

The Importance of Corporate Social Responsibility among Students in EUROPE [†]

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Abstract: This document addresses the issue of awareness and involvement in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by students from all over Europe. The purpose of the document is to investigate the involvement and the knowledge of students in Social Responsibility and to obtain results that can confirm or invalidate the proposed hypotheses, presenting a real situation regarding their involvement. Social responsibility has a major impact on communities, and awareness of this concept is needed for involvement in CSR actions. The aim of the research is to study the knowledge and development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Europe.

Keywords: CSR; students; initiatives; knowledge; CSR benefits

1. Introduction

The concept of CSR has been debated in several contexts [1,2]. The following definitions are to be retained:

- CSR is the concept through which organizations integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interact with stakeholders on a voluntary basis (European Commission, 2001);
- CSR is “the process by which managers within an organization think about and discuss relationships with stakeholders as well as their roles in relation to the common good, along with their behavioral disposition with regard to the fulfillment and achievement of these roles and relationships” [3].

Most studies in this field have identified a relationship between CSR activities and the benefits to their organization [4,5]. Whether we are talking about reducing direct costs, increasing labor productivity, applying risk management, image enhancement, or improving environmental management [6], the importance and application of the concept of CSR in the strategy and activities of any type of organization are indisputable.

The quest of this subject in Romania started shyly but in the course of time attracted some followers. Lungu et al. (2009) [7] integrated the studies on social and environmental reporting in Europe and worldwide and the financial reporting experience in this area, Șendroiu et al. referred to EMA principles in Romanian entities, Crisan-Mitra analyzes the context in which companies in Romania should use CSR practices [3]. There are also more concrete pieces of research regarding the involvement of CSR in the profession of accountants [6], Kork M. studies whether the concept of CSR is transposed from theory to practice [2,8] and even aspects related to public relations as a component of public [6].

The results of the Romanian research show that an integrated approach of corporate reports is needed as the CSR trends are set by the big companies. In this context, we believe that in order to change

things for the better, little initiatives, organizational awareness, insistence from the stakeholders are needed. This study considers that it was an awareness first and then an empirical analysis, its results have a number of conclusions and recommendations about that society is becoming more involved in more branches and fields. In 2007, a survey was carried out by the Forum for International Communications through its CSR Romania program on a sample of 250 corporations active in the Romanian business environment [7], followed by research in the field of CSR communication, [8] conducted a survey between 2006 and 2008 focused on the evolution and the quality of the environmental reports from the Romanian companies listed on the Bucharest Stock Exchange. The research was resumed to cover 46 companies with an environmental impact.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a useful tool for any organization that wants to be renowned. Even if it is not a mandatory mechanism, ignorance of this concept and its neglect may have effects on the image and implementation of future strategies of any type of organization. Through this article, the authors emphasize the Romanian context in which companies need to implement and develop CSR practices, with empirical qualitative research based on questionnaires. The research tool used is a questionnaire drafted by the authors and the respondents were the representatives of the most important companies in the technical and industrial field present at the face-to-face event with the employers organized by the Association of ESTIEM Mures and the Faculty of Engineering of “George Emil Palade” University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureş, Romania. The ongoing research provides a detailed picture not only of the perception of CSR but also of the reasons that have led companies to invest in CSR.

2. Materials and Methods

The parameters of the study consisted of:

- Target group: students and graduates of the ESTIEM network, from all over Europe;
- Sample: 59 samples;
- Sample type: ad-hoc sampling (probability);
- Data collection for the CSR study took place in March 2020.

The objectives of this study are closely related to the importance of the concept of CSR. Social responsibility has a major impact on communities, hence the awareness of the need to get involved in CSR actions. The aim of the research is to study the knowledge and development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Europe. Among the objectives set by the research, we highlight four that are directly related to this paper: determining the level of knowledge on the concept of CSR, identifying ways to involve and organize CSR activities, implementation of CSR strategy, and implementation of CSR initiatives within organizations in the area of each respondent.

The questionnaire is based on the knowledge of the concept of Social Responsibility, which aims to identify the involvement of respondents in activities carried out by companies across Europe, the initiatives most often encountered in the communities they belong to, and the identification of reasons why participants were not involved in such activities. Depending on the purpose of the research and the literature, the structure of the CSR questionnaire was developed to verify the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. *People with university studies know the concept of CSR, they have contact with this concept through non-governmental organizations present in universities.*

Figure 1a,b refer to questions 3 and 4, show that 49 of the participants completing this questionnaire have university degrees, they are aware of the existence of this concept in a proportion of 62.7%. A fairly large number, 37.3%, are not familiar with this concept, which demonstrates that society needs to be more involved in such activities. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

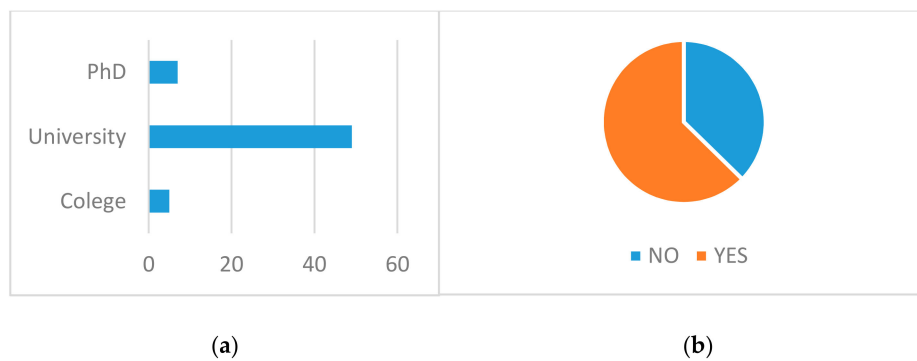


Figure 1. (a) Level of education of respondents; (b) Did you hear about CSR?

Hypothesis 2. *The concept of CSR is often encountered in companies.*

Figure 2 is representative of question number 5, which refers to where this concept of CSR is often encountered. As we can see from the chart above, the participants in this study consider that this concept is often found in companies, in a percentage of over 50%, and less common in NGOs, a percentage of 20%. Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

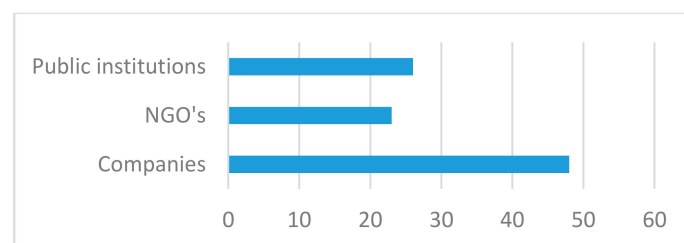


Figure 2. Where you can find this topic applied?

Hypothesis 3. *The field of involvement of companies in CSR projects is mainly for activities that cover initiatives towards the local community, environment, and business ethics.*

Figure 3 refers to question number 6, a question related to the initiatives that are most often applied/encountered in the country of which the respondents are part. The average of the answers is quite balanced, the first three positions being environmental protection, business ethics, and initiatives towards the local community. The hypothesis is confirmed.

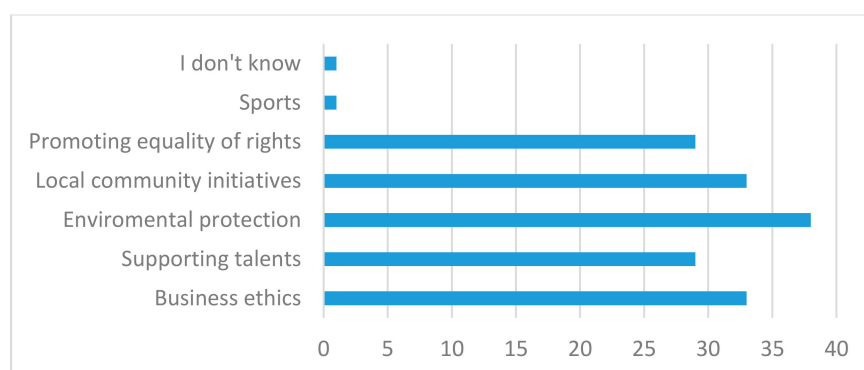


Figure 3. Which of these initiatives are usually applied in your country?

Hypothesis 4. *Universities and organizations support the involvement of students in CSR programs; therefore they are familiar with the concept of CSR.*

Figure 4, refers to question number 8, a question related to the involvement and participation of respondents in CSR actions. It can be seen that a very large number of them did not participate in such activities at 71%. Only 29% were involved in CSR actions. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

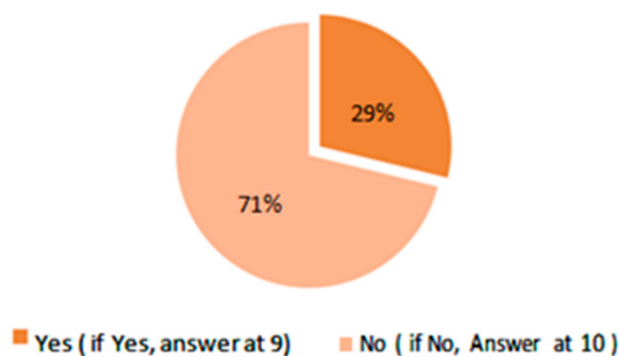


Figure 4. Have you ever participated in social responsibility actions?

Hypothesis 5. *The reason for students' non-involvement is related to the fact that they were not given the opportunity to be part of such projects.*

Figure 5 shows the reasons why the participants were not part of CSR projects (question number 10). The most common reason is related to the fact that they were not offered this opportunity, which shows the lack of presentation and introduction of several CSR projects. The hypothesis is confirmed.

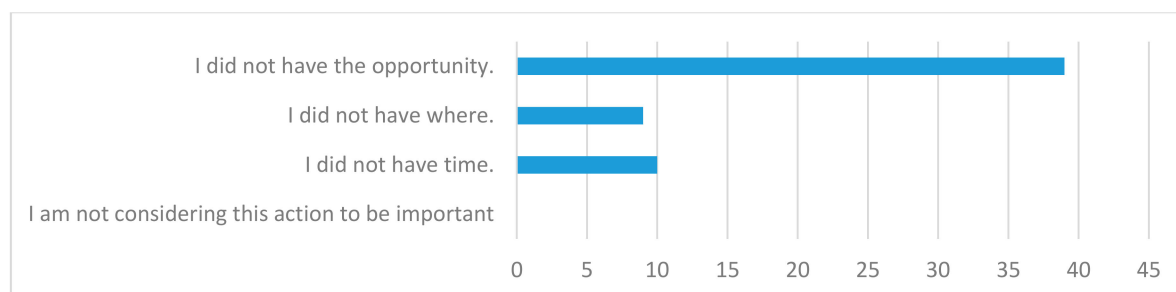


Figure 5. Specify your reasons for not being involved in CSR actions.

Hypothesis 6. *Social responsibility is practiced following the emergence of legal provisions.*

A relevant question in this study is to find out the reason for the involvement of companies in such actions. Why do participants believe organizations participate in such actions? The results highlight an interesting situation, following the data in Figure 6—most respondents believe that this involvement is due to the company's need to protect its reputation, followed by the option legal provisions. These two reasons are followed to a lesser extent by reasons such as investor relations, pressure from NGOs. It can be seen that these implications are due to the desire to increase the image by remedying certain problems. Pressure from local communities, customers and suppliers ranks last in this survey. The hypothesis is confirmed.

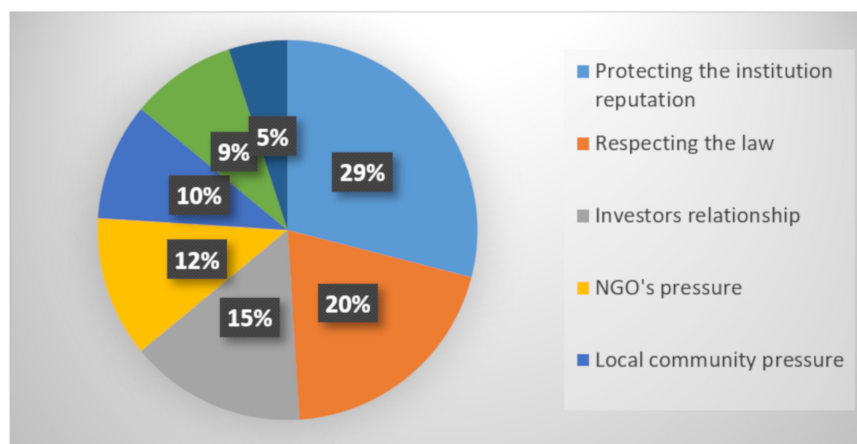


Figure 6. Which are the main actions in case your organization is using CSR practices?

Hypothesis 7. *The type of program/cause supported by most companies should be related to the predominant problem in each country.*

One last question refers to a more sensitive point, the situations in which these projects offer a chance and hope to only certain categories of people (Figure 7). The chart above reflects the need to involve people in CSR projects, in situations where people suffer from certain incurable diseases, or in situations where people are victims of sexual exploitation, homeless people, and people subjected to domestic violence. The hypothesis is confirmed.

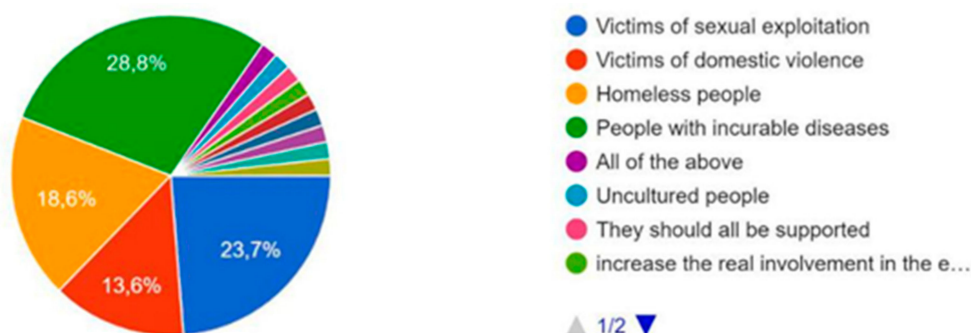


Figure 7. Which causes should be supported by companies from your country?

3. Conclusions

Following the interpretation of the study, it can be seen that the field of corporate social responsibility in Europe is an area that is taking shape and is constantly evolving. The respondents included in the study have general/minimal knowledge and notions on what this field entails and are eager to be involved in CSR activities.

The study shows that society is becoming more and more involved in more branches and fields, which is a very positive thing, and we tend to believe in continuous growth in the coming years.

Respondents believe that lately, companies are trying to create and maintain a pleasant image among society through CSR actions. The main purpose of the private sector is to generate profit and value. Through such activities, the private sector contributes to economic growth and social development. In the long run, it is in the interest of both society and companies to have a private sector that works responsibly and develops products and services that help solve social and environmental problems. Practicing the concept of Social Responsibility brings added value to organizations due to the easier implementation of legal provisions and the betterment of the company's image in the community, NGOs, and other stakeholders.

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