

CSR – A new challenge for universities? – An empirical case study on CSR activities of universities

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Universities follow mandates given by society. Thereby, the mandate is not a static mission, but universities rather work in a dynamic environment of society and thus they are confronted with certain specific challenges. The leading research question comes naturally: What kind of commitments to the society are specific for universities and how can these institutions manage this? This leads to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (cf. Scherer & Butz 2010, 368). Thus, the question is how universities should design the CSR activities. In other words: What is a USR (University Social Responsibility) and how can it be managed?

First of all, CSR activities of universities can be differentiated into four perspectives. The first perspective refers to research activities. In the context of the research focus these activities have different characteristics (e.g. corruption in companies, explanatory questions concerning business ethics) (cf. Matten & Palazzo 2008). The second perspective comprises the teaching and learning process and how universities prepare their students for a responsible acting in future working situations (cf. Gerholz & Sloane 2010). The third perspective includes the institutionalization of CSR and how universities can construct responsible structures in their organization and beyond that the Dialogue with the economic realm, i.e. with businesses and the specific stakeholders.

An empirical analysis of these perspectives has only been made in the fields of teaching or research (cf. Schwalbach & Schwerk 2008; Scherer & Picot 2008), but obviously there is no integrated survey on the CSR activities of universities.

In consequence, what was conducted was a case study (cf. Gerholz & Heinemann 2012) concerning the current situation of universities in North Rhine-Westphalia and their CSR activities. The research questions based on the theoretical framework: CSR activities in research, teaching and institutionalization. In that case, we prepared an open questionnaire for all business and economics faculties at universities in North Rhine-Westphalia (universities and universities of applied science). We used a descriptive data analysis for the key facts (e.g. number of research activities in CSR) and a hermeneutical approach (cf. Creswell 2009, 183ff.) for the analysis of the open answers.

The findings generated by the analysis can be separated into three central aspects.

(1) Teaching: Two-thirds of the faculties follow an integrated approach to teach CSR. But an extracurricular offer is hard to find and study paths with concrete CSR reference do not exist.

(2) Research: CSR research activities are often covered in theses. Concrete research projects are generally financed by own resources instead of third-party funds. Furthermore, the universities of applied science have a lot of research cooperations with companies.

(3) Institutionalization: An institutionalization of CSR can often be found on the programmatic level (e.g. mission statements), but frequently there is no counterpart in the organization structure. Instead, what can be found occasionally is some information in the organization structure (e.g. vice president for diversity, membership at UNGC)

The study can be seen as the first complete structure of CSR activities at universities. In our conversation we focus on the results of the study and what could (descriptive) and should (normative) CSR activities look like in the future.

Literature

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