Bringing Social Responsibility to Higher Education –
A Case Study on Students’ Perceptions in Portugal

Abstract
This paper analyses students’ perceptions on issues related to Social Responsibility in relation to a Marketing degree in a Portuguese university. The aim of this paper is to explore how students perceive Social Responsibility related concepts. It is of interest how they make sense of it when these topics are discussed within the confines of the marketing discipline and how they understand the conceptualisation and operationalisation in order to improve the learning experience and thus the effectiveness of its application in practice.

Using grounded theory, focus groups have been carried out with students that attend a three year Marketing degree and conducted as part of their course real campaigns for social responsibility actions.

Results show that there is a need for a coherent conceptual plan throughout the entire curriculum, so that students can make the links between the different disciplines. This is necessary to facilitate the holistic transformation towards more responsible and sustainable business. Secondly, it is vital to de-theorise SR teaching by employing the use of case studies and practical exercises that help students to understand the practical implementation and application of the theoretical concepts that in its essence tend to be often abstract.

Keywords: Higher Education; Social Responsibility; Students’ Perceptions; Marketing; Focus Groups; Grounded Theory.
Introduction
This paper analyses students’ perceptions on issues related to Social Responsibility (SR) in relation to a Marketing degree in a Portuguese university. The aim of this paper is to understand how students perceive the SR related concepts. While the SR construct is well established in the academia, it is of interest how students make sense of it when these topics are discussed within the confines of the marketing discipline. In order to improve the learning experience and the effectiveness of SR application in practice, it is important to understand how students perceive its conceptualisation and operationalisation. Moreover, the paper seeks to gain insights into the effectiveness of embedded SR teaching, which in turn will facilitate integrating SR principles in the wider curriculum.

For this research focus groups have been carried out with students that attend a three year Marketing degree. While there are one mandatory and one optional discipline that specifically deal with ethical implication of marketing, other disciplines such as Advertising, Communication and Operational Marketing deal with SR on an implicit level.

In addition, the paper looks at these aspects in the context of social responsibility campaigns that were implemented by the students. Specifically, a Christmas campaign collecting goods for families in need and another one to gather bone marrow donors. The students’ tasks for these projects ranged from the design of the campaigns and critically reflecting on the academic theory, strategy, developing the promotional material like posters, flyers, displays, social networking campaigns and videos. Moreover, the students were also responsible to distribute the flyers and present the campaigns in classes, “selling” the ideas to other students, lecturers and members of staff.

This exercise helped students to link the different aspects of the theoretical concepts of SR with its implementation. Hence, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on SR education of management students with a critical reflection based on the students’ experiences on the effectiveness of these teaching methods. Furthermore, there is the potential of sensitising students to turn them into drivers of sustainability by teaching the competencies to link various aspects of SR.

Literature Review
Naturally, with the increasing realisation for more embedded approaches for sustainable business, the focus moves towards business schools for producing the graduates that possess the skills and the vision.

According to Windsor (2008) responsible management is the most important theory-development and educational issue that business schools and businesses alike are facing. Business schools are increasingly called upon to play their role in advancing the agenda by further including and integrating Business Ethics, (Corporate) Social Responsibility (CSR/SR) and Sustainability. Particularly because of the corporate malfeasance linked with the financial crisis, it needs to be discussed what role business schools should play (Matten & Moon, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005).

In the light of this, universities are required to change the traditional syllabus and acknowledge the role and importance of education in creating more sustainable businesses. For this, two strategies in particular are necessary. Firstly, the principles of SR have to be integrated throughout the entire curriculum instead of merely being limited to separate disciplines. Otherwise it would prevent students from understanding the complexity of SR
and it is necessary to highlight the interconnection between the different business aspects (Brown 2009). Moreover, it is crucial to encourage students to link the different aspects of SR among the various business areas, giving justice to the multi-disciplinary nature of SR. It is particularly important to include practical examples and refrain from theorising the issue too much (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Gardiner & Lacy, 2005). In addition, Matten & Moon (2004) identify the following objective that business schools should pursue (p. 324):

- provision of graduates with SR skills,
- supply of SR education for practitioners,
- specialist SR education for industries,
- research to advance knowledge in SR.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by collecting empirical data on what the best strategies are in order to educate management students to be future drivers of sustainability and promote a more effective cooperation between academia and practice (Gardiner & Lacy, 2005; Owen, 2008). Currently, research exists on how CSR and ethics are being taught at universities, but little is known about how students perceive these issues. Previous studies predominantly adopt surveys in order to provide a broad overview on what courses and subjects are being offered by business schools (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2004) or analyse the conceptual aspects of the curriculum (Spence, 2000). Rarely do studies analyse and engage with the students.

Ultimately, the critical evaluation of the businesses curriculum regarding SR and sustainability raises a number of important questions, which certainly also apply to business education in general. For instance, it needs to be questioned if and how ethics should be taught, how to link basic awareness and decision-making, how to avoid repetitions and, most importantly, how to embed ethics and SR throughout the entire curriculum (McDonald, 2004).

Currently, a promising strategy to incorporate SR and business ethics in the curriculum is the use of the various accreditation schemes. With the increased importance of rankings and accreditations, this will be a significant driver in the future and all major schemes have started to address these issues (EQUIS, AACSB, AMBA) (Gardiner & Lacy, 2005). In Portugal, the accreditation scheme A3ES is a major influence and currently does not explicitly cover criteria related to SR, failing to promote institutionalising the teaching of SR.

**Methodology**

In order to explore the students’ perceptions, opinions and experience regarding SR incorporated in marketing degrees, two focus groups (FG) were carried out with students of two different years of a marketing degree (3-year course). The key aim was to get a general sense on these perceptions among the groups. The second stage of this ongoing research will consist of a quantitative study, examining the SR construct on an individual level in more detail. The sample will consist of a larger sample of management students.

These FG were conducted in a Portuguese university in June 2012 and lasted around 50 minutes each. The sample consisted of students of different years, one finishing the second year (23 students), the other finishing the last year of the course (27 students). The FG followed a semi-structured guide. Some questions were modified according to the each situation during the FG. The sample was selected with the requirement that all these students completed an advertising subject, which took place in the first term of the second year, where
their main practical assignment was conducting an advertising campaign always with a social aim. Doing a FG with the 2nd year and another with the 3rd year class was considered a strong combination to understand how these students perceive SR in different stages of the course. It is also important to state that around 50% of the students already have professional experience since they combine their studies with a job. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, transcribed, and then translated into English. Finally, the seven stages grounded analysis approach of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002) is currently being employed in the data analysis, namely: (1) Familiarisation with data; (2) Reflection on the interview data; (3) Conceptualisation; (4) Cataloguing concepts; (5) Re-coding; (6) Linking; and (7) Re-evaluation. The choice of grounded theory was made since the aim was to have an open approach in to order collect these students perceptions towards CRS embedded in marketing degrees and therefore to create new theory from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Results
This section will present key results that emerged from the data analysis.

Social Responsibility (SR) and Sustainability
Some confusion is noticeable regarding the terms SR and sustainability (business ethics was not included in the FG). The majority of students consider that SR is aimed at “helping people in need” and to increase social conscience regarding issues such as climate changes, environment and social equity. Several students emphasise the need of future generations having the same resources they have at the moment. Thus, there is a close connection between SR and sustainability, as if they are almost the same thing.

Moreover, some students make an immediate association between the need of more SR and the most recent definition of marketing, that of being “to create value for customers, clients, partners and society at large” (American Marketing Association, 2007). This seems an interesting aspect, their knowledge that SR is a fundamental part of the marketing subject.

It is also perceived that the 3rd year students consider SR an essential strategic tool for companies. This may be explained by the fact that they already had a module of “Marketing and Social Responsibility” in the 3rd year and therefore having a more profound knowledge about SR and its implementation. It seems that these students are more skeptical and critical towards companies who carry out SR actions considering that some just want to “show off” and to create an image that they are “responsible and concerned with the society” when in fact it is all about “strategic positioning”. Yet some other students argue that there are a few companies who are genuine in their SR actions giving some examples they know of. Moreover, students speak about the “green customers” segment as an opportunity for companies, this way being again more “strategic marketers” (rather than ethical).

Many students, of both years, consider that SR should be part of the organisational culture, criticising companies that only do some occasional and periodical SR activities. Once again, there are some students arguing that it is important to start and that “it is better to do SR occasionally than never”.

SR Campaigns
It is important to start contextualising the campaigns the students carried out. The 2nd year class developed, in the Advertising module (in the 1st term of the 2nd year), a Christmas campaign, in all its stages since defining aims, strategies, media operational plans, evaluation and control, aimed to gather essential goods for families in need. This campaign did not achieve the expected results. The class of the 3rd year developed, in the same module but in the academic year before, two advertising campaigns, also the Christmas campaign, which is
already a “tradition” at the marketing degree of this University, and another one aiming to
gather bone marrow donors. Both were considered successful although the latter had three
times more donors than the defined aim. Moreover, it is relevant to state that the campaign
had a real life case, a 5 year old boy (“J”), who urgently needed a bone marrow transplant.

In this theme of the SR campaigns, some strong differences between both classes emerged. It
is noticeable that the students of the 3rd year speak in a very emotional way about the
campaign to gather bone marrow donors. Although they consider the Christmas campaign
very important and emphasize the importance of its continuity, the bone marrow campaign
prevails in their minds. It seems as if it was something that deeply “touched them”
emotionally. It is also clear that personally knowing “J” and his family was a strong motivator
for the students to implement campaign with maximum effort, so their involvement was
naturally very high. The aim of this campaign was to gather 100 people to come to the
University to become bone marrow donors, filling in a form and give a small blood sample,
becoming part of the international database of bone marrow donors. The fact is that the
campaign resulted in 300 people becoming donors. These students show a solid sense of
social conscience and also a sense of pride for what they have accomplished. Interestingly,
they also show some surprise in how it was so successful, stating how insecure they felt in the
beginning, all the excitement / involvement / anxiety they went through, and pointing out that
they never thought that so many people would come. It is clear that this success increased
their confidence levels and all of them argue that, in the future, they could, individually, carry
out a similar campaign in a job / company. This is an extremely important finding, the
capacities they gained doing this real advertising campaign and its effects on society. Thus, it
seems that there is a role for universities in increasing the students SR conscience and to
contribute to the development of society in terms of the importance of social and
environmental aspects.

Regarding the 2nd year students, a sense of self-realisation for “helping people in need” was
also visible. However, some frustration emerged since the defined aim and expectation were
not achieved. Some show some motivation saying things such as “at least we helped some
families”, “we need to start and to continue”. Yet is also noticeable a critical view in the sense
that students consider that people are selfish and they “just don’t care”. They also mention the
economic crisis as a possible reason for the lack of contribution compared to the previous
year. A few students mention the fact that they should have communicated more directly with
the target group, which was not done in the same way as the campaign of the previous year.
Moreover, most of the students point out that their first motivation for doing the
campaign/assignment was the mark they could have. This aspect of academic performance did
not emerge in the FG with the 3rd year class, the word “mark” not being mentioned at any
time. Some doubt remains regarding the impact of the students’ own motivations in the
campaign results. However, several students state how happy they felt to know that they were
doing something to help other people despite the results not having been the ones they
wanted.

Attitudes towards SR

All the students consider that something changed after doing these campaigns, mainly their
need to spread the word about what they did. Furthermore, many of them state that before the
campaign they did not know what SR actually was, even if some argue that they had already
some knowledge on SR. It is clear that they tell friends and family about these campaigns and
even try to motivate others to do the same. This increase in the students’ social conscience
seems a relevant finding.
Another important aspect emerging from data is the emphasis students give to having done a real campaign. They show that many subjects are too theoretical and one thing is to learn how to do it and another is to really do it. There is a consensus that they feel capable to do another advertising campaign since they already did it in all its stages, since doing the creative briefing, defining aims, strategies, media operational plans, maps of control and evaluation. Thus, students clearly consider that they increased their competences and skills. There is a sense of confidence noticed in all of them and the idea that “only doing you learn”. This balance between theory and practice in the marketing degree or even degrees in general seems a relevant aspect to explore.

Conclusions
This paper explores the students’ perceptions on SR embedded in marketing degrees in the example of a Portuguese University. Two focus groups were carried out and it is intended to carry out follow-up studies to enable a longitudinal analysis on students’ perspectives towards SR.

Although this research is still in its early stages, it is considered that some novel and interesting themes are emerging. Firstly, business education is often the first stage in which students deal critically with these issues. This is important to both enable these future managers/marketers, but also to continue to question the status quo. Academics have the possibility to help breaking down the barriers that exist between business, academia and other stakeholder groups (Gardiner & Lacy, 2005) and future managers should be included in this too. While the fact that SR should be part of the curriculum is less controversial, it is more debatable how this should actually be implemented. The issues that this paper is raising are that there needs to be a coherent conceptual plan throughout the entire curriculum, so that students can make the links between the different disciplines. This is necessary to facilitate the holistic transformation towards more responsible and sustainable business.

Secondly, it is vital to de-theorise SR teaching by employing the use of case studies and practical exercises that help students to understand the practical implementation and application of the theoretical concepts that in its essence tend to be often abstract. After all, the theoretical discussion has already been ongoing for decades, while failing to initiate more wide-spread radical changes of business practice.

Finally, as a “happy end” to this paper is that “J”, the five year old boy needing a transplant, found a compatible bone marrow donor precisely in the week that the bone marrow campaign had started.

Limitations and Further Research
This research is set in a highly specific context and therefore it is not possible to either generalise the results or transfer them to other settings, both due to the limited sample size and the nature of qualitative research. Instead the idea is to specifically learn more about marketing students’ perceptions on SR and the associated teaching methods.

Moreover, the focus groups are part of an ongoing research project. The second stage of this study will employ a quantitative approach to a larger sample of management students, examining the SR construct on an individual level in more detail. It is also intended to examine the impact of their prior SR knowledge on the results.

This research is considered to be an important step of enriching the discussion on SR and really engaging with students on these matters.
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