BUSINESS STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Edit Barizsné Hadházi, Roland Filep, Mária Ujhelyi
Department of Economics and Business, Institute of Management and Organizational Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Business, Debrecen, Hungary
barizsne.hadhazi.edit@econ.unideb.hu
fileproland@hotmail.com
ujhelyi.maria@econ.unideb.hu

Abstract: *Nowadays, more and more companies recognise the importance of social responsibility. This activity is not simply a marketing trick, but a real tool to achieve a company's goals. In this way firms can meet the requirements of customers, society, owners, employees, suppliers and any other stakeholders, in order to stay competitive in the long run. Therefore, all managers have to deal with the issue of corporate social responsibility. Why are business students' attitudes towards corporate social responsibility important? The answer is simple: they will become employees of a company, and later on can become managers in a company, which is why they have to become acquainted with this issue. Many international empirical research studies have tried to analyse business students' social sensitivity, and their attitude to social responsibility. Some researchers deal with the opinions of students in relation to the role of ethics education in the business curriculum. The aim of this study is to examine the social attitudes of students at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Economics and Business. The respondents had to fill in one part of the Haski-Leventhal questionnaire. They had to rank companies' potential stakeholders according to their importance and to evaluate 18 statements in a Likert-scale format. According to our students, the three most important leadership tasks in CSR are: to achieve customer satisfaction, to ensure fair and ethical treatment of employees and to achieve fair trade with suppliers. The ranking of stakeholders in their view begins with consumers, followed by workers and owners, while the least important for them are the government, shareholders, members of society and trade unions. The majority of respondents agreed on the following statements: "Good ethics is often good business"; "The overall effectiveness of a business can be determined to a great extent by the degree to which it is ethical and socially responsible" and "Business has a social responsibility beyond making profits". In our study, we also present significant differences between the averages.*

Keywords: *corporate social responsibility; business students; ethical perception; ethical attitudes.*

JEL Classification: *M14; I23.*

1. Introduction

In our study, we seek to find out how university students studying on economics courses view social responsibility, and what kind of approach characterizes them in this respect. Different aspects of corporate responsibility must increasingly be considered at business organisations, beyond a simple profit orientation. This contributes to the company's reputation and even may have financial benefits. Within

the company, this task is mostly done by top managers together with the active participation of employees. That is why we think it is important to develop the social sensitivity of almost every employee, especially of those who are involved in economics courses, since their first career step will probably be to become an employee, and later to become a manager. In this case this issue is particularly important.
In our paper we first give an overview of the notion of social responsibility, and then present some empirical research connected to social responsibility that examines the attitudes of university students participating in economics courses. In the second part of our article, we introduce our own empirical research, which was conducted among students at the University of Debrecen.

2. Theoretical Background

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) appeared first in public thinking in the mid-1900s, and we can state that although many theoretical models and much empirical research deal with this topic, there is as yet no unified definition. In addition, it is not only that the terminology which is used is not universal, but that different names are used in practice, for example: corporate responsibility, stakeholder responsibility, corporate citizenship, sustainable development, fair trade, ethical consumerism, and so on. In the following, we will present some of the possible definitions that can be found in the literature.
According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), “Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large.” (WBCSD 1999:6).
It is “a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources” (Kotler and Lee, 2005:16).
Porter and Kramer (2011:10) no longer refer to CSR, but to Corporate Shared Value, which “can be defined as policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates. Shared value creation focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between societal and economic progress”.
In Bowen’s understanding, corporate social responsibility “refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 1953:6).
Elkington approached this question through the concept of the so-called "Triple Bottom Line", and argued that the TBL expresses the fact that companies and other organisations simultaneously create or destroy economic, social and environmental value (Elkington, 2006:523-529).
It is clear from the above concepts, that there are common points among these definitions: CSR is the voluntary activity of companies or organizations which are willing to invest resources for that purpose, and most frequently it is the workers, the closer and wider communities, and the natural environment which receive most attention from among the various stakeholders.

In the literature, Carroll's model is quoted almost everywhere. He is the creator of CSR pyramid, which can be seen in Figure 1. (Carroll 1979 and 1991). Carroll argued that total corporate social responsibility was based on economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. He argued that these four components are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather represent a continuum in which corporate social responsibility can be examined.

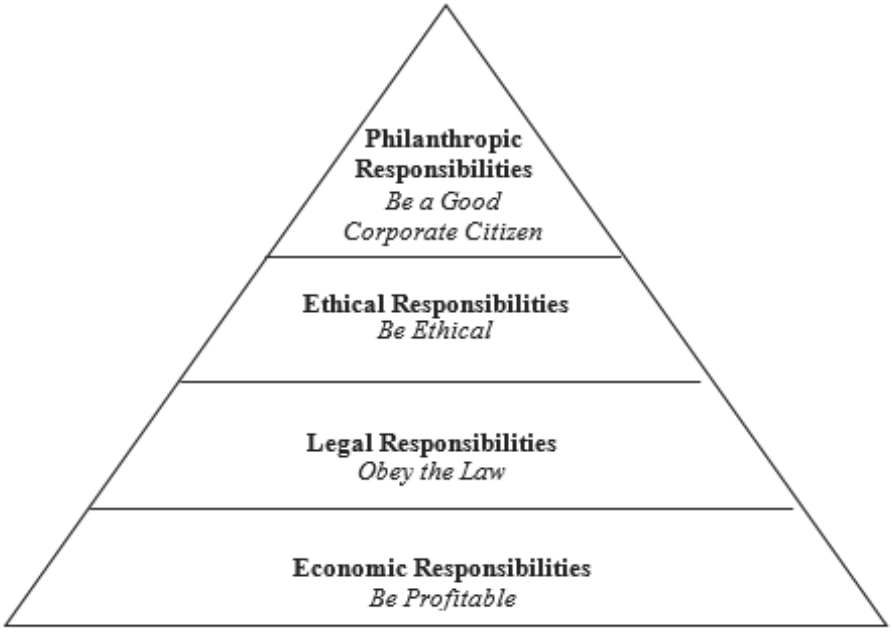

Figure 1: Carroll's CSR Pyramid
Source: Authors' own design based on Carroll (1975 and 1991)

Let us consider what the four levels mean (see also Figure 1):
An organization's economic responsibilities could include maximizing earnings per share, generating a high and consistent level of profitability, establishing and maintaining a strong competitive position and operating the firm at a high efficiency level (Carroll, 1991:40).
The legal responsibilities "are the laws and regulations that all firms are expected to abide by as they perform their daily functions. … It is expected that the firm will be able to fulfil its economic responsibilities while following the legal requirements that have been established by society" (Carroll, 1991 in: Stanwick – Stanwick, 2009:51).
Ethical responsibilities mean that the firm performs in a manner which meets or exceeds the expectations of both social and ethical norms. However, it is difficult to define ethical behaviour, while social and ethical norms change over time (Carroll, 1991 and Stanwick – Stanwick, 2009:52).
Philanthropic components of the pyramid could include ensuring that the firm performs in a manner that is consistent with the charitable and philanthropic expectations of society (for example: supporting cultural events, becoming involved in various charitable organizations through volunteering, providing financial and non-

financial assistance to educational institutions) (Carroll, 1991 in: Stanwick – Stanwick, 2009:52).
In addition to corporate social responsibility, it is worthwhile, and an interesting subject in itself, to deal with the ethical sensitivity of students participating in business courses, since when leaving their course they will work as employees or even executives of companies. Thus their social responsibility will be a relevant question. For this reason, we can find several international research studies that examine the ethical sensitivity of students attending business courses, as these results are likely to predict their ulterior ethical or unethical behaviour.
Let us now outline the results of some of these international empirical surveys.

3. Overview of International Empirical Research

In this chapter we discuss the empirical research which can be considered the antecedent of our own survey, which will be presented later.
Luthar and Karri (2005) asked 817 business students how they feel about the level of corporate social responsibility, and what they think about the ideal situation in this regard. In the respondents' opinion, there was a significant difference between the current and the desirable situation, with women expressing higher expectations in assessing the desirable situation, and school advancement improving the values of both the present and the desirable situations. At the same time, studying ethics previously did not affect the evaluation of the current situation, but increased sensitivity to the desirable situation. We must also highlight the finding of the study that ethical courses in education enhanced the ethical sensitivity of men to a greater extent than women.
Sleeper (2006) analysed students' opinions about what role knowledge about social responsibility in education. 851 economics students who were very interested in, and sensitized to, social responsibility participated in the research. For this reason, the authors suggested that decision makers should involve subjects related to this field of knowledge in the school curriculum.
Haski-Leventhal conducted two research studies to understand the attitudes towards socially responsibility of students on business courses, one in 2011 and another two years later. His research in 2013 focused on how the CSR pyramid drawn up by Carroll is built up among university students. Based on his research results, the pyramid can be represented from the bottom to the top, as follows: the ethical responsibility of the company, followed by the legal and then the economic responsibility, and finally the philanthropic responsibility at the top of the pyramid. We can see that the students' and Carroll's orders (importance) of responsibilities do not match. The respondents in this research also considered that it is necessary to teach "responsible management". We will revert to the research of Haski-Leventhal in later chapters, because our own empirical research is based on his work.
Kaifi et al. (2014) reviewed the opinions of 184 bachelor economics students, examining gender, cultural and generational differences. In the analysed sample the following significant differences were found: women's social sensitivity is stronger than men's; students from "high-context" cultures are more sensitive than those from other cultures; Y generation members are more sensitive than members of the X generation.

Alonso-Almeida and his team studied Spanish students (2015). Their research, conducted with 535 respondents, gave similar results: the sensitivity of women to social responsibility was stronger than that of men and first year students were more sensitive compared to second and third year students.
After reviewing some of the research results, let us now present the methodology and results of our own research.

4. Methodology

After introducing the theoretical background and international empirical research, we will now discuss how we designed and conducted our own survey, a process which began in 2018. In this paper we will present the results of the statistical analysis carried out on the questionnaires we have received back so far.
Our examination is based on Haski-Leventhal's study (2013). We used one part of his questionnaire to assess the attitudes of students at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Economics and Business relating to social responsibility. Our research is still in progress, and the questionnaires are coming back continuously. At the moment we have a 35-element sample. We hope that we will be able to repeat this analysis later on a larger sample.
Participants in the study were asked to evaluate the statements - questions 20, 21 and 23 in the original Haski-Leventhal questionnaire - on a 6-grade Likert scale. These questions and statements are included in the tables in the results section.
The questionnaires were completed by students on the Bachelor's in Business Administration and Management programme and on the vocational course in tertiary education in the same field of study. The sample size is 35 persons, of which 13 are men (37%) and 22 women (63%). There are 8 individuals (23%) in the sample from the bachelor level and 25 from the vocational course level (71%). 2 students (6%) did not respond to this question. 16 (46%) of the respondents had not yet studied ethics, while 19 (54%) had.
The sample is too small and not representative, so our findings are not generalizable, but it is suitable for drawing attention to the shortcomings we have at this stage of the research. As a result, we will be able to correct these mistakes and define in which direction it is worth continuing our analysis.
Based on the available data, we analysed means and standard deviations, and tried to find significant differences, using independent two sample t-tests, between different variables (gender, year of studies, the existence or lack of previous ethical studies).

5. Results

Students' attitudes towards responsible management and CSR were evaluated with three questions. The results are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Haski-Leventhal's research (2013), carried out among MBA students served as a model in our analysis.
The first question was the following: "If you were in a position of power in a business organisation how important would the following issues be for you?" Students were given a list of 11 items and were asked to rate them on a 6-digit Likert scale (where 1 means "Not at all important" and 6 means "Very important"). Table 1 shows how students ranked each item according to its level of perceived importance. The last column contains means and standard deviations.

Table 1: Importance of aspects to business leaders (%)

Aspects	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean (Std. Deviation)
Consumer satisfaction	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	20.0	74.3	5.69 (0.58)
Treating employees fairly and ethically	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	25.7	60.0	5.46 (0.74)
The economy and financial markets	0.0	0.0	2.9	14.3	45.7	34.3	5.15 (0.78)
Making a profit for shareholders	0.0	2.9	8.6	34.3	42.9	11.4	4.51 (0.92)
Trading fairly with suppliers	0.0	0.0	5.7	17.1	34.3	42.9	5.14 (0.91)
Engaging with various stakeholders	0.0	0.0	5.7	37.1	37.1	20.0	4.71 (0.86)
Developing the community we operate in	0.0	5.7	11.4	37.1	31.4	14.3	4.37 (1.06)
Local and national peace and the reduction of violence	2.9	5.7	11.4	25.7	34.3	17.1	4.38 (1.26)
Environmental concerns and climate change	0.0	0.0	17.1	25.7	37.1	20.0	4.6 (1.01)
Employer-supported volunteering and giving	0.0	8.6	17.1	28.6	37.1	8.6	4.2 (1.11)
Philanthropy and donating to charity	0.0	0.0	11.4	45.7	34.3	8.6	4.4 (0.81)

Source: Authors' own research results

Table 1 demonstrates that according to 74.3% of the respondents, "Consumer satisfaction" is very important for business leaders. This is the aspect where the mean of the responses is the highest, at 5.69. "Treating employees fairly and ethically" was considered very important by 60.0%. In the research by Haski-Leventhal (2013) these two elements also received the highest score, the first 74.8% and the second 73.8%. There was a difference between our and Haski-Leventhal's results in the third place in the ranking. "Fair Trade with the Suppliers" ranked third with 42.9% in our sample, but only 5th with 39.1% in Haski-Leventhal's research.

The second question asked students to evaluate the importance of 10 potential stakeholders for a business organization on a 6-digit Likert scale from 1 (Not at all important) to 6 (Absolutely essential). Table 2 shows how students ranked each item's perceived importance. The results show that the most important stakeholders for a company according to the students are "Consumers". Both the mean of the answers (5.57) and the ratio of students who considered this group of stakeholders "Absolutely important" (62.9%) are the highest. The second most important stakeholders are "Employees" (mean 54.3%, i.e. this group is absolutely important for 54.3%) followed by "Owners" (mean 40.0%) These results are in line with Haski-Leventhal's research results. In our research the least important stakeholders were – in terms of their means - "Unions" (3.51), "Governments" (3.66), and "Members of the general community" (3.89).

The third question included seven statements on social responsibility. Students were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with them, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). Table 3 shows the ratio of agreement at levels 5 and 6. In this

table we also present statements where we found significant differences between the responses of male and female students, between first and third year students and between students who had already studied ethics and those who had not.

Table 2: Stakeholder importance (%)

Stakeholders	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean (Std. Deviation)
Consumers	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	31.4	62.9	5.57 (0.61)
Employees	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	45.7	54.3	5.54 (0.51)
Owners	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.6	51.4	40.0	5.31 (0.63)
Shareholders	0.0	2.9	14.3	34.3	42.9	5.7	4.34 (0.91)
Suppliers	0.0	0.0	2.9	40.0	40.0	14.3	4.68 (0.77)
The environment	0.0	2.9	11.4	22.9	40.0	22.9	4.69 (1.05)
Governments	2.9	14.3	25.7	34.3	17.1	5.7	3.66 (1.19)
Employees' families	0.0	0.0	17.1	48.6	17.1	17.1	4.34 (0.97)
Members of the general community	5.7	8.6	14.3	40.0	25.7	5.7	3.89 (1.23)
Unions	8.6	5.7	34.3	28.6	22.9	0.0	3.51 (1.17)

Source: Authors' own research results

The students who took part in this study agreed most with the statement that "Good ethics is often good business" (48% agree and strongly agree with this statement). 46% of respondents believe that "The overall effectiveness of a business can be determined to a great extent by the degree to which it is ethical and socially responsible", and 43% argue that "Business has a social responsibility beyond making profits". These results are much lower than those in Haski-Leventhal's (2013) research. Unlike MBA students, our students did not agree too strongly with the statements that "Social responsibility and profitability can be compatible", and that "Companies should do a lot more for society and the environment".

We found significant differences between male and female respondents, and between first and third year students at two different statements.

25% of the respondents who had previously participated in an ethics course agreed with the last statement ("The most important concern for a firm is making a profit, even if it means bending or breaking the rules") and significantly more (33%) agreed with it among those who had not taken an ethics course. 23% of men, and 32% of women agreed with the sentence that "Social responsibility and profitability can be compatible".

Table 3: CSR attitudes (% of agreement)

Statements	Agree	Strongly agree	Gender	Year of study	Ethical studies
Social responsibility and profitability can be compatible	23	6		**	
Good ethics is often good business	37	11			
Business has a social responsibility beyond making profits	37	6			
Business ethics and social responsibility are critical to the survival of a business enterprise	26	9			
Companies should do a lot more for society and the environment	11	17	*		
The overall effectiveness of a business can be determined to a great extent by the degree to which it is ethical and socially responsible	40	6			
The most important concern for a firm is making a profit, even if it means bending or breaking the rules	17	11			

N=35; * significant at the .05 level ** significant at the .10 level
Source: Authors' own research results

Reviewing the above analysis, we can conclude that our students, similar to foreign students, are interested in social responsibility. The difference between the opinions of the international and Hungarian students was most evident in the evaluation of the statements of Table 3: in Haski-Leventhal's sample 40% of the respondents agreed and 20-40% strongly agreed with all statements except the last one; however, in our sample these ratios are lower. Hungarian students were better divided by these statements and, based on their responses we can say that they do not consider the marked CSR approaches to be particularly important.

6. In conclusion

In this study, we revealed the interest and attitude of university students participating in economic and business courses towards social responsibility. Our results show that, similarly to the results of international studies, economics students in Debrecen are also interested in this topic, but they are less sensitive than their foreign counterparts. However, our research is still in its first stage, as is indicated by the small sample size. The collection of questionnaires is still continuing, so we hope that the expansion of the database will give more differentiated results. We are also planning further research on this topic, using a more detailed questionnaire and composing more complex questions in order to gain a more precise picture of student's social responsibility.

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