

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Universities: Towards an Integrative Approach

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Abstract—This paper examines the emerging relationship between CSR and Universities and calls for a more clearly defined goal for universities to involve themselves with the wider world outside academics. By identifying literature as a way of relating to the outside community, this research looks into the ways universities can empower societies to create national identities with clearly defined histories and traditions. Using the example of a university in the Middle East, it examines the way in which universities could pave the way for a wider association of student bodies' with the community to affect an understanding of a nation's literature and, by doing so, create national narratives and identities which are urgently needed in the rapidly changing contemporary scenario.

Index Terms—Corporate social responsibility, universities, Sultan Qaboos University, literary canon, student bodies

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2003, when the University of Adelaide launched its fair-trade practices initiative on campus, it was received with a sense of excitement and expectation in the recognition that the university had, at last, aligned itself with the discourse of community responsibility outside campus and officially become involved with the emerging priorities of the wider world. The university's campaigns veered toward creating awareness of local produce, holding awareness programmes about increasing sustainability within the campus, promoting recycling and liaising with the corporate sector to facilitate the transformation of the university campus into an ecologically and socially responsible one. As one student blogged in response to this initiative: "As the corporate world – once again-materializes and profits from what should not be a sellable idea, this student action serves as a much needed reminder (or restoration of faith) that social responsibility should be an individual conviction that is collectively upheld, not a business 'philosophy' that is strategically implemented" [1]. This can be seen as an early instance of universities' increasing concern with local communities and their involvement with social concerns. It is an involvement which soon established itself as an imperative parameter around which the central concerns of the university administration would revolve.

II. DEFINING THE AREAS OF CSR

In the continuing narrative of corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR) and its increasing centrality in corporate and financial sectors, the involvement of universities has remained in the peripheries. Even today, CSR is widely defined in terms of ethics and commitment that the private sector could initiate in its immediate community, often with an eye at tangible and intangible personal benefits, but studies on the role of the educational sector remain surprisingly low. The limitations of the way in which CSR could establish a framework within which the academic community would establish a relationship between self and society, individual and community, academics and private enterprise, remains, at best, at its germinating stages. What is completely lacking, more particularly, however, is the way in which the academic curriculum outside the established management programmes can be re-viewed to create conditions conducive towards establishing more proactive and dynamic relationships with larger societies. Currently, the most established way of maintaining CSR commitments within the university framework have been in the form of courses, particularly management ones, in which responsibility is taught with a clear eye on the market goals of future business students. The notion that most Arts programmes in the universities, particularly literary ones, remain firmly entrenched in their ivory towers is perhaps not completely unjustified as generations of students continue to be exposed to literary works as productions of imagination and inspiration in far flung areas of the world with little connection to immediate communities, whether of the producer of the text or the recipient, in this case, the students.

III. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

This paper attempts to integrate the research that has been done in the areas of CSR and its relation to universities and other academic institutions and the academic curriculum, particularly of literature, to suggest ways in which the stakeholders and indeed, the owners of this product, of the literature itself, could transform communities and their understanding of their own world by empowering them with skills and generate adequate interest to entrench their understanding of literature into the context of their communities. This attempt is especially interesting in newly emerging societies such as those of the Middle East, particularly the Gulf countries where the histories and national narratives are being presently canonized and contextualized. A case study of an attempt by literature students of the public-funded university of Oman, Sultan Qaboos University, will be projected as an example of the way in which university literary programmes could point to the establishment of specific dynamics in student bodies,

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especially in the way that they articulate the sense of identity creation through internal dialogue and public events. Universally, universities have often been cited as harbingers of change and as such, produce students who could be privileged to initiate such changes within the context of their immediate society. Such an endeavour becomes more marked in this case as the literary production here is not as established and documented as in many other parts of the world and as such, any attempt to formalize the literary history with changing social contexts can only be seen as revolutionary.

IV. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has almost always been interpreted as a business tool taken over ultimately by management gurus whose concern has universally been with branding, image building and, of course, profits of various kinds. Archie Carroll, an acknowledged theoretician in this area defines CSR as being primarily interdisciplinary and states that, at present, the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic areas of CSR are at a point of struggle and constant tension owing to the often contrary pulls of the corporate sector [2]. H.R. Bowen's 1953 study *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* [3] is recognized as being the point of departure for corporate studies shifting to its responsibility to society. It can, in fact, be stated that "this field has grown significantly and today contains a great proliferation of theories, approaches and terminologies" [4]. The history of CSR studies can be traced back to the 1960's in the works of G.A. Steiner [5] who propounded the notion that companies should ultimately also be responsible for the society around them, at times for legal, but more often, for ethical reasons. In the 1970's, the pioneering work of K. Davis [6] and J. B. MacGuire [7] began to introduce the notions of responsibility and profit, establishing the relationship between them more clearly and formally [8]. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the focus shifted to a more sustained definition of the term CSR and its implications in a changing society. In Carroll's phrase, CSR began to be institutionalized and became a legitimate academic area of research including, under its axis, concepts of economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic features. By the new millennium, its development into international and interdisciplinary studies began to emerge with works of Heidi Muijen [9] and Craig Smith [10].

V. INSTITUTIONALIZING CSR IN UNIVERSITIES

In a seminal study of the way in which universities could be used to establish links with public policies, a survey made in 2007 identifies several initiatives and declarations by the United Nations as well as the EU to facilitate the spread of CSR initiatives into the university framework. Leitão and Silva [10] show that these include the declaration of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) that "presents an opportunity for higher education institutions to promote training and

awareness for a more sustainable future," the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) declaration towards "Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training" in social responsibility and the COPERNICUS University Charter for Sustainable Development that establishes the need for studies in sustainability within the European Union. Nejati, Shafaei, Salamzadeh and Daraei [11] identify C.J.C. Jabbour [12] as having worked on the area of sustainability, focusing on the role of individuals in influencing organizations' decisions, particularly in their relation to the community. They go on to identify human rights, labour practices, environment and fair operating practice as important elements constituting the area of social responsibility in education. Panduranga and Nair [13] study the impact of social commitment in universities as involving the various sectors of industry and explore the way in which universities have begun to move to more multidisciplinary areas in order to make learning and research a more immediately relevant and applicable pursuit. As they go on to add: "The Kellogg commission on the future of universities in America emphasized the idea of a revitalized, expanded, and far broader involvement of universities with society". Topal [14] also identifies the central and most significant areas in which CSR is being developed within universities as being those of economic, intellectual, social and cultural capital.

Universities as an entity, therefore, seem to be positioned in a uniquely strategic way to use the public policies that may be in place in most parts of the world, to make use of the educational and technological innovations available to the institutions and affect sustained and effective changes in the immediate and global communities. In a community portal "Sustainable Groove" Richard Goossen suggests that universities are, in fact, platforms for leadership activities and that they can either choose to be followers in the initiatives of corporations or "seize the opportunity to be leaders and adopt CSR as a vital aspect of their competitive advantage" [15]. His suggestion is that universities are already privileged by society, already being in the business of learning instead of profit and can, therefore, frame their position to interact with their stakeholders in an immediate, more effective discourse.

VI. LITERATURE PROGRAMMES IN UNIVERSITIES

With such a framework for a sustained discussion on the nature of CSR and the possibilities for university faculty and stakeholders' involvement, it is inevitable that the programmes of the faculties be re-examined in order to look into the ways in which literary programmes could be changed in a way that could establish a more dynamic rapport with the student community. Panduranga and Nair's observation that universities need to move into more interdisciplinary areas in order to be more connected to the realities of the outside community without compromising on the quality of the education being imparted is central to any discussion on CSR within the university framework. In this context, some specific queries emerge: what could be the role of particular academic programs and departments in continuance of CSR objectives of universities worldwide? Given that an

inclusion of community priorities has emerged as a significant strategy and essential pre-condition for the revitalization of the synergy in the triangle involving faculty-student-community, what could be the ways in which this relationship could be vocalized and made more pertinent in emerging societies? If the cultural component is an important part of the university's sphere of influence it necessarily follows that part of the academic role of the university is to facilitate the emergence of national canons and make possible the establishment and maintenance of symbols and traditions which could define the national narrative.

The notion that the curriculum of English Literature as it is currently taught in most universities worldwide is severely compromised and unrepresentative has been frequently established by such critics as Jan Gorak [16] and Deborah Madsen [17]. The primacy of the western canon and the resultant backlash in many academic universities has been a significant source of discussion over the last few decades. In many parts of the world, this challenge has taken extreme forms such as re-inventing the literary canon while privileging immediate social contexts and allowing for such strategies as translation, contextualization and new historical readings possible. Such attempts at redefining the canon have been exhaustively studied in various other forums, yet the debate between balancing classical literary canons with rising interest in the immediate community have not been successfully accomplished in most universities. It cannot be denied that, part of the responsibility of the university curriculum is to be able to provide a voice for the emerging voices, not just the creative ones but for the ones who are striving to institutionalize these voices. It is in this sense that the social responsibility of the universities could be seen to be immediately relevant as the theoretical assumptions which are etched out in the classrooms could be linked to the real world outside, thus allowing for a more real and dynamic relationship between student readings and the society to which they belong.

VII. USING COMMUNITIES TO CREATE NATIONAL LITERATURES

The importance of creating a platform for local voices, particularly in emerging nations where the opportunities for such dialogue were minimal, is indisputable. In the countries of the Gulf, the attempt continues to be to assert its literatures, as their cultures, identities and histories, into the wider context of world affairs. As these countries transform into fully formed and established nations, the emerging identity is encapsulated in attempts at arriving at such nation building exercises as exploring shared histories, documenting a common past, establishing a link between different, at times, disparate sections of the community and encouraging local languages and dialectics to be studied in order for the concept of the nation to successfully emerge. In this dialectic of making history and living it, the universities of these countries serve a significant role of promoting the discourse of nation building by setting a framework of standards through which the concerns of the society could be addressed.

That the established narrative of English Literature as it is widely taught in most universities worldwide is inadequate can also be summed up by the reactions of Arab students from Middle Eastern countries, especially the Gulf countries, where the national narratives have been subsumed by the overwhelming focus on a literary canon that is alien, not only linguistically but culturally and socially as well. Studies such as those of Obeidat [18], N. Alawi [19] and Al-Shalabi [20] have shown the increasing disconnect felt by middle eastern students towards western literature as it is presently taught because it continues to be seen as an expression of cultural hegemony and power, in fact, as literature of the colonizers. The direct result of studying with such a curriculum, aside from the existing problematics inherent in approaching a western canon has been the need to establish alternate avenues for expressions of more immediate, often local literatures which have hitherto remained outside the purview of mainstream discourse. While the literary curriculum deals with this lacunae in significant ways such as changing methodologies like the focus on intertextuality, it is the initiative of the students to redress this gap that emerges as the most interesting phenomena in this enterprise, catapulting students to being more than knowledge seekers to being, in fact, producers of creative and critical material. This effort on the part of students in this specific context of establishing a literary tradition stands as an example of the way in which CSR may relate itself in university education to the society and the community at large by empowering students to create an alternate canon. This attempt appeals to the need for identity and history in the context of students in the Gulf grappling with the multiple effects of globalization, immediate material comfort and the repercussions of a state brought into limelight without a sustained process of social and cultural development. A specific example may prove this point more accurately.

VIII. A CASE STUDY: SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY

Sultan Qaboos University is the only government funded national university of the Sultanate of Oman. It is a multi-speciality, research oriented institution which aims to encourage nationals to participate in the public discourse of information gathering and making, focusing on various aspects of emerging and historical areas of study. The mission statement of the university indicates the priorities that guide the university. As part of its community initiatives, it promotes the functioning of student bodies "that enrich intellectual, cultural and physical sides of the university community". In its cultural and artistic symposiums section, the deanship announces that the primary point of concern was "the organization of cultural lectures for students, like poetry or literary evening demonstrated by academics from the university or outside visitors" [21]. It is clear, that like most other universities in this region, the university would like to be seen as promoting student initiative, making it possible for youngsters without too much experience in community development owing to limited possibilities in school to be engaged with the seemingly daunting task of developing national canons and histories. The organizations of the university are sufficiently funded, both financially and in

terms of other facilities such as venues and publicity so that they are able to make optimum use of the privilege of being in the national university and participate in activities which, albeit indirectly, impact the cultural development of the nation.

A direct manifestation of the establishment of such societies and organizations in the department of English is in the ETS (The English and Translation Society). This organization, set up entirely by student initiative and continuing support by the administration and peer groups is sponsored by the deanship of the university and partly funded by them but otherwise wholly under the auspices of student bodies. It is characterized by its various subdivisions such as the dramatic society, the creative writing club and most interestingly, the Omani literature awareness group. This group, sustained over four years so far, attempts to centralize the Omani national narrative and grapple with the various facets of this literature which has, so far, largely remained at the threshold of literary margins. The workshops of these students revolve around contextualizing Omani literature in the light of more international writers, focusing on the various genres that define the historical context of its production, influenced as it is by various Islamic, African and sub-continental waves. As such, the society attempts at a re-definition of the concept of Omani literature, sweeping under its umbrella, various aspects of its colonial influences from Zanzibar and the other African countries.

IX. CONTINUING EFFORTS OF STUDENT BODIES

In the continuing effort to showcase local literatures and contextualize them within the framework of a larger Omani situation, the efforts of the ETS continue to move toward studying diverse versions of artistic works, often inviting writers whose discussions revolve around the complexities of artistic composition as well as techniques used to reflect on changing social situations. The ETS has evolved over the last seven years as one of the most vocal and involved groups in the university. In an atmosphere where English is very much a foreign language and where students are very often grappling with the complexities of a variety of genres, the students involved with this society have managed to, not only sustain the interest of increasing number of students in different cohorts, but have also improvised, added and changed their definition of what it means for them to be Omani and the way in which they could situate their literatures in the spectrum of developing nations. Many of the events organized by this student society revolve around the area of national literatures. In an interesting example of living literatures, they have frequently invited poets, fiction writers and bloggers to share their writing with the students. As most of the work they have composed in not yet published, the audience has a throbbing notion of the process of creating history as the presenters share aspects of their creations with them. The sense of pride, of belonging and of shared history is often palpable in such meetings. Eventually, a portion of the work which is studied in the group discussions makes its way outside the university, most often in a newspaper supplement established by former students of the organization. This canonization of local literatures facilitates

the formation of history, helps to establish a past and steers the course of literary activity for the present. With specific models to follow, future writers are able to relate themselves to the continuing tradition of literary writing, made more sustained through discussions and artistic interactions. As a student-participant, Suleiman Al-Harthy said, “these sessions make me very proud to be Omani. I did not know that my country had such a rich tradition because I thought all the writing was religious and oral. I am now inspired to try to write myself.”

The case study of this society is significant in the context of the development of CSR in academic institutions and the more intangible ways in which students from the Arts can contribute to the sustenance and development of local communities. As Leitão says, “(d)espite many factors on the behalf of sustainability and social responsibility, most social and environmental trends have not been effective. However, universities are presently open to promote a sustainable growth strategy. Therefore, the theoretical framework and operational models are being clarified”. The example of one such attempt of a student organization, with the active support of the university, points to the way in which CSR could be connected to the efforts of the university which goes beyond academic responsibilities. This attempt to establish a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship with students and what is largely an oral society into which historical and cultural narratives need to be integrated is a seminal example of the way in which academic involvement can translate into community awareness.

X. CONCLUSION

Student societies have often been seen as expressions of independence, partaking of the society of which it is a part and representing it in more cohesive ways. This kind of volunteerism and activism from almost grassroots levels represents the way in which CSR can be implemented within an academic framework. These efforts double into an initiative to create a canon about local literatures that contextualize, historicize, document and, in effect, form identity and nation. The project of students of this university to voice the histories of the nation is an immediate example of the way in which universities can facilitate community involvement by empowering students to discover individual histories and, as a result, help to re-define nation and society.

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