



FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

Implementing the social dimension of Corporate Responsibility:

**A study in the Australian university
context**

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Abstract

Engaging with corporate responsibility (CR) is a challenge facing the modern organisation and one that poses both risk and opportunity. CR is generally understood to be an approach to business practice that balances environmental, social and economic dimensions. In response to calls from other CR researchers, the purpose of this thesis is to develop a fine grained understanding of the social dimension of CR. The research endeavours to provide a deeper understanding of the social dimension of CR in order to identify the areas that influence the planning and implementation of change towards this dimension of CR in the university context. In particular the thesis examines expectations around social responsibility as well as the definition and operationalisation of this dimension of CR within an Australian university.

In order to explore these issues a qualitative approach is taken that utilises a single case study design. The university sector has been chosen as the context of the study as its implicit history is founded in social responsibility, particularly in terms of its role in relation to moral responsibility. The research draws on insights from a number of strands of organisational theory including stakeholder theory, organisation development and change, resistance theory, resource based view and institutional theory. This multidimensional approach is taken as it is argued that using multiple theories may help to explain the findings of the research more accurately than if a single theory were used.

The findings of the research are multifaceted. In early chapters a qualitative meta-analysis is undertaken of the corporate responsibility literature in order to identify definitions of social responsibility. From this analysis an organising framework is developed that provides a normative account of how the social elements of CR are defined and interpreted in the literature and more fully investigates the individual elements that make up this dimension of CR. This framework is the foundation against which the remainder of the thesis is based. It represents a hitherto unrealised attempt to systematically define the social dimension of CR from an academic perspective. A deeper understanding of this framework is then developed by exploring how these elements are operationalised and interpreted by participants at one Australian university. The findings suggest that the role and understanding of CR is poorly defined and that the complex nature of universities makes a coordinated and systematic approach to CR implementation problematic. The findings further suggest that the social dimension of CR is important to stakeholders and plays a key role in universities, but interviews with participants suggest that the implementation of social responsibility currently lacks coordination. To develop more of an understanding of why this is the case, the thesis goes on to explore what is driving change towards social responsibility in the

case university and where the barriers and areas of resistance to change lie. The findings from this part of the thesis are important as they help to show where potential problems might arise for universities that are attempting to implement social responsibility.

The culmination of the findings from the thesis are presented in the final chapter where seven emergent recommendations are considered in detail. These recommendations encapsulate the issues that appear to influence the implementation of social responsibility in the university context. They draw on both the qualitative findings of the research as well as the organisational theories that have influenced it. In particular the recommendations seek to provide a contribution to both theory and practice in terms of building on existing work that has been undertaken with regard to social responsibility in universities, as well as offering some ideas about planning and implementing CR in the university context.

This thesis makes four main contributions to the body of knowledge. Firstly, it provides an in-depth exploration of the implementation of CR within the university context. The approach taken has been to bring together a number of theoretical influences in order to identify the factors that appear to be important in the implementation of CR. A second contribution comes in the form of the development of an organising framework that defines the various elements of the social dimension of CR, thus responding to calls found in the literature for a more systematic and robust investigation of the elements of social responsibility in organisational settings. Thirdly, it addresses a gap in the research into the operationalisation of CR in universities. Finally, an important contribution of the research is in the development of eight theoretical implications as well as seven practice based recommendations which emerged from the research findings and suggest the issues that should be considered by managers and policy makers when implementing the social dimension of CR in the university context.

Overall the thesis offers recommendations about the role that social responsibility appears to play in universities. The findings suggests that CR cuts across all parts of the organisation and should therefore be embedded into strategy, planning and evaluation over time in order to ensure it remains central to the core functions and values of the organisation, and to the sector as it continues to change and evolve.

Declaration

I certify that:

1. the work in this thesis is entirely my own original work, except where indicated or appropriately acknowledged,
2. this work has not been previously submitted, in whole or part, for any other degree at this or any other university
3. the research presented in this thesis was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Macquarie University Sydney. (Approval Number: *HE31JUL2009-D00071*)

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Publication

During the course of this project, the following public presentation was made based on the work presented in this thesis:

Le Roy, C. & Benn, S. 2010. Unpacking the “social” element of corporate responsibility: The case of the higher education sector. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting 2010 (Dare to Care)*, Montreal: Canada.

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