

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS BUSINESS EDUCATION'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING ETHICS AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ISSUES

Miguel Ángel López-Navarro, María Mercedes Segarra Ciprés

Departamento de Administración de Empresas y Marketing, Universitat Jaume I (SPAIN)

Abstract

In recent years, business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become one of the most important topics in business management. In this sense, the training of business students – future entrepreneurs and managers– in these topics is important in order to prepare them to assume responsible roles in society. A relevant question in this area lies in knowing the extent to which students actually believe that business studies should educate about ethical and CSR issues. However, business education literature lacks data on students' attitudes towards such education. Along this line, the main objective of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of students toward the role of business education in preparing them to make decisions affecting social needs. Our study is based in a sample of 124 Spanish undergraduate business students at the Universitat Jaume I (Spain). We use the BERSI (Business Education's Role in addressing Social Issues) scale which incorporates questions dealing with the value of student learning about awareness of and solutions to social problems, civic leadership, discrimination, service, and general CSR issues. Firstly, the findings strongly imply that students at this university are quite positively disposed to the idea that business education should encompass substantial coverage of social issues. Students tended far more to agree than disagree with statements in the BERSI scale. Secondly, we find that there are differences between students' attitudes toward business education's role in addressing social issues and what this education really is. Specifically, the values of these students' attitudes are higher than their perceptions regarding that the business education is. These results imply the need to incorporate into the business studies more social contents. Furthermore, gender was found to have a limited effect upon students' attitudes toward business education's role in addressing social issues.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been increasing interest in all matters relating to the corporate social dimension. The issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and business ethics occupy an increasing number of pages in the academic literature as well as corporate memory of companies. As CSR has become an increasingly salient feature of business and its environment, to which managers are expected to respond, it has acquired status within management education and research [1]. Most of this research concluded that corporations have a responsibility towards various stakeholder groups beyond maximizing stock price and that social responsibility is important in determining corporate effectiveness.

The employment of approaches of CSR allows to the companies to direct a favourable image in front of all the groups of interest, what contributes to improve its reputation. Today is widely acknowledged the benefits of corporate responsibility for good business. This growing perspective should entail a change in business education. In fact, the attitudes of tomorrow's business women and men about good business behaviour and good decision making for the success of their business wellbeing of their local and global environment are created to a remarkable extent during their years in business schools [2]. However, some authors (e.g. [3]; [4]) reveal that business school education is still inadequate to address the changes in ethical behaviour among future business professionals, due to business schools mainly focus on the theories and economic models that emphasize shareholder values over the stakeholder model.

Business decisions, by their nature, involve ethical considerations because (1) most economic decisions are choices where the decision maker could have done otherwise; (2) every such decision or action affects people, and an alternative act or inaction would affect them differently; and (3) every decision or set of decisions is embedded in a belief system that presupposes some basic values or their abrogation [5]. Business scandals that have occurred recently have made business schools around the world seriously contemplate on the role of business education in relation to such

phenomena [2]. It is very important to pay more attention in assessing student attitudes toward CSR, assuming that those students will be the managers of tomorrow. In this sense, the main objective of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of students toward the role of business education in preparing them to make decisions affecting social needs. Specifically, the main research questions we address in this paper are: What are the business students' attitudes towards education's role in addressing social values and needs? What is the students' perception of what business education's role in addressing social issues is and what it should be? Do the students' gender impact on students' attitudes?

The present paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we present the theoretical background of the paper, and then we describe the methodological aspects of the research and set out the results. Finally, we discuss our main conclusions and implications of the study.

2 THE LITERATURE

The current conception of CSR is very bound to the strategic conception of the company and the stakeholder theory or groups of interest ([6]; [7]; [8]). Therefore, the company will guarantee its survival and growth when the interests of the different groups that converge in the same one, agree: employees, shareholders, suppliers, clients, social community, etc. According to Freeman [9], the main feature that characterizes the literature on CSR is the biggest emphasis that has put on in the satisfaction of those stakeholders that traditionally had been fewer considered. Basically, community and employees, in front of the group of the proprietors whose objectives had constituted the main concern traditionally –shareholder model-. At the present time, it is broadly accepted the idea that the maximization of the shareholder's value is perfectly compatible with the satisfaction of the other people also affected by corporate policies and practices. In practice, a number of studies have been carried out to determine the correlation between CSR and corporate financial performance. From those, an increasing number show a positive correlation between the social responsibility and financial performance of corporation ([10]; [11]). The stakeholder vision sustains that the government of the company is a complex process of negotiation that seeks to balance the interests of all the implied groups. The adoption of approaches of CSR allows the companies to solve conflicts and to distribute the value created among the different groups of interest. Stakeholder theory appears to offer a useful framework for studying the relationship between business and society and, more specifically, the concept of CSR.

Literature suggests that business school emphasis on CSR can indeed make a difference in student attitudes. Business courses have been found to stimulate student concern for the obligation of business to act for social good [12]. White and Montgomery [13] claim that colleges are among the best places to encourage the development of internal principles that value the rights of others. Boyd [14] concludes that instruction exposing students to the social impact of corporate actions can substantially speed the rate of their moral development. Business and society courses have been shown to help students define and evaluate the importance of social issues [15]. The broad psychological literature suggests that education constitutes one of the most consistent and powerful correlates of moral judgment development [16].

The training of business students in business ethics and CSR issues is important to prepare them to assume responsible roles in society. Even less studied than the importance of business links to society is whether students believe business schools should educate them about them. Business education literature lacks data on students' attitudes towards such education. Consistent with this, in the present research we have taken as reference the work of Sleeper et al. [17] and the scale that these authors developed to assess student perceptions regarding (B)usiness (E)ducation's (R)ole in addressing (S)ocial (I)ssues (BERSI). In fact, in the future research section of this article, authors noted that "the scale and findings reported here need to be replicated in a variety of other business school settings to provide generalizability to the study's findings. Suggested pedagogical applications need to be adapted and reported". It is in this context that we develop our research.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

The sample of our investigation consisted of 124 Business students of a Spanish public university (Universitat Jaume I). The students were in the last course of the degree. The total number of students enrolled in this last course was 190. Thus it was obtained a response rate of 65%, which is considered acceptable for the purposes of this research. Concerning to gender distribution, 48 (39%) were male and 75 (61%) female (in 1 of the cases the gender was not pointed out).

We have focused our study on the attitudes of students toward the role of business education in preparing them to make decisions affecting social needs. As we have previously pointed out, we have used the scale developed by Sleeper et al. [17] to assess student perceptions regarding business education's role in addressing social issues (BERSI). We wrote the items in Likert scale format using a five-point response scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In addition, and in a complementary way, we have also attempted to assess the student perceptions regarding these topics in the business studies that they are currently carrying out. The questionnaire used in the survey was translated from English to Spanish in order to achieve a better understanding by participating students. The business students' responses were obtained in the classroom.

4 RESULTS

Prior to assess the student perceptions regarding BERSI scale, students were asked about the contribution that different institutions have on their formation in aspects related to ethics. This question was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important). A summary of the results is presented in Table 1. According to the answers, the students surveyed similarly evaluated the importance to family and public institutions (3.57), somewhat less to the social context (3.42) and business context (3.39) and gave an assessment significantly lower to public institutions (2.873). These results allow us to confirm the high consideration of educational institutions with respect to the formation of students in moral and ethical aspects.

Table 1. Contribution of different institutions to the education of people in the area of ethics

	Item mean	Item SD
Family	3.57	1.23
Social context (friends, etc.)	3.42	0.98
Educational institutions	3.57	0.96
Business context	3.39	1.11
Public authorities	2.83	1.01

Table 2 shows the results for the assessment of student perceptions regarding business education's role in addressing social issues. Each of the nine items in the BERSI scale was answered with a five-point scale, from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Most of the values of the items of the scale (seven of nine) are above the scale midpoint (3). Moreover, the mean value of the scale is set to 3.46. Similar to the study of Sleeper et al. [17], the results indicate that the students interviewed are quite positively disposed to the idea that business education should encompass substantial coverage of social issues. Especially high values are shown in items such as "business studies should prepare students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders" or "business education should require students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility".

Table 2. Business education's role in social issues (BERSI) scale evaluation results (what it should be in the business studies)

	Item Mean	Item SD
Learning to help others should be an important part of business education	3.10	1.01
Business education should require students become involved in service projects	3.66	0.90
Business education should prepare students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders	4.20	0.91
Business education should encourage students to help needy people in their communities	2.90	1.08
Business educations should offer opportunities for students to increase their understanding of community issues	3.60	0.94
A good business education should make students aware of the needs of less fortunate citizens	3.32	1.12
Business school graduates should know how to help solve social problems	3.48	0.98
Business education should require students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility	3.97	0.85
Business courses should include topics on discrimination	2.91	1.08
Mean value of the scale	3.46	0.67

In a complementary way we also assess student perceptions, according their experience, regarding the scale items about what business studies really are (Table 3). In this case, the values of all items of the scale are below the scale midpoint (3). The most outstanding conclusion, observing tables 2 and 3, resides in the existence of important differences among the student perceptions regarding business education's role in addressing social issues (what it should be) and their perceptions about its present role (what it really is). This gap should denote certain disapproval, on the part of the business students, with regard to the current coverage of social issues by business education.

Table 3. Business education's role in social issues (BERSI) scale evaluation results (what it really is in the business studies)

	Item mean	Item SD
Learning to help others is an important part of business education	2.31	0.97
Business education requires students become involved in service projects	2.44	0.97
Business education prepares students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders	2.73	0.97
Business education encourages students to help needy people in their communities	1.83	0.84
Business education offers opportunities for students to increase their understanding of community issues	2.35	0.91
Business education makes students aware of the needs of less fortunate citizens	2.17	1.00
Business school graduates know how to help solve social problems	2.40	0.99
Business education requires students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility	2.92	1.05
Business courses include topics on discrimination	1.67	0.88
Mean value of the scale	2.31	0.67

We also analyzed the student perceptions regarding business education's role in addressing social issues from a gender perspective (table 4) using ANOVA method. Although in most cases the assessments were higher for women (in 6 of the 9 items), only in two of them there were significant differences. Specifically it comes to the following items: "business studies should prepare students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders", and "business education should require students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility". These were just the items of the scale with higher values, as we have noted above. It is about those items in which there are elements more closely related to the field of management, such as leadership or corporate social responsibility. Similar to study of Sleeper et al. [17], female students exhibited higher BERSI scores, on average, than did male students, reflecting a stronger tendency among women than men to agree that business schools should address social issues in their curricula. This result is in line with previous studies which suggest that women may be more identified with social and ethical issues as compared with men ([18]; [19]; [20]; [21]).

Moreover, we also analyze the possible existence of significant differences between men and women as regards the assessment of the scale items about what business studies really are (Table 5). In this respect, and as shown in this table 1, no significant differences for any of the items of the scale were identified.

Table 4. Business education's role in social issues (BERSI) scale evaluation results (what it should be in the business studies) from a gender perspective

	Gender	Item mean	F-test
Learning to help others should be an important part of business education	Male	3.08	0.041
	Female	3.12	
Business education should require students become involved in service projects	Male	3.56	1.251
	Female	3.75	
Business education should prepare students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders	Male	3.90	9.135***
	Female	4.39	
Business education should encourage students to help needy people in their communities	Male	2.88	0.050
	Female	2.92	
Business education should offer opportunities for students to increase their understanding of community issues	Male	3.65	0.173
	Female	3.57	
A good business education should make students aware of the needs of less fortunate citizens	Male	3.30	0.029
	Female	3.33	
Business school graduates should know how to help solve social problems	Male	3.52	0.051
	Female	3.48	
Business education should require students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility	Male	3.77	4.342**
	Female	4.09	
Business courses should include topics on discrimination	Male	2.98	0.394
	Female	2.85	

p < 0,05; *p < 0,01

Table 5. Business education's role in social issues (BERSI) scale evaluation results (what it really is in the business studies) from a gender perspective

	Gender	Item mean	F-test
Learning to help others is an important part of business education	Male	2.29	0.054
	Female	2.33	
Business education requires students become involved in service projects	Male	2.44	0.027
	Female	2.47	
Business education prepares students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders	Male	2.69	0.308
	Female	2.79	
Business education encourages students to help needy people in their communities	Male	1.81	0.068
	Female	1.85	
Business education offers opportunities for students to increase their understanding of community issues	Male	2.48	1.347
	Female	2.28	
Business education makes students aware of the needs of less fortunate citizens	Male	2.40	3.789
	Female	2.04	
Business school graduates know how to help solve social problems	Male	2.54	1.472
	Female	2.32	
Business education requires students to study issues concerning corporate social responsibility	Male	2.90	0.111
	Female	2.96	
Business courses include topics on discrimination	Male	1.73	0.297
	Female	1.64	

p < 0,05; *p < 0,01

5 CONCLUSIONS

Considering the various business scandals that took place two decades ago, the importance of business studies for creating more social leaders is rising. Higher education institutions influence the perception that students have of companies and their responsibilities to society. In the present research, we have presented the results of a survey of undergraduate business students built to assess their perceptions regarding business education's role in addressing social issues. The findings of this research are consistent with the results of the work of Sleeper et al. [17], and suggest that students consider relevant the social issues in the contents offered in business education. As these authors noted, "this apparent movement in student acceptance of a role for social issues education may indicate that these students have become sensitized to corporate social contexts from increasingly public and socially destructive corporate abuses". Additionally, the findings of our study provide support, though limited, for the literature that female students were relatively more concerned than male students with the business education's role in addressing social issues.

However, our study goes further to consider the assessment of students about the role that education actually is exerting in addressing social issues. The results show significantly lower values when we compare them with the assessment that students make about the role that business education should play. These findings imply, therefore, a significant gap between what is perceived and what is desired in the question of the role of business education in addressing social issues.

The fact that most students are receptive to the relationship between business and social issues should encourage universities to consider a pedagogical response that results in the design of subjects related to business ethics and corporate social responsibility.

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