Cooperative Education: Mixed of Skill Enhancements and Social Responsibilities

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Abstract
This paper shares the idea of creating a cooperative education programme that mixes skill enhancements and social responsibilities through university-industry collaborations. The idea focuses on the roles and responsibilities played by the university and industry in enhancing students’ hands-on skills and bridging them with the nearest communities in social activities. Some existing similar programmes related to skill enhancements and community services activities are compared and a new programme that mixed of both is proposed.

Keyword: Cooperative education, corporate social responsibility, university students, university-industry collaboration.

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is one of the committed programmes by business entities in the business world. CSR, at the basis, is a programme that encourages business entities to execute their operations ethically and to minimise waste on communities and environment. Subsequently, business entities can gain economic benefit continuously as the price of their engagement on the CSR programme. The CSR has been defined by The World Business Council for Sustainable Development in 2001 as a business commitment that contributes to sustainable economic development through team work with employees and their representatives such as families, local and public communities, to improve the quality of life by means of beneficial ways for businesses and development (Jamali, 2006).

A case study by Nur Diana Hidayati (2011) on four public companies in Indonesia revealed that the investigated business entities commit to the CSR for the beneficial of the business. Among the reasons of their commitment on the CSR include: to increase the reputation as good companies for citizen, to sustain their business and to create mutual benefit relationship between
the company and the community. Similar study by Hoivik (2011) provided some insights about the significance of CSR to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Norway. The CSR has been regarded as an important knowledge to the SMEs in order to strengthen the expectations of their main stakeholders and to foster a financially and socially responsible business. Therefore, serious actions were discussed and implemented to embed the understanding of CSR into business strategy, business innovation, personal development and continuous learning of the SMEs.

The continuous efforts to overcome the scepticism of CSR in business world should be reflected in university courses. Leigh (2004) listed some of CSR modules at universities in the United Kingdom which include Business Ethics and Social Responsibility module (Nottingham University), Social Accounting module (Huddersfield University), Ethical and Environmental Reporting module (Glasgow University) and MBA in Corporate Social Responsibility (Nottingham University). Also, Leigh (2004) gave the details on the effort of Accounting and Finance Department of De Montfort University to incorporate interdisciplinary concepts of accounting and accountability as sustainable development and corporate social responsibility as a module of a final year student. The module aims to assimilate the knowledge of CSR in business and critically examine the role of accountant in real business activities. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) offers various types of CSR programmes as either credited or non-credited module. Most of these programmes, as understood by the authors, gave great focus on humanitarian volunteerism and community development including donation for the poor and support programmes for people at the rural areas.

Centre of University-Industry Collaboration (CUIC) at the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is the centralised centre for the management of collaborations between the university and industries. Also, the centre is responsible to make an arrangement for the students to organisations (both government sectors and private sectors) via cooperative education, which is termed practicum in the university. The centre manages almost 4,500 final year students annually for the cooperative education of three colleges namely (i) Arts and Sciences, (ii) Business and (iii) Law, Government and International Studies. The module of cooperative education in UUM is offered at the end of the study and it takes about 4 to 6 months training at the identified organisations, except for Law that takes four weeks training. The cooperative education is compulsory for most undergraduate studies which contribute to 8 to 12 credits hours.

This paper introduces a special cooperative education programme runs by a smart partnership between CUIC and some public listed companies in Malaysia. The execution of the cooperative education, takes as its core the notion of CSR and business, aims to sustain the development and to create more competitive advantage for the companies. As for CUIC, this programme stimulates research and consultation which further beneficial for the centre to become centre of excellence for industries (ICoE).

2. Areas of Corporate Social Responsibility in Malaysia

All public listed companies in Malaysia are encouraged to disclose their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to public. On December 2006, Bursa Malaysia launched a CSR Framework as a guide for public listed companies in implementing and reporting on CSR.
Although there are varieties of programmes, modules and trainings about CSR, the framework lists four focal areas for CSR practices:

**CSR on environment** – it covers operations of business in such a way reduce the consumption and waste and to create further understanding on the importance of conserving and protecting the environment. Example approaches include awareness programmes about green cities or cleanliness, sharing of educational articles and nature activities with children.

**CSR on workplace** – activities commonly attempt to maintain high standards of recruitment, development and retention of employees via employee volunteerism, health, safety and welfare, sports and wellness programmes, employee training and employees’ communication channels. Other activities stimulate innovation for green business and technology.

**CSR on community** – it based on company investment to communities such as donation of money, time, products, services, influence, management knowledge, technology, experts and other resources to make a positive contribution to the deserving local communities.

**CSR on marketplace** – the activities cover good collaborations among stakeholders in the marketplace to support the market with good products, engaging in ethical procurement, enhance business collaborations and organisation frequent dialogues. The stakeholders include suppliers, customers (investors, fund managers, financial institutions), participating organisations, government departments and agencies, regulators and industry associations.

3. The Creation of the CSR Cooperative Education

CUIC designs a CSR cooperative education programme to enhance collaboration between CUIC and public listed companies (PLCs). The enhancement refers to frequent dialogues and discussions between the two entities in: (i) creating module and training for the students and CSR activities (at least one) for the four focal areas namely environment, workplace, community and marketplace, (ii) sharing of expertise and technology in the CSR programme, (iii) contributing to an agree amount of fund to finance the CSR programme. By strengthening the collaboration, CUIC believes more knowledge and technology sharing can be made which brings both CUIC and PLCs to achieve various research-based decision makings for sustaining the business.

Also, CUIC uses this platform to equip talented students with recent advancement in business management and to promote them for better employability. The CSR cooperative module is designed together with PLCs in an attempt to instil added talent (knowledge and skills) among the students. The implementation of this programme uses a structured method that combines mentoring-based education with practical work experience. The CSR cooperative education programme is conducted via the following steps:

**Step 1: Identification of CSR programme**
CUIC and PLC identify at least one suitable CSR programme to be executed. The choice of CSR merely looks into PLC’s internal and
external focuses and it impacts towards sustainable development of organisational culture, finance, social influence and environment.

Step 2: Design of specific CSR module
CUIC selects some experts among lecturers in UUM to design a specific module for the identified CSR programme. A process of designing the module is based on the Kolb (1984) learning cycle that allows for students to experience, to reflect themselves, to apply concepts and theories and to plan to change the usefulness of CSR in business world. The module also utilises the work-based learning environment to engage students in critical thinking exercises. Next, the module is presented to PLC to identify cost, duration time of implementation and facilities.

Step 3: Selection of students and mentor
CUIC selects a number of students via face-to-face interview. Each student is attached to a mentor, chosen among lecturers from her undergraduate study. Meanwhile, the PLC nominates a staff to supervise at least a student when the student is undergoing the work-based training at the PLC.

Step 4: Work-based training at the PLC
Students undergo the work-based training at the PLC for at least 4 months. During this period, they involve in managerial tasks in executing the CSR programme to the target group depending on the focal area of the CSR. Students need to conduct SWOT analysis or/and need analysis of the programme as an exposure to them to grasp the understanding of knowledge of CSR. Students receive advice from mentor and may conduct discussion with staff of PLC. Meanwhile, CUIC will organise some trainings for the employees at the PLC if the PLC does not have experts to execute the intention CSR programme.

Step 5: Continuous monitoring
Both assignable lecturer and PLC’s staff are responsible to monitor the student throughout the attachment at the PLC. At the end, they must evaluate the performance of the student. Meanwhile, the performance of the CSR programme is monitored and evaluated by the PLC.

In general, CUIC-PLCs collaborate closely throughout the programme for conducting the CSR programme and educating the participated students. The needs and collaborations between CUIC, public listed companies and companies are demonstrated in Fig. 1.
The module of the CSR cooperative programme contains two major parts: (i) common knowledge and training and (ii) specific knowledge and training. The common knowledge and training instil common management and business skills to students where they, in general, have to

- Identify issues related PLC’s capacity to commit in CSR.
- Describe the CSR activities that the PLC planned to cover.
- Analyse the CSR activities in a sense of how the activities may give some implications (tangible and intangible) to the organisation and community.

The specific knowledge and skills differs depending on the needs of the CSR programme. For example, CSR programme that attempts to give basic entrepreneurial skills to the origin (*orang asli*) should consider the use of pictures, tools and more hands-on activities to deliver the knowledge rather than workshops and talks. Therefore, students should be equipped with some knowledge to understand the behaviour and background of the target community before executing the CSR activities.

4. The Evaluation

The evaluation of the CSR programme is mainly performed by the PLC as they need to look into some aspects relate to business performance, reputation, added value to employees and many internal and external focuses. This issue is not going to be delivered in details in this paper.

However, the focus of the evaluation is centralised to the successful of the programme to instil recent management skills to students and to identify some added values from the students. The evaluation process endeavours to balance between conceptual outcomes and outcome measure as the CSR cooperative education has to meet the needs of the academic programme and the expectation of the PLC. Therefore, the evaluations on students’ performance are made based on
(i) judgment of their improvement in soft skills (e.g. communication, teamwork, leadership, time management etc.) which is measured via five-point Likert scale and (ii) technical skills (e.g. competency in critical thinking, preparing SWOT analysis etc.) which are based on report, paper work and other tangible evidences.

5. Summary

The programme provides a platform for tripartite engagement and allows knowledge sharing (theories and practices) between university, PLC and students. Students get benefit to enhance their managerial knowledge and skills especially in CSR hence leads to increase their employability. The work-based experience exposes students with real business activities and mentoring system gives students platform to discuss, to identify and to bridge the theories and practices. Meanwhile, the PLC directly involve in CSR for developing future talent among graduates by providing working experience at their place. They also get benefits via knowledge and technology sharing from the university. CUIC has started this programme with one PLC in early 2012, and in future, more PLCs are going to be invited to engage in this cooperative programme. CUIC will conduct some analyses in future to measure the effectiveness of this programme and may take some necessary actions to improve the programme.

6. References

Bursa Malaysia (http://www.bursamalaysia.com)


