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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES DURING PANDEMIC: ANALYSIS OF CUSTOMER ISSUES

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Abstract

In the new challenging time, corporate social responsibility has become a central issue for universities to get through the crisis caused by COVID-19. Under the crisis success of universities is directly dependent on their students' level of satisfaction. The higher their rate of satisfaction is the greater are the chances to succeed. Thus, one of the central tasks for universities is to deepen engagement with their students, and to make steps that will define their reputation and goodwill tomorrow. This prerequisite underlies the motivation to study the CSR strategies universities apply to provide assistance to their students. The research was conducted in the form of a content analysis, with the evidence being gathered via the content analysis procedure. The sample of seven regional universities was explored. The information of the universities' official websites was analyzed to identify the aspects of consumer issues, caused by pandemic situation and to outline supporting activities the universities are engaged into to provide their students with safety and sense of belonging. One of the most obvious results to emerge from this study is that the universities demonstrate their success in tackling the challenging issues. Moreover, it was observed that some universities not only have reacted to challenging issues during this crisis, but also have proactively engaged in various CSR activities, particularly those that can offer immediate help and assistance.

1. Introduction

Currently the concept of sustainable development in Russia is taking shape institutionally through appropriate changes in the legislative, consumer, educational, and communication systems. In Barić (2017) it is demonstrated that the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has transformed, in its time of existence, from the forced necessity to the strategic business model. Although it may seem that CSR is superfluous in the university context, since the whole mission of a university is to serve society through education, the relevance of CSR implementation in university management has been repeatedly confirmed by the practice of domestic and foreign universities (Nejati et al., 2011). Believe that there is a broader reason which underlies the use of CSR in the higher education setting. The authors discuss in their paper that the universities are evolving together with society and are transforming into research organizations which educate responsible humans, develop state-of-the-art knowledge to solve the global issues and share the knowledge so that it can make a positive contribution to society. This and the fact, that students are future leaders of business and government, and their future decisions and behavior determine the framework for sustainable development of the country, can be the major reasons that underlie why universities are expected to be involved in CSR and reporting it to society.

But there are several more reasons that motivate universities to commit to their social responsibilities. Since there is a direct link between CSR and organization's stakeholders, their relationship is a paramount factor that exerts the success of the organization. The research of Chapleo and Simms (2010) indicates that success of a university is often dependent on a broader range of customers than many organisations that operate in private sector. The authors demonstrate that customers (students and their families) represent the group of stakeholders that is of the ultimate significance in terms of whether they directly affect student recruitment, retention and satisfaction. Currently the situation with attracting applicants is aggravated due to government cuts to Higher Education funding. The universities have to increasingly compete for students. Concurrently, parents who can afford paying for their children's education became more selective.

As it is argued in Barić (2017), CSR provides sustainable competitive advantage to an organization. This statement is in line with the findings of Simpson and Aprim (2018), who state that "CSR may be a source of competitive advantage in attracting applicants" (p.11). Moreover, its elements, whether economic, social or environmental, play a determining role in their preference for a particular organization.

The current and prospective students belong to millennials and generation Z, who according to Klimkiewicz and Oltra (2017), "are highly sensitive towards CSR issues" (p. 449). In the best way possible it was shown in the recent report by Deloitte in which younger consumers demonstrated the strongest belief in corporate responsibility (Deloitte, 2020).

In terms of hierarchical importance of CRS aspects for students the evidence are given in the research by (da Silva Junior et al., 2019), who have found that the most important dimensions of CSR for undergraduate students are: the philanthropic, the ethical, the legal, and the economic.

Thus, universities have to practice CSR and actively report it in order to make a better image among its current and prospective customers. Reporting CSR practices strengthens the university's brand recognition, which in turn, according to an econometric study by Zemtsov et al. (2015) is one of the "key factors for applicants in choosing the higher educational institution" (p. 201).

Under normal times the consumer issue category, in the context of universities, is considered in terms of providing education and accurate information for students who were enrolled or planning to get enrolled in the university. As it was found in Nejati et al. (2011), more often than not universities provide "sufficient information on various aspects of pursuing education from admission procedure to cost of livings, as well as available financial resources for both current and prospective students" (p. 447).

2. Problem Statement

However, the current situation with pandemic creates challenges for universities to remain committed to their CSR efforts. It is even more challenging because, according to the recent study of Manuel and Herron (2020), crisis "changes consumers' perspective on how to pursue higher social and self-actualization needs" (p. 235). The analysis of the literature (Figure 1) revealed that among the weakest spots in consumer issues of CSR in higher education the following ones can be named:
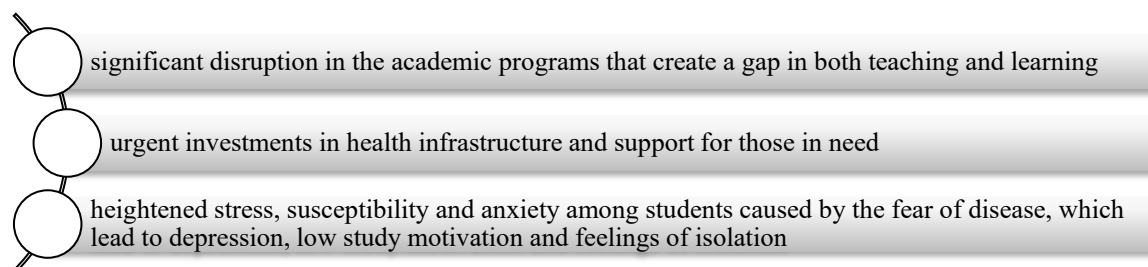
significant disruption in the academic programs that create a gap in both teaching and learning

urgent investments in health infrastructure and support for those in need

heightened stress, susceptibility and anxiety among students caused by the fear of disease, which lead to depression, low study motivation and feelings of isolation

Figure 1. Urgent CSR issues in higher education institutions during pandemic
Source: author based on (Islam et al., 2020; İnce et al., 2020; Săveanu & Săveanu, 2020).

In Islam, Barna et al. (2020) the remedies for these problems are suggested. The authors recommend that "faculties, as well as university authorities, should stay connected with the students using social media platforms and motivate them to move forward together during this difficult time". The idea of developing "student support networks during the times of crisis for promoting new forms of positive engagement and social resilience that benefit both students and their learning, university communities and society more broadly" is supported in İnce et al. (2020). Under normal circumstances listening to customer feedback is a core task for an organization. In times of crisis, keeping constant and open communication with students is way of maintaining a dependable atmosphere and comfort for them. Understanding of that university wants to know how they are doing can keep students engaged and gives the feeling of connection. No doubt, that CSR efforts are rarely more needed than during a crisis, which is the time for universities to innovate their CSR efforts and to shift towards more genuine and authentic CSR.

3. Research Questions

The CSR practices of universities towards their customers during pandemic are still extensively unexplored. Therefore, the questions that this paper tries to answer are the following:

Do universities demonstrate special concern about customer issues during pandemic?

How many of the universities are active under the pandemic towards their students' health, educational, social and emotional support?

To what extent are they currently involved in supporting activities and committed to their customers?

To answer these research questions, this study examines the responsibilities of universities towards their students during pandemic by examining the issue among 7 universities through analyzing their website content. In the lack of significant previous studies which comprehensively discuss the research questions, this paper tackles this problem and provide an image of CSR status in the consumer issue aspect among leading universities in Samara region.

4. Purpose of the Study

Under crisis universities are urged to communicate empathy, understanding and support and should first focus on the people they depend on most, their students. The absolute top priority should be ensuring students' comfort and safety. In the light of recent events, it would be extremely narrow-minded to ignore the importance of CSR practices that could provide stakeholders and society with support and ensure the future thriving of an organization. In the context of higher education it gives proactive efficiency growth, by increased level of customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. Thus, this study aims at analyzing specific customer issues in universities of Samara region during the pandemic of Covid-19. This study set out to investigate if the universities shift towards providing their students with health, educational, social and emotional support. The task of this paper is therefore twofold. Firstly, to focus on university responses to the pandemic through CRS practices. Secondly, to understand how potent universities are to tackle challenging issues.

5. Research Methods

This study employs a content analysis methodology to analyze the websites of the top universities of Samara region. Content analysis represents one of the most suitable tools to analyze contents of a website. A study of Nejati et al. (2011) provides a good example of this method application. In this paper the content of the universities' official websites is analyzed to identify the aspects of consumer issues, caused by pandemic situation, as one of CSR core areas. Moreover, the related web pages of the universities (including news, media, department web pages, etc.) are studied. The area of consumer issues was selected for reporting in this paper based on the guidelines provided in the draft of ISO 26000 (ISO/DIS 26000, 2009).

The study sample includes Samara State Transport University (SSTU), Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education (SSUSE), Samara National Research University named after academician S.P. Korolev (Samara University), Samara State Medical University (SMU), the Povolzhskiy State University of Telecommunications and Informatics (PSUTI), Samara State Technical University (SSTU) and Samara State University of Economics (SSEU).

6. Findings

The findings of this study show that the universities of Samara region have all taken new challenging issues of CSR seriously and demonstrate this in their websites. The findings show that all the 7 universities

under study have covered the issues of "health support", "educational and administrative support" and "emotional support" on their websites. The coverage is different in form and quantity though, and sometimes the announcement of their involvement is not direct. Figure 2 summarizes the research findings.

Health support issues	Educational and administrative support issues	Emotional support issues
• Samara University • SSTU • SMU • PSUTI • SSEU • SSTU • SSUSE	• Samara University • SSTU • SMU • PSUTI • SSEU • SSTU • SSUSE	• Samara University • SSTU • SMU • PSUTI • SSEU • SSTU • SSUSE

Figure 2. Presence of urgent CSR customer issues areas on university websites

Source: author.

Fortunately, it was observed that some universities not only have reacted to challenging issues during this crisis, but also have proactively engaged in various CSR activities, particularly those that can offer immediate help and assistance.

For example, universities have provided their students with personal protective masks and hand sanitizers for free, has bought and installed expensive bactericide recirculators, etc. Content analysis of the universities' websites has demonstrated that all of them managed to show a conscious and earnest approach to CSR practices to provide their customers' safety and comfort.

Figure 3 illustrates various practices the universities have been applying to meet customers' needs and wants.
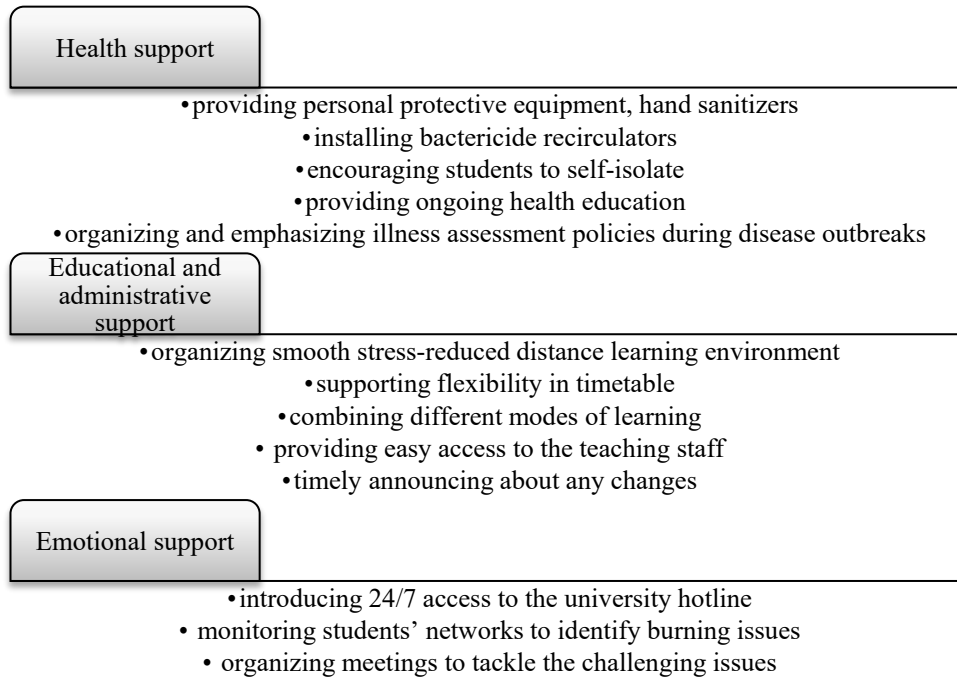
Health support

- providing personal protective equipment, hand sanitizers
- installing bactericide recirculators
- encouraging students to self-isolate
- providing ongoing health education
- organizing and emphasizing illness assessment policies during disease outbreaks

Educational and administrative support

- organizing smooth stress-reduced distance learning environment
- supporting flexibility in timetable
- combining different modes of learning
- providing easy access to the teaching staff
- timely announcing about any changes

Emotional support

- introducing 24/7 access to the university hotline
- monitoring students' networks to identify burning issues
- organizing meetings to tackle the challenging issues

Figure 3. Common CSR customer practices of Universities during pandemic

Source: author.

Overall, the study shows that all of the studied universities are involved in CSR customer issues to a certain level and announce this through their website content, specific pages designed for media, etc.

7. Conclusion

The paper shows that all the universities under study are engaged in new urgent customer issues and announce it in their website content. Their practices are intertwined with social responsibility. The universities demonstrate their potential to tackle challenging issues. This helps to form mutual understanding, keep the customer satisfaction at high level and provide the society with the responsible leaders of tomorrow.

A limitation of the study is the generalizability of its results. Although the study is limited to the urgent customer issues in CSR activities without any exploration of the effectiveness and results of such activities, it represents only a starting point in research of this kind. The future studies may consider this issue. A further study could assess the efficiency of supporting measures taken by universities and their long term effect. In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the CSR issues under the challenging times of crisis. The most evident result to emerge from this study is that universities are on the right track for their success in the long run as they demonstrate a genuine commitment to their students.

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