Sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR): Essential topics for business education

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ABSTRACT

The current changes and challenges of the economic and financial environments have created a need for further development in the way higher education, organizations and management systems view the sustainable development and business education. The purpose of this paper is to examine different aspects and approaches regarding sustainability, sustainable development, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the context of business education. The research is based on a literature review, on the experience gained as a result of our participation in various projects and international activities regarding the above-mentioned concepts, and on the results of several qualitative and quantitative marketing researches developed by the authors. Based on these findings we are underlining the fact that the concepts related to CSR and its components are not well known by managers of companies and public institutions and we also point out the fact that the respondents that have knowledge and skills in this field, have acquired most of them outside the formal education system. Furthermore, the paper contributes to the discussion needed to take place in order to understand that universities should make important steps not only for reorienting curriculum, developing programs, and modules, but also in implementing innovative teaching methods in order to integrate such topics in their educational programs.

Keywords: Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, university, business education.

INTRODUCTION

The global economic and financial crises have created not only economic problems, but also social and environmental ones. We are all witnessing major global challenges, from climate change and rapid environmental deterioration, to the demographic downwards trend in some areas of the world, poverty, unemployment and others social issues. In this context, it is important to ask ourselves some questions: Is a sustainable society a myth or a reality? How can we overcome obstacles and barriers to make the transition to sustainable development? What can we do to promote sustainability? How are these issues handled by todays’ leaders and managers? Are the higher education institutions, especially the business schools, prepared to cope with these complex challenges that are facing the world?
The present paper tackles these questions both, in a direct and indirect way. Nowadays it is important for organizations to embrace ethically and socially responsible thinking and that the business world needs society and that society needs the business environment. In the new millennium, the organizations must focus “not just on the economic value that they add, but also on the environmental and social value that they add – or destroy” (Elkington, 2004, p. 3). Moreover, “People-Planet-Profit” (3P), also known as the triple bottom line (TBL) – concepts coined and developed by Elkington - should be embraced alike by the business sector, the governments and the education institutions. In a century of economic, environmental, social, technological and political transformations, is time for a new type of management. It is time for a change! Managers should understand that corporations must create economic value, but at the same time they should play an essential role in the creation of sustainable social and environmental values. “Business ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability have arguably become more important to both the business world and business schools in recent years“ (Segon, & Booth, 2009, p. 72). In this context, education must respond to the changing realities and prepare graduates and undergraduates that have a significant contribution to a sustainable future.

**SUSTAINABILITY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND CSR**

‘Sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are not clearly defined concepts and therefore are open to many different interpretations. These vague and ambiguous terms may be used and defined in many ways, often with different connotations. At present, neither in theory nor in praxis there is no consensus or a general agreement regarding these multidimensional complex and dynamic concepts. Some authors consider the terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ as synonymous and interchangeable, while others don’t and therefore make a distinction between the two concepts (Reid, 2013; Sartori, Latrónico, & Campos, 2014).

Some authors consider that “sustainability is an old wisdom” and researches “have devoted yeas to pursuing the Holy Grail of the robust definition, with diverse and often conflicting results” (Gibson, Hassan, & Tansey, 2013, p. 39). Sustainability is a holistic approach, constructed on several pillars. Gibson (2006) emphasis that there are debates “about whether it is best to conceive of sustainability resting on two intersecting pillars (the ecological and the human) or three (social, ecological and economic) or five (ecological, economic, political, social and cultural), or more” (p. 173). Regarding sustainable development, the concept can be interpreted and defined in many different ways, but the most used, known and quoted definition was given in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (“Brundtland Commission”). In its highly influential report Our Common Future, sustainable development was defined as: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (WCED, 1987, p. 9). The definition is general, broad and involves a creative and constructive ambiguity. Taking into account the moral obligation towards future generations, the Brundland Commission consider that sustainable development concept “bring together equity between generations and equity within generations” (Dreser, p. 2).

In the European Union, sustainable development has been integrated into the Europe 2020 strategy (EC, 2010), “built around education and innovation ("smart"), low carbon emissions, climate resilience and environmental impact ("sustainable") and job creation and poverty reduction ("inclusive")” (EC, p.2). In understanding the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development the connection between economic, environmental, and social components is the important one. In a broader sense, these concepts promote an equilibrium between economic, humanity and nature to secure the well-being of the current and next generations.

To achieve a sustainable transition, a sustainable development requires changes in human values, attitudes, and behaviors (Leiserowitz, Kates, & Parris, 2004). In the United Nations Millennium Declaration, there are a set of a specific, declared values, identified and highlighted as “fundamental values” in the 21st century: freedom; equality; solidarity; tolerance; respect for nature; shared responsibility (UN, 2000, p. 2)
Considering all these aspects, it becomes extremely important to do business in a responsible way. The European Commission emphasis that CSR practices “can play a key role in contributing to sustainable development while enhancing Europe’s innovative potential and competitiveness” (EC, 2005, 24). Corporate social responsibly (CSR) – one of the most important challenges of the 21st century – may mean different things and is explained differently in various sources. This confusion has several sources. One source is linked to the fact that there are a lot of different terms which overlap with it, these are connected or synonymous with CSR, such as “corporate citizenship, sustainable business, environmental responsibility, the triple bottom line; social and environmental accountability; business ethics and corporate accountability” (Moon, p. 2). As a modern term, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has already been introduced during the 1950s (Bowen, 1953) and nowadays has a huge number of definitions. In our previous researches we analysed different definitions given by academics, experts, practitioners, and international organizations (Gorski, Fuciu, & Croitor, 2014, Gorski, Fuciu, & Dumitrescu, 2016). It is not the purpose of our paper to present them again, but we still want to emphasise that corporate social responsibility, like the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’, mean different things for different people (Berthout, 2005).

EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Although the concepts of sustainable development, sustainability and corporate social responsibility has received a growing recognition, unfortunately for many managers and leaders these are new ideas and issues. In the recent years, we have been witnesses not only to political and business corruption scandals, but also to a strong financial and economic crisis. Today’s leaders must manage businesses through an unprecedented transformational change. Considering the world’s major challenges, some questions are arising: Are managers and leaders professionally trained to face such complex issues? Are they prepared to lead with integrity taking into account, in a well-balanced way, the economic, environmental and social challenges?

In this paper, we don’t intend to answer the previous questions, but rather to highlight them at this time and taking into account the interest for sustainable development, it is important to redefine the business competencies in order to fit the realities of a sustainable society. Nowadays, the business environment faces a radical and new competitive landscape. The challenges and the pressures are huge for all business leaders. They “must run their companies successfully under the present framework conditions while helping to lead society toward the new framework conditions of sustainability” (Vision 2050, Executive Summary). Considering the interest for a sustainable future, this should become the new agenda for business leaders. To fit the nowadays realities, it is important to redefine not only the managerial competencies, but also the skills of all those working in the business world. In the Age of Sustainable Development (Sachs, 2015), business needs employees and managers with sustainability skills. In this context, undergraduate or graduate university education should be “a key place where these employees can gain this new skill“ (from der Heidt, & Lamberton, 2011, p. 671). Education for sustainable development and education about sustainable development are closely tied together. The combination of these two types of education “provide people with not just the knowledge and understanding to engage with sustainable development issues but also the skills and capacity to plan, motivate and manage change towards sustainability within an organization, community or industry.” (Tilbury, p. 103-104).

Another question arises: Are universities able to equip students with skills in order to handle in future, as employees, the real problems linked with this subject? Unfortunately, nowadays there are some criticism about social responsibility education in business schools (Matten, D., & Moon, J. 2005). We face a world in which management education, particularly MBA education, is by many assessments in crisis (Waddock, & Lozano, 2013). Moreover, many students consider that today’s business and engineering education in Europe “do not sufficiently takes into account complex problems, tendencies of chaos and uncontrollable business behaviour, and the lack of mutual trust in business transactions” (Kobza, Schaefer, Glawar, & Brandt, 2016).

We have to take very seriously into account the fact that today’s students may be the future managers and leaders. Moreover, the future of humanity and of our planet lies not only in our
hands, but “also in the hands of today’s younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations,” (General Assembly, United Nations p. 12).

A research that investigates deans and directors at the top 50 global MBA programs (2006 Global MBA rankings, by Financial Times) revealed that majority of them require ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability topics be included as a part of their curriculum (Christensen, Peirce, & Hartman, 2007). These topics and others associated terms have seen a significant increase in Western European countries. Unfortunately, in Romania, regarding these topics “assimilation and design of a new curriculum it still remains a challenge” (Teodoreanu, 2014).

Between 2011 and 2013 academics of Romania-German University have participated in a very complex and interesting project – „Corporate Social Responsibility – CSR MATRIX” – developed in partnership with other four organizations from: Austria, Cyprus, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia. The project has incorporated a set of tools: a model, a manual, and a self-assessment tool, that considered the analysis of a set of initiatives, benchmarks and standards in order to assist organizations from these five countries in the process of CSR implementation. The CSR Matrix Model is an integrated framework of goals and steps of a CSR Model which adopts an approach based on the PDCA cycle - Plan, Do, Check, Act (CSR Matrix Manual, 2013). Through the projects’ activities was possible: to bring an innovative CSR methodology in each of the participating countries; to improve CSR knowledge and skills (through seminars and training for CSR consultants and trainers); to prepare teaching materials for the students from the two participating universities (Romanian-German University of Sibiu, Romania and University of Nicosia, Cyprus), to identify ways of recognition the CSR training modules by the EQF and ECVET systems.

In 2013 we have conducted a complex research regarding the implementation of CSR practice in the organizations from Centre Development Region of Romania (Alba, Brasov, Covasna, Harghita, Mures and Sibiu counties). The results reveal: a relatively low level of knowledge on this subject – the calculated score was 2.52 on a Likert scale (1 - "Very poor", 5 -"Very good") and a low level of involvement in defining CSR policies and integrating them into organizational policies (score 2.22). Moreover, only 10% form the managers with knowledge regarding CSR have received them from education (bachelor or master programs, training programs). The majority have informed themselves about this concept: from publications, websites, blogs, and articles (63%), from other media sources (19%), from participating to different projects (7%) (Gorski, Fuciú, & Croitor, 2014). Unfortunately, the research emphasizes also that managers are not aware of the potential benefits from CSR implementation. So, CSR communication is at a rudimentary stage in some of the investigated organizations. Organizations do not understand clearly enough the importance of CSR activities as ways to attract new customers and to win customer loyalty. The marketing communication strategies (in the organizations were these strategies are developed) do not make reference sufficiently clear and comprehensive to ethical CSR values and CSR principles; CSR is an underused tool for marketing communication in the questioned organizations; Organizations have moderate implication in carrying out awareness campaigns about social issues, environmental security and products/services safety, and also not enough implication in promoting these actions (Gorski, Fuciú, & Dumitrecu, 2016).

Unfortunately, the study reveals that researched managers do not have enough knowledge about CSR and implicitly no skills to identify business opportunities and competitive advantages that could be gained through CSR. In order to develop CSR strategies and integrate them into the business strategies, it is important for employees and managers to understand the long-term benefits for individuals, organizations and the society, as a whole. In this context, training on the CSR subject for managers and employees is a must in order to develop CSR knowledge and skills. Researches reveal that business schools should place more emphasis on elements such as “soft skills,” “information technology,” “globalization,” and “corporate social responsibility.” (Navarro, 2008). If we expect tomorrow leaders to lead toward sustainability, we must prepare them from school or at the higher education level. Nowadays, students should understand as early as possible the importance of committing to corporate social responsibility principles. “Undergraduate curriculum should be modified so every student in all academic departments has knowledge of corporate social responsibility” (Kaifi, Khanfar, Noor, & Poluka p. 40).
Business need management tools, techniques and approaches that integrate environmental, social, and economical concerns not only in their daily operations, but also into their strategies. As a consequence, business school and other academic institutions “need to have a proactive strategy in shaping the perspectives of business leaders through sustainability related management education, research, management, and training programmes” (Park, Sarkar, & Bunch, 2012, p. 4). In this context, higher education should respond to the profound transformation toward a sustainable future. Moreover, education could be a catalyst of change and equipped students with capabilities to promote sustainability. In order to respond to these challenges, higher education institutions should make important steps in transforming not only their curriculum, but also their teaching and learning techniques (Barth, 2014). Business education should develop programs and modules and use innovative teaching methods that integrate topics like sustainability, sustainable development, CSR into their business courses and curricula (Parkes, Rosenbloom, & Gudi, 2015).

In order to promote sustainability, sustainable development, CSR and other related topics, professors and students from Romanian-German University have participated / organized two summer schools – one in Germany and one in Romania – where they have presented papers of these topics: “Corporate Social Responsibility in the context of implementing the 2020 EU Strategy” (Gorski, & Fuciu, 2014), and “Using Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Media for the development of social services” (Gorski, & Fuciu, 2016). Also in the context of International guest lecturer week, organized under the title „Corporate Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility, Marketing”, professors from Romania, Great Britain, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain and France have presented different lectures for students from faculties of International Business and Management in Industries. In this context, we have had a very interesting discussion and the students have developed several team projects in the framework of my presented subject „CSR and marketing 3.0 in the context of sustainable development” (Gorski, 2016). Always, in our lectures, seminars and workshops we used different methods for teaching and learning under the student-centered approach: case studies, role-playing, debates, problem-based learning, reaction to videos (learning by watching videos/ movies), gallery walk, group projects, etc. As teachers, we have the role to pass knowledge and information to the students, but this is not enough. It is also very important to encourage creativity and combine the appropriate methods so that students can play active and participatory roles in their own learning process. In teaching sustainability, CSR, ethics and other connected concepts, it is also important to identify certain information about the students: What are their values, attitudes, behaviors regarding issues like environment, poverty, social inclusion, community development and so on. For this purpose, teachers “might find it useful for students to complete assessments prior to teaching CSR to enable them to be aware of their values and attitudes” (Poulton, & Barnes, p. 156).

It is very clear that we cannot speak about sustainability, sustainable development or CSR without taking into consideration the crucial role of ethics and moral principles and values. Nowadays it is important for organizations to embrace ethically and socially responsible thinking. In this context, “the provision needs to be ‘proactive’ with fundamental ethics programs taught by committed and engaged business schools.” (Dutse, & Hilman, p. 343)

On 1 January 2016, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — adopted by world leaders in September 2015 – has become official and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets are universally valid and apply to all counties, taking into account the different national realities. The “Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, target 7 (4.7) states: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UN, 2016, p. 19). As the world moves forward on the implementation this Agenda, education should play once more a crucial role. Business schools and universities from all over the world, should take advantage of CSR challenges and opportunities, and should act as change agents for sustainability (Stephens, Hernandez, Román, Graham, & Scholz, 2008; Peer, & Stoeglehner, 2013). It is the role of higher education to prepare a new generation of transformational leaders that contribute to contribute to the betterment of society.
CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and on our participation in international projects and activities together with experts, teaching staff and students from different countries, but also because of the research activities undertaken by the authors, we can state that there is a need for shaping a new generation of sustainable leaders. Our experience combined with the research results lead us to the assertion that there is a need to develop the managers’ understanding regarding sustainability related subject and their knowledge and skills, in order to improve business sustainability through appropriate strategies. In Romania, businesses and business schools suffer from a degree of inertia and are lagging behind others developed countries from Europe and USA not only in teaching, but also in integrating this concepts into the business strategies. But at the same time, we also mitigate this by the fact that the Romanian business education system has been based on the free market economy only for the last 26 years and in some European and US universities these concepts have been taught for at least 25 to 30 years.

The main directions for implementing these concepts in the Romanian higher education system should include the following actions: development of panels or workshops in which we bring together business academics, business leaders to identify and point out changes needed in the curricula regarding the above-mentioned concepts, benchmarking on the experience of westerns universities experience in the development of curricula, development of CSR master programs etc. Higher education should make important steps for reorienting curriculum and teaching staffs’ education programs in order to integrate sustainability, CSR and others related concepts in their educational programs. The teaching staffs’ role in not only to help students understand these concepts, but also to motivate them to became sustainable leaders. Education for sustainability, education about sustainability, education regarding CSR and other connected subjects can influence the graduate opinions, attitudes and behaviors regarding these complex issues. Moreover, as prospective employees and leaders they can consider this aspects in the business decisions.

Thus, we conclude that a consideration of sustainability and of the CSR issues is very important, in order to face the complexity of business in a global world. Like business ethics, sustainability and CSR should be a part of business education and not only. Consequently, business schools have to be open to an important change and should play a leading role in developing new skills so useful in the Age of Sustainable Development. This is not a single step transformation, but a complex, dynamic, uncertain, and quite difficult journey, because most of the business schools and universities should transform themselves in supporting education, evolution and development.

At the same time, the authors are continuing the research in this field with the development of qualitative and quantitative researches aimed at the higher education level with a target group formed of business academics, business faculty deans, managers and business environment leaders form all of Romania, not just the 7 Center Region to have a clear diagnosis of phenomenon in our country and to bring together the needs of the business environment and what the higher education institutions have to offer.

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