

Understanding CSR Initiatives Between NFP and Higher Education Institutions in Australia

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Abstract— Addressing the gap between students, graduates, and the industry has been a problem; the students claimed that there seemed to be a scarcity of opportunities for them to upskill and be involved in the industry, likewise for the industry claiming that students, especially recent graduates lacked the skills needed in the job market. Various stakeholders, including the higher education institutions, schools, and not-for-profits (NFP), have been involved in addressing the industry's gap. These have been translated in both short-term and long-term programmes, allowing and encouraging engagements between the students and industry players. This study explored the relationship of CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions and its benefits for all involved participants through reputation and relationship building, including collaborations amongst students (higher education students and high school students involved in the programmes), researchers, industry players, and university institutions. This account was based on the authors' observations and engagements with several NFPs based in Melbourne, Australia, from 2018 to 2020 guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This paper also provided recommendations for all the stakeholders involved to develop further and drive these initiatives.

Keywords— *Collaboration, corporate social responsibility, higher education institution, not-for-profit, and reputation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Findings from academic research and industry trends often mentioned gaps; industry gaps wherein graduates lacked the practical experience or expertise needed in the job market, likewise for graduates claiming that the university institutions and industry lacked in providing relevant pathways, such as volunteering opportunities to address the said gap [1]. Additionally, studies also showed that there were "ceilings", where students, both from higher education institutions and high school students were unable to "break" as they lacked platforms and opportunities to connect with industry players and be involved in the said industries. This is further exacerbated as reports forecasted that unemployment would increase because of the COVID-19 pandemic [2] as inequality of job supplies and demand increases, shifts in the working environment, and the widening gap due to technological advancements.

To address these issues, university institutions have implemented various programmes and initiatives to bridge the gaps mentioned catered for students and their respective fields [3] as the emphasis was given on both soft and hard skills needed in the job market. Similarly, various organisations, such as corporations, non-governmental organisations, not-for-profit (NFP) corporations, among many others, have also taken the initiatives to address the gap. These NFP organisations operate under the education sector and work closely with university institutions, higher education students, and high school students in various fields. Most importantly, several NFPs have focused on bridging the gap with the industry, higher education, and high school students, which incorporated the design-thinking approach, cultivated mentor-mentee relationship, and produced project-based outcomes, as Lecy and Swedlund [4] found that these NFP models have been significant and beneficial for all the parties involved.

Thus, this study explored the relationship of CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions and its benefits for all participants involved through reputation and relationship building, including collaborations amongst students (higher education students and high school students involved in the programmes), researchers, industry players, and university institutions. This paper also provided recommendations for all the stakeholders involved to develop further and drive these initiatives.

This account was based on the authors' engagements with several NFPs based in Melbourne, Australia, from 2018 to 2020. Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, this study focused on Australia, as most NFPs have shifted and implemented their programmes online; thus, initiatives were not necessarily bound by geographical restrictions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework

This paper was guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [5], particularly on knowledge, learning, and motivation as this theory posited that knowledge is constructed based on

social interactions within a knowledge community, which integrates the learners into the learning processes. Further supported by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, the learners are motivated by the knowledge community towards their learning goals and journey. Hence, this view ultimately shapes the teaching implications, which collaborative learning and group work is encouraged while being guided by an educator. The theory was clearly illustrated in each participant's involvement through reputation and relationship building, including collaborations amongst students (higher education students and high school students involved in the programmes), researchers, industry players, and university institutions. The NFPs structured approach with project-based outcomes and particularly for the mentor-mentee relationship demonstrated the sociocultural theory approach, in which both the mentor and mentee were involved throughout the learning process, guided and supported by the mentor and resulted in a collaborative learning effort. Thus, these ideas supported the importance of CSR initiative relationship and benefits between NFPs and higher education institutions.

B. NFP in the Education Sector

The Australian Accounting Standards Board (AASB) defined NFP as a body that provides services to a particular group or community without incurring any profit for its members, shareholders, and the organisation [6]. Philanthropy Australia reported that there are currently 600,000 NFPs, with the most common engagements including religious activities, primary and secondary education, grant-making, social services, and aged care services. The education sector involves kindergartens, schools, universities, industry training organisations, and operates mostly for research purposes and education advancement. Additionally, to stay relevant in competitive environments and address demands from the society, donors, and stakeholders involved, NFPs continuously assess the needs or gaps in knowledge and skills relevant for the current and future market. This also consists of utilising resources and networks to broaden their effectiveness and impact on the community [7].

Correspondingly, NFPs also act as a “mediator” by providing platforms, networking opportunities, linking, and sourcing for relevant parties in their initiatives. For instance, BrainSTEM, a Melbourne-based NFP that runs “Innovation Challenges”, pairs up high school students (mentee) with students from higher education institutions and researchers (mentor) from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field to work on real-life problems and create feasible solutions as part of their programmes [8]. Other NFP organisations, such as Girlworld, In2Science (Victoria), among many others, provide similar initiatives that focus on design-thinking approach, mentor-mentee relationship, and a project-based outcome. These programmes not only offer access or “break the ceiling” between students from high school, higher education institutions, and industry players, they also provide the opportunity to learn and contribute to STEM innovation projects.

C. CSR in Higher Education Institutions

Corporate social responsibility in university institutions focuses on the impacts that the university's operations and activities on its internal and external publics [9]. Nejadi et al. [10] found that university stakeholders, including students, looked beyond university rankings, research publications, and student intakes; however, stakeholders were more focused on how the university can contribute and improve the communities. Thus, universities' engagement with NFPs was seen as one of the university's efforts to promote social responsibility amongst faculty, scholars, deans, staff, students, and external publics based on ethical learning.

In addition to building social responsibility, these initiatives were also part of the institution's portfolio, branding, and recognition among stakeholders and potential students (particularly millennials) as they value these areas when choosing institutions and brands that they engage with. Institutions have been more committed to reduce carbon footprints, improving labour policies, advocating for fair trade, recognising and organising more volunteering in the community, among others.

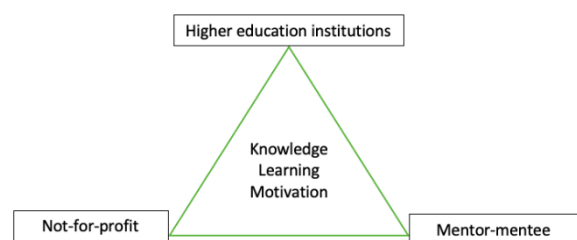


Fig. 1. Using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to illustrate the relationship and benefits of CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions through reputation and relationship building, including collaborations.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an unstructured observation on the author's engagements with several NFPs in Melbourne, Australia, from 2018 to 2020. This method was utilised as observations were made in a more natural setting with an open-ended approach without predetermined categories and classifications [11]. Reoccurring themes were identified and analysed based on the engagements and relationships amongst the stakeholders mentioned.

IV. RESULTS

Based on the observation conducted, this study identified three emerging themes, namely reputation building, relationship building, and collaborations amongst students (higher education students and high school students involved in the programmes), researchers, industry players, and university institutions. Further analysis showed that all

the stakeholders mentioned benefited from the CSR initiatives.

V. DISCUSSION: CSR INITIATIVES BETWEEN NFPs AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

A. Reputation

CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions aid in reputation-building and branding for universities as part of their university social responsibility strategies [12]. Additionally, it would increase their recognition and outreach amongst stakeholders, such as prospective students, parents, employees, board members, among others. These engagements also provided further industry opportunities, which were beneficial for current and future students as they were able to build and improve on both their soft and hard skills relevant to their degree and interests. Both the high school and higher education students benefited from this by building their resume, personal branding, and networking with industry players and researchers. In the long run, these initiatives also empowered both parties as knowledge transfer occurred, and both parties learned from one another throughout the programmes. The NFPs also experienced the spill-over effects from matching students and industry experts, built network, and gained recognition, all of which were important (vital) for the NFPs operations and other programmes for success measurement and its effectiveness in advancing education [4].

B. Relationship

Stelter et al. [13] stated that a trusting and positive relationship between a mentor and mentee was beneficial for both parties involved, albeit mixed experiences were recorded from the mentor-mentee relationship from both parties. Provided with proper training, programme structure, approach, and support given, both mentor and mentee could learn and support one another as both parties further developed their skills, such as networking, mentoring, networking, and other project opportunities, echoing the above idea on reputation-building. Stelter et al. also found that positive mentoring relationship increased the participants' interest and willingness to learn in their field as they were highly likely to venture into more mentor-mentee programmes based on their experiences in learning and engaging with a mentor in their relevant areas. Resultantly, these engagements have bridged the industry and research gap with knowledge transfer occurred from the parties involved as mentors were better informed regarding the student's university learnings and activities, while the mentees were able to familiarise themselves in the workforce and (with) skills needed [14].

C. Collaboration

As high school students, higher education students, and researchers engaged in project-based outcomes, these allowed collaboration and co-creation, leading to lasting results, such as knowledge production, innovation, and social capital [15]. Additionally, these programmes

increased the participants' visibility in the education and research communities, which also provided opportunities for potential partnerships in the industry and other sectors, such as (in particular) the government. The adoption of the design-thinking approach also benefited them as it provided the participants with a structured problem-solving method and it was also listed as one of the needed skills in the market, regardless of their field [16]. As mentioned, this also benefited NFPs as part of their programme effectiveness and future programmes and collaborations with other industry players. Lecy and Swedlund [4] recorded that successful programmes from NFPs were crucial in maintaining and improving the organisation in receiving more sponsorship, donations, collaborations, and volunteers.

Concerning the recent COVID-19 pandemic, most high school students, higher education students, and research have now shifted towards virtual learning, communication, and collaboration. Thus, these programmes encouraged participants to get involved in working and utilizing collaboration tools, such as Padlet, Miro, Google Documents, etc. and attend virtual meetings via various platforms, namely Zoom, Microsoft Team, Skype, among many others. These also provided them with an opportunity to enhance and prepare themselves towards the shift in the future working environment and create a competitive advantage for them [2].

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship of CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions and its benefits for all involved participants through reputation and relationship building, including collaborations amongst students (higher education students and high school students involved in the programmes), researchers, industry players, and university institutions.

Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [5], the CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions have demonstrated that knowledge was based on social interactions with all the participants involved, particularly during mentor-mentee sessions and project-based outcomes. The learners (both the mentor and mentee) were directly involved in the learning process, which also comprised the broader knowledge community, such as higher learning institutions, industries, and research centres, which further benefited them in building their reputation and relationship. These engagements and benefits also motivated the participants and provided them with the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards needed to achieve learning and project outcomes by the mentors' guidance. The reputation and relationship building could also be argued to consist of both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for all the participants involved. Ultimately, the CSR initiatives between NFPs and higher education institutions have shown collaborative learning and group work while being guided by an educator

(mentor), which supported the last point on collaboration, particularly considering post-pandemic changes in the work environment.

Universities should prioritise and create more engagements between NFPs and high school students to ensure more collaboration and long-term relationships. They should also create more opportunities for various fields and recognise these engagements for participating students to build their skills and personal brand. NFPs should also adopt a similar approach using design-thinking (or other future skills needed), mentor-mentee relationship, and project-based outcomes. Additionally, NFPs should provide training for both the mentor and mentee, including providing a structured engagement for a period of time to enhance their experience further. NFPs should proactively engage, create, and optimise initiatives based on a needs assessment, both from students and the industry to stay relevant and provide the best outcomes for education advancements. Schools of students of all ages should also proactively search for such initiatives from NFPs and higher education institutions to expose and provide the best learning outcomes for their students.

This paper only focused on the author's account based on a short period and limited engagements as a marketing communication person volunteering for the NFPs. Future research will be beneficial to explore NFPs' role for more extended periods across various fields (apart from STEM). Investigating from different stakeholder positions will also be useful to further understand CSR engagements between NFPs and higher education institutions. Future studies should also explore other parameters apart from reputation, relationship, and collaboration to investigate the relationships and benefits involved.

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