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What is CSR for students of higher education business schools? - management students' attitude towards CSR

Abstract

One of particularly interesting groups comprising the enterprise environment are students of management. In the course of their studies, they have an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the subject of CSR, and also with the broader issue of business ethics. However, there are few research results on students' attitude regarding CSR and whether it undergoes changes depending on the level of knowledge they acquire in the field of economics and management. The authors have resolved to achieve the following aim – identify different dimensions of attitudes to CSR and determine groups of people with similar attitudes to CSR. The conducted research led to distinguishing three groups of participants with different views on CSR, described as the unconvinced, the enthusiasts and the realists. The article discusses their various characteristic features and their socio-demographic profile.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, corporate image, students' awareness of CSR, segmentation based on attitude toward CSR.

Introduction

A growing interest in applying the idea of CSR in strategies of enterprises in market economy prompts a reflection and research on the level of familiarity with these issues of future managers, i.e. students of management. Undertaken research and generalisation attempts have placed themselves in one of the following areas: law – economics – ethics, or have been

interdisciplinary in character. Relatively seldom do they refer to the issues' recognition by the youngest, professionally inexperienced, future participants of economic processes, i.e. students, especially students of higher education business schools. This article is an attempt to fill the gap by identifying the level of knowledge about CSR depending on the sociodemographic features of students, the type of higher education school and the level (year) of studies. In order to achieve this aim research questions were developed and addressed in an empirical study conducted on a group of over 200 students of Pozna_ higher education schools, with particular focus on Pozna_ University of Economics.

Theoretical background

Even though the idea of CSR in the sense similar to the modern approach appeared in the literature at the turn of the 20th century, it is since the 1950s that it has become really popular (Bowen, 1953, Carroll). CSR is defined as a concept according to which enterprises voluntarily include social and ecological matters in their business activity and contacts with stakeholders (Carroll 1991). CSR covers four interrelated areas: economy, law, ethics and philanthropy, within the frame of which the enterprise strives for an increase in its value, operates in accordance with the law, acts ethically and attempts to be a good "member of the community"(Carroll 1991; 1999). According to the European Commission's definition (2001), CSR is a concept integrating social and environmental concerns into the conducted business activity and the interactions with stakeholders on a voluntary basis. In a broad perspective, CSR refers to the public good, goes beyond the enterprise's interest and beyond legal regulations. A decade later the definition was replaced with a new one stressing the need for a wide definition of the subject environment and for developing tools and methods for implementing and appraising results of CSR (European Commission 2011). The turn of the 21st century brought in new perspectives for defining the concept of CSR. W.C. Frederick

introduced the terms CSR₁ and CSR₂ (Frederick 1994). The first is concerned with the so-far understanding of CSR, following A. Carroll. CSR₂, on the other hand, refers primarily to the enterprise's response and its behaviour as a result of adopting the concept of CSR as a guideline for its strategy (Corporate Social Responsiveness). Another step in the CSR idea development is CSR₃ and CSR₄ by the same author. Also W. Visser, M. Porter and R. Kramer, or B. W. Husted and D. B. Allen, etc. took part in a discussion on the essence of CSR and introduced the idea of social value and Corporate Social Strategy (Visser 2010; Bachnik 2011; Husted, Allen 2009).

The evolution of the notion taking place in recent years indicates a rising interest of researchers in the essence of CSR. There is a growing number of publications concerning the impact of CSR on buyers (van Herpen, Pennings, Meulenberg 2003). Studies conducted so far have led to the conclusion that CSR activities result in strengthening the competitive advantage, in particular: reinforcing the positive image of the enterprise, propagating positive word of mouth communication (Bolton, Drew 1991, Brown, Dacin 1997), evoking trust in the marketing offer and the enterprise (Morgan, Hunt 1994), increasing immunity from negative information in crisis situations (Jones, Wynn, Comfort, Hillier 2007; Bevan, Isles, Emery, Hopkins 2004), and heightening the level of customer satisfaction (Luo, Bhattacharya, 2006).

One of especially interesting groups comprising an enterprise environment are students of management studies. In the course of their studies, the students have an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the subject of CSR, and also with the broader issue of business ethics (Cornelius, Wallace, Tassabehij 2007). However, it is difficult to evaluate what their attitude towards CSR is and whether it is affected by socio-demographic variables or the level of acquired knowledge of economics and management, due to little research on the subject. One of such research was conducted among 410 extramural students and it

revealed, that 45% of the respondents, so a significant percentage of the polled, have not come across the term CSR before (Stefa_ska 2010). The respondents met with the issue of socially responsible business only through the questionnaire survey. Research conducted among bank customers in Australia by A. Pomering and A. Dolinicar also pointed to a low awareness of CSR activities (2009). Here, nearly 20% of the respondents came into contact with the term CSR in course of their studies, while 10% of the respondents indicated at least two sources of information – mainly the press and Internet, 3% indicated the company they are presently working for. The remaining respondents gave more than one source of information about CSR. As many as 91% of the polled have not so far searched for information about an enterprise with a focus on implementing the CSR concept. A study by E. Bigne's team (2006) revealed that students of non-business schools attribute more CSR activities to enterprises than students of business studies. Also interesting are results of research conducted by P. Arlow (1991) who proved that:

- the fact whether students represent a business or non-business higher education school is irrelevant to their attitude to CSR more significant in shaping the attitude are cultural variables and social norms,
- students of non-economic higher education schools are more cynical in their evaluation of activities undertaken by socially responsible enterprises,
- women represent a more ethical attitude than men and expect a greater commitment to social matters on the enterprise's part,
- age is an important variable younger students seem to be less negative about CSR activities than older ones (24+) due to their professional experience.
- R. Panwer, E. Hansen and R. Anderson (2010), studied students' attitude towards CSR in the context of wood industry in the US. Yet another study, by M. Stefa_ska (2011), revealed that

students are cautious in their approach to CSR, focusing in their evaluation on enterprise's activities towards employees and general fairness in business.

The authors' therefore set themselves an aim of identifying the level of students' knowledge about CSR and next evaluating whether such factors as age, gender, year of studies, or the type of higher education school students attend have an impact on their evaluation of CSR. It seems vital to establish which factors, according to the group, determine CSR. Meeting the

- whether students' attitude to CSR is dependent on the perception of factors reflecting
 CSR activities;
- whether and if so, to what degree, socio-demographic features determine the attitude to CSR;
- whether parallel to extending knowledge about economics and management there grows awareness of CSR;
- and whether pro-social or pro-ecological attitude of students makes them more aware
 of the essence of CSR, so that they understand it better.

The first question results from the assumption that students in subsequent years of studies, with increasing their knowledge of economics and management understand better and better the conditions in which enterprises function, and also understand better the essence of CSR. The remaining questions are related to identifying students' attitude to social and ecological matters. The basis for their evaluation are opinions included in Appendix 1.

The sample's characteristics and research procedure

objectives required finding answers to such questions as:

In 2012 a survey research on the subject of corporate social responsibility was conducted among students¹. The respondents were selected with purposive sampling, since students of management-related studies may have encountered the idea of CSR in the course of their studies. It should be noted that the issue of CSR is still rarely discussed as an independent subject, it rather appears as a topic in the framework of other lectures, e.g. in public relations or business ethics. The survey nature of the research restricts the possibility of generalising results, it does, however, lay the foundations for comparing opinions of students representing different levels of studies - BA, MA and PhD. Other research projects with reference to CSR also on groups of MBA and the first-degree (BA) students, as well as supporters of Amnesty International, were conducted with the use of an experiment method by P. Auger, P. Burke, T.M. Devinney and J.L. Louviere (2003).

The research embraced 213 full-time and extramural students of Pozna_ higher education schools. Nearly 83% were students of Pozna_ University of Economics. The majority (about 62%) were women. The average age was 23 - M_{age} = 23, SD=4,64. Most of the respondents were first-degree (BA) students. The vast majority (75%) never worked during the studies.

The research procedure was divided into two stages. In the first one, a factor analysis was carried out on the basis of a collection of statements. In the second – the data obtained in the first stage was used for a cluster analysis. As a result, three segments of students with various perceptions of enterprises implementing CSR were identified. They served as the basis for verifying the first question set in the article.

¹ The survey was conducted in co-operation with 3rd year students: Martyna Gr_pka and Justyna Szuba

A scale consisting of 18 items in a semantic differential was used in the study. The specific points concerned the basics related to an evaluation of enterprises using CSR, such as competitiveness or attitude to employees. The full list can be found in Table 1. The particular items were evaluated on a 6-point scale. The opinions and evaluations, presented in the Appendix, were used to conduct a post hoc segmentation of respondents. For this purpose, first the measure's correctness was evaluated, the factors identified and characterised (Wieczorkowska, Wierzbi_ski, 2005). Then, the segmentation was done using k-means clustering. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicated that the null hypothesis saying that the correlation matrix is the unit matrix should be rejected, thus acknowledging the fact that the data qualifies for a factor analysis (The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure 0,819).

Insert table 1

Factor loadings for particular factors are presented in Table 2.

Insert table 2.

The factor analysis produced 4 factors. They account for 56% of variance variables. The first factor was defined as a "good social image of the company". The second factor was interpreted as the "market rating of the CSR company", the third – as the "intentions of the company implementing CSR". The final factor was defined as "foreign roots".

Stage 2

Based on the isolated factors, a cluster analysis was performed. The results were checked for 2, 3 and 4 groups. The best results were obtained for three groups. The centroids for the isolated segments are presented in Table 3.

Insert table 3.

The three isolated segments were called symbolically the unconvinced, the enthusiasts and the realists. Segment 1, defined as "the Unconvinced", embraces about 36% of the respondents.

The group's most distinct feature is their perceiving CSR as an activity which does not guarantee a good competitive position. As far as other matters are concerned, their views are moderate. This means that characteristic of them are opinions that CSR is a socially legitimate activity.

Segment 2 can be called "CSR Enthusiasts". It embraces about 38% of the respondents. They have a very positive attitude to CSR activities, are convinced that owing to CSR one can achieve a good market rating. They also do not question the intentions of companies implementing CSR. Segment 3 can be called "the Realists". It embraces about 26% of the respondents. The persons from this segment believe the least in CSR activity. In their opinion, one cannot achieve a better market rating with CSR activities. They are not convinced of the purity of intentions of companies using CSR. It means that they see such kind of activities as instrumental and not dictated by true and honest needs of company managers.

Socio-demographic profile of market segments

The particular groups differ relatively little in terms of gender composition. In the case of the second group (CSR enthusiasts) one can observe here a slight majority of women over other groups, as far as the men-women ratio is concerned, but the differences are not statistically significant. Similar results – indicating that gender is not a factor considerably differing the respondents – were also obtained by E. Bigne, L. Andreau, R. Chumpitaz, V. Swaen (2006). Much bigger differences become visible in the case of the type of higher education school. The "Realists" group has the greatest percentage (about 25%) of persons studying in a non-public university. The percentage of persons from non-public schools in other segments is marginally yet statistically significantly lower ($^2=5,306, p<0,1$) - 8,2% in segment 1 and 11,5% in segment 2.

Insert table 4.

Significant differences can also be observed in the type of studies. Persons included in group 2 (CSR enthusiasts) were significantly more often ($_2^2=8,612, p<0,05$) students of master's degree programmes than those from the other two segments. It may suggest that a greater knowledge about CSR contributes to a higher opinion about it.

Insert table 5.

Differences between segments also relate to the question of work (Table 6.) The Realists' segment to a greater extent than others consisted of working persons. They comprised over 44% of the segment, significantly more (2 =10,193, p<0,01) than 23% in segment 2 and 14% in segment 1.

Insert table 6.

The study also tested in what way pro-social and ecological behaviours translate into opinions about CSR. On the basis of questions concerning waste segregation, the use energy-efficient light bulbs, involvement in "Clean up the world" campaigns or buying ecological food, an index was developed being the sum of positive responses to all of the above issues (see the Appendix). Comparing the activities with market segments showed that persons from the 3rd group (the Realists) least exhibited pro-social and pro-ecological behaviours [F(2, 134)=6,011, p<0,01] The results are presented in Table 7. By contrast, the persons with the most positive attitude to CSR were involved in pro-social and pro-ecological activities themselves.

Insert table 7

Discussion of results

First of all, one must not forget that the study was not representative research. Consequently, its results cannot be generalised for the whole population. Particularly, not as far as the

structure of the population is concerned. The isolated profiles may have a different size than indicated in the study. It is worth paying attention to the similarities between the results of this study and those presented in the literature. They show that gender is of relatively little significance in determining the perception of CSR (Bigne et al. 2006). On the other hand, older students, in comparison with their juniors, exhibited more positive attitudes towards companies implementing CSR. The divergence between these results may have various causes. One of them could be different levels of knowledge of the two populations used in the study. Master's degree students of economics (as in the presented study) have a greater knowledge about CSR than their peers from non-business higher education schools (as in the research by Arlow, 1991). In the latter group's case, an improvement in the attitude towards CSR is thus impossible.

Conclusion

The presented research allows formulating a statement that there are lasting differences between students in the sphere of attitudes to CSR. It made it possible to distinguish three groups of people with a different attitude to CSR – the unconvinced, the realists and the enthusiasts. The group described as the enthusiasts consists of persons who more than others exhibit pro-social behaviours. It is made up of more than in the other cases master's degree students. This aspect deserves emphasising, as it may be relevant to the level of knowledge the persons acquired in the course of their studies. It would indicate the existence of a correlation between knowledge about CSR and an attitude towards it.

Managerial recommendations

Conclusions from the research which could be of importance for the practice of both higher education schools and business can be characterised as follows. What regards higher education schools, it is advisable to conduct classes concerning CSR in a systemic way.

Systemic activities should be understood here as co-ordinated activities related not only to transferring CSR related content as part of different subjects, but also to acquainting students with companies' practical side of CSR. Transferring theoretical knowledge should be accompanied by socially-responsible activities, which stimulate a positive perception of CSR. From the business perspective, the conclusions from the presented research are twofold. First, it is recommended to establish co-operation with higher education schools with the aim of presenting and disseminating the idea of CSR among students. Second, communication activities targeted at various stakeholders, including one's employees, are essential so that faith in CSR developed during studies does not falter.

Appendix 1.

Questions used to identify students' attitude:

How often do you express your opinions on socially-significant matters?

Do you segregate waste?

Do you use energy-efficient light bulbs?

Do you get involved in campaigns like "Clean Up the World", "Earth Hour", etc.?

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Tables

Opinions	N	M	SD
is more competitive	146	2,794521	1,348909
is more profitable	147	3,585034	1,2488
has a more positive work atmosphere.	147	2,210884	1,130107
is committed to social, not economic aims	146	2,938356	1,365701
finds good employees more easily	146	3,006849	1,273045
has a better image than other companies	146	1,993151	1,165579
has better financial results	147	3,721088	0,991625
has a competitive advantage	145	2,924138	1,230869
acts ethically	147	2,00000	1,134756
is more prone to image crises	147	4,408163	1,961112
treats employees fairly	147	2,605442	1,279757
puts work atmosphere first	147	3,102041	1,168858
does not protect the environment	147	5,931973	1,337857
acts charitably	147	2,510204	1,523188
is a better employer than other companies	147	2,795918	1,146399
is hypocritical in its CSR strategy	145	4,97931	1,529656
treats customers dishonestly	147	5,428571	1,404494
is from abroad	144	3,368056	1,461614

TABLE 1.

MEAN VALUES FOR PARTICULAR ITEMS ON THE SCALE.

Opinions	Factor loadings			
	1	2	3	4
has a more positive work atmosphere.	0,525256			
acts ethically	0,758999			
treats employees fairly	0,617204			
does not protect the environment	-0,63081			
is a better employer than other companies	0,5999			
is hypocritical in its CSR strategy	-0,68514			
treats customers dishonestly	-0,62557			
acts charitably	0,640658			
has a better image than other companies	0,430242			
is more competitive		0,750925		
is more profitable		0,624581		
finds good employees more easily		0,621183		
has better financial results		0,671768		
has a competitive advantage		0,744118		
puts work atmosphere first			0,489766	
is more prone to image crises			0,579158	
is committed to social, not economic aims			0,745091	
is from abroad				0,833288

TABLE 2.

FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS

	Segment 1	Segment 2	Segment 3
social image	-0,36416	-0,48440	1,195353
market position	0,884551	-0,80090	-0,047120
motives	-0,18941	-0,14386	0,465603
foreign roots	-0,14172	0,237156	-0,14966

TABLE 3.

CLUSTER ANALYSIS RESULTS

Source: Own work based on the survey

Groups		University of Economics students	Other students
The Unconvinced	number	45	4
	%	91,8	8,2
The Enthusiasts	number	46	6
	%	88,5	11,5
The Realists	number	27	9
	%	75	25
	Total	118	19

TABLE 4.

THE KIND OF STUDIES PURSUED BY THE SPECIFIC SEGMENTS

Groups		1 st degree (BA)	2 nd degree (MA)
The Unconvinced	number	35	14
	%	71,4	28,6
The Enthusiasts	number	26	26
	%	50,0	50
The Realists	number	28	8
	%	77,8	22,2
	Total	89	48

TABLE 5.

THE TYPE OF STUDIES PURSUED BY THE PARTICULAR SEGMENTS

Source: Own work based on the survey

Groups		Non-working students	Working students
The Unconvinced	number	42	7
	%	85,7	14,3
The Enthusiasts	number	40	12
	%	76,9	23,1
The Realists	number	20	16
	%	55,6	44,4
	Total	102	35

TABLE 6.

THE PARTICULAR SEGMENTS AND WORK

Segments	Median	Number	Standard. Dev.
Segment 1	2,163265	49	1,213585
Segment 2	2,538462	52	0,999246
Segment 3	1,75	36	0,874234

TABLE 7.

PRO-SOCIAL AND PRO-ECOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES BY REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PARTICULAR SEGMENTS

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