators that will ensure progress control for the achievement of the strategic objectives;
- Implementation of the strategy (action plans, programs, deadlines, allocation of resources, preparation of reporting and monitoring procedures);
- Monitoring, assessment and control in order to ensure the achievement of the strategic objectives, to refine it on the basis of the evolutions of the society or external factors.

Registering to CSRNA, by joining on a voluntary basis could mean the recognition as a socially responsible organisation. The recognition degree could be induced on the basis of the involvement and results obtained. Promotion of the results should be granted at a higher central level after an external audit mission to certify the results.

In this regard, we will detail the elements that we consider to be essential in order to ensure transparency and credibility.

6. Modalities of assuring the transparency and credibility in CSRNA

It is worth mentioning the following important elements as part of the alliance: coherence in organizing, transparency and credibility. **Transparency** is a condition of an efficient communication, both at the Central Directorate and working groups level and within the organizations involved in the economical and social level.

Credibility needs an agreement between the assumed objectives, achieved activities and results obtained. Practically, an agreement between the declarations and actions of the involved partners, is necessary.

In order to promote a policy of transparency and credibility in the CSRNA activity, we propose:

- to define an **ethic code** to settle: the principles guiding the partnership in its actions, the rights and obligations of the involved institutions, the rights and obligations of the CSR actions beneficiaries, to publish and promote the ethic code among employees, partners, communities;
- to elaborate **periodical social reports** to show transparently the strategic objectives aimed, achieved progress, difficulties encountered, solutions forecasted. The social reports are a proof of transparency and meet the public needs to know what are the actions taken;
- to audit the achieved activities;
- to publish the **evaluating reports**, to specify the CSR principles, to specify the public that elaborated the reports;
- **to evaluate the economic and social impact of the achieved actions;**
- **to publish the results** of the achieved programmes.

Assuring the recognition as a socially-responsible organization might have the following benefic effects upon the involved ones[10].

For economic entities:

- **qualitative improvement of the labour force** with effects upon the investments in employees training, in their becoming familiar to the environment, in increasing the efficiency thanks to an accordingly - trained labour force;
- **a favourable image creating, image** which could contribute to increasing the economical entity profit both by influencing its customers and by fidelizing the valuable employees, by increasing the appurtenance decree to their organization;
- **creating a healthy social environment** where the business occur.

For universities

- increasing the educational services qualities which can induce to society more trust in education and professional training and, in those universities that get involved, especially.
- fidelizing the valuable employees, by increasing their appurtenance decree to the organization;
- it can make it possible the institutional appreciation by achieving some superior quality indicators.

For the social environment

By the active implication in the generation of change process the social environment could contribute to: the social cohesion growing, the struggling against of exclusion, unemployment, demographic difficulties and development

Taking into account that an efficient communication with the end the sensitivity of civil society as regards the organizations that are involved in CSR followed by a communication of civil society feed-back to organizations, could have spectacular effects in the constructive engagement of these.

For that the benefit effects predicted can be achieved, it is considered to be necessary that the public opinion to be correct informed and sensibilized by these organizations that make an effort concerning this subject.

Sensibilization of public opinion found to be with a low level in this country, could be a on the point of starting. It is measure that the Romanian rely on the responsible companies could determine their grade development of social implication and responsibility.

The local community should have to be awareness that can use CSR like an instrument to involve the companies actively local to the community life.

We could take as the Kingdom of Great Britain's example where, one in five consumers boycott the products of a company that cannot be associated with a good cause.

The economic entities should have to be awareness the holding some good relationships with these communities as part of which develop their activity can help to counteract some unforeseen matters, the conflicts and hostilities avoidance, the making a better environment for their own employees, the conscription and keeping their employees and no last instance at the strengthening some business relationships with people and companies from respective zone.

For that the corporative social responsibility to have success should have to be involves also the employees of the CSRNA component organizations.

By the implication to employers it is understood: information, consulting, the employers participation from the university environment – like main knowledge suppliers, the ones from the economic environment – like beneficiaries, users and trainers of competences for graduates but like active supporters of social responsibilities. The implication into the social actions about the competences and abilities training can offer the emotional satisfaction and can rise the respect themselves of employers, because this is a question that themselves effects or interest directly the employers or the ones closed to them.

7. The position of universities in their integration in CSR

The position which could assume the universities themselves should be that to contribute to ensure the considering and transparency of social responsibility draft. The European Union invites both the universities and the European enterprises at the objectives carrying out. The Lisbon Collaboration between the university environment and the economic one could ensure the complementarily and efforts efficiency.

The position of universities in the CSR integration, in this situation, could be such as:

- Participant in the identification the main issues and directions, action areas for the promoting to concept of social responsibility;
- Active participant to form specialists able to proactively tackle the CSR fields: economic, social, environment protection as part of workshops;
- Information and sensibilization the public opinion concerning the importance of social implication of organizations;
- Information and sensibilization the public opinion concerning the essential participation of this in the growing of social implication scale and responsabilization of organizations.

Conclusions

By the Commission Programme for innovation and competitiveness (CIP), EU invites the European enterprises to perform in their reports the modes in which contribute to carrying out objectives from Lisbon. Invariably, EU supports the important participation of universities for reaching the Lisbon objectives

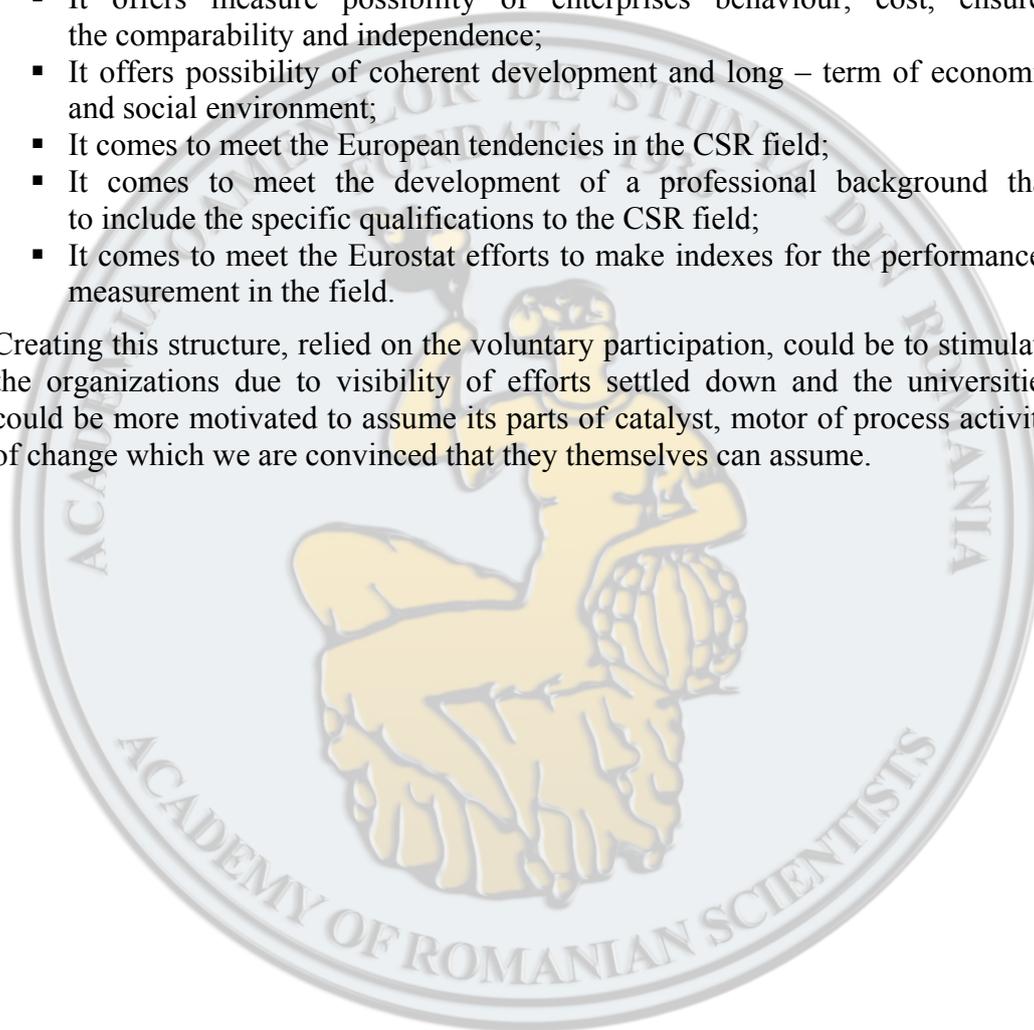
and usage potential of these for the economic growth generation and social cohesion.

The universities can open, by promoting of social responsibilities, under above circumstances, the reconciliation pathway between the organizational social development, the continuous improving of *competitiveness* level and the community development.

Making the organizational structure called by us CSRNA, could be, in our opinion, to contribute to the economic and social progress achievement and the support of sustainable development due to the following aspects.

- It contributes to encourage of active partnership between public sector, civil society organizations, companies, customers and suppliers, their employees by benefits which could obtain the involved partners;
- It offers measure possibility of enterprises behaviour, cost, ensures the comparability and independence;
- It offers possibility of coherent development and long – term of economic and social environment;
- It comes to meet the European tendencies in the CSR field;
- It comes to meet the development of a professional background that to include the specific qualifications to the CSR field;
- It comes to meet the Eurostat efforts to make indexes for the performances measurement in the field.

Creating this structure, relied on the voluntary participation, could be to stimulate the organizations due to visibility of efforts settled down and the universities could be more motivated to assume its parts of catalyst, motor of process activity of change which we are convinced that they themselves can assume.



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