

OPINION ARTICLE

From an important concept to a normal practice: corporate social responsibility education initiatives for non-practitioner students [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 3 approved with reservations]

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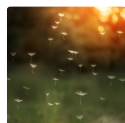
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Abstract

In this work, we discuss the gap between teaching the understanding that engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities is important and showcasing it as a normal practice for different companies and situations – not just for multinational enterprises (MNEs) or as a case of charity. We highlight an important possible gap in CSR education, which prohibits students and graduates from effectively aligning business objectives with applying technological solutions to social and environmental problems. It is our belief that the poor statistics concerning social entrepreneurship growth in Russia contribute to particular flaws in CSR education for future managers and specialists in medium and large private enterprises, particularly for undergraduate and pre-experience graduate programs. The case of applying modern educational technologies to compensate for the inability to integrate the studied solutions to environmental problems with own goals is described.

Keywords

corporate social responsibility, education, business students, best practices



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Approval Status 

	1	2	3	4
version 1				
22 Apr 2020				

1. **Ekaterina Ivanova**, National Research University — Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation
2. **Felix Okechukwu Ugwuozor** , University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria
3. **José-Carlos García-Rosell** , University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland
4. **Valeria Dineva**, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.



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Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

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On the importance-centered paradigm of CSR education

The paradigm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) education has traditionally been built up around the idea that students, as future specialists and managers, must be made aware of the important consequences that their decisions might have on the environment, including different types of stakeholders, such as society in general, and environment. The end goal for the practice could be viewed as former students being able to successfully align their business goals with the benefits of the many. For decades, many of the leading international business schools have successfully integrated lectures, courses, and summer schools on CSR in the training of bachelor students, master students, MBAs and executives, which makes it is safe to conclude that currently there are numerous cohorts (and in more developed economies, numerous generations) who understand that CSR is an important practice.

However, there is a gap between an understanding of the importance of the potential risky, costly and not necessarily business goal-related practice of CSR and its actual implementation. Existing research indicates that the main practitioners of CSR in Russia are in fact the largest multinational enterprises (MNEs), and this practice, to a great extent, is guided by foreign market policies and corresponding entry barriers^{1,2}. At the same time, social entrepreneurship growth in Russia is amongst the lowest in the world³. Russia is characterized by significant difficulties in informing the population about the nature and possibilities of social entrepreneurship and attracting high-level specialists in social ventures^{3,4}. The problem is rooted in various peculiarities of Russia, including government policy, culture, and also education. The association of CSR with an activity for the “rich and bored” MNEs and charity organizations in general prohibits rapid dissemination of such practices.

We argue that educators oriented on producing future managers for middle-sized companies and the private sector in Russia must focus not so much on teaching the students that CSR is important, but rather that it is “normal”. The integration of

case studies about successful foreign companies and MNE’s, which implement CSR, organizing garbage cleaning excursions for students, encouraging charity engagement might not be a sufficient enough practice to promote CSR if those activities are not systematically being integrated with business goals. Moreover, a sole focus on the importance-centered paradigm of CSR education may further contribute to alienating the students from the concept of CSR. This may happen if the student starts thinking of CSR as a practice for only the richest companies, or a practice that he or she might engage in when they have the spare time and the extra money. It is our belief that the modern paradigm of CSR education should evolve beyond its importance-centricity: instead of concentrating on getting a louder presence in the conversation, it becomes imperative to focus on what is happening in the silence after the conversation is over, or more precisely on what does not happen.

The role of work experience in learning CSR

The notion that CSR education should be integrated into the curriculum through varying subjects and internships is not new (e.g., 5,6); however, how this integration is to be established remains the more prominent and unresolved issue⁶. For example, Sunley and Leigh⁷ look at CSR education as consisting of several stages, from merely linking ethics to corporate governance or legal context to integrating social, ethical and environmental considerations into all management subjects, fostering social entrepreneurship and inclusive business. The transition from the first step to the last requires going beyond providing CSR as a core, compulsory module and engaging students with charities. The last stage involves a transformation of thinking that in many ways must be initiated by the student; there, the focus of CSR education shifts to integration and innovation.

It is important to note that the CSR education process is different for students with and without practical experience of work, and those with and without the opportunity to immediately initiate or try to initiate CSR practices in their place of work. As depicted in Figure 1, for non-practitioner students

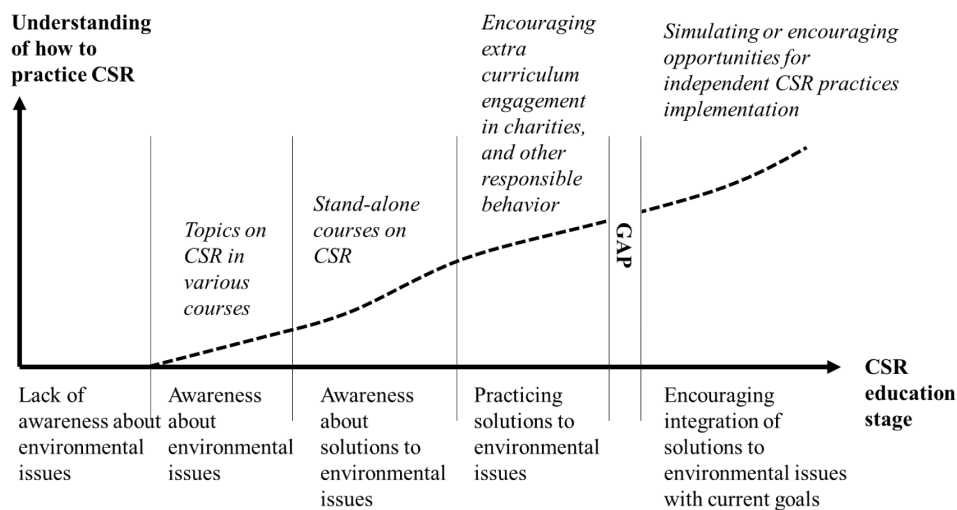


Figure 1. Stages of corporate social responsibility (CSR) education.

there is a gap before they can actually integrate solutions to environmental issues with real business goals. Students with little or no work experience would likely understand the importance of the issues in question, but as they are not able to implement what they learn in the stand-alone courses immediately, there is a chance that it will remain a concept concerning issues that are important but not that relevant. Wide theoretical knowledge of the principles of socially responsible management does not necessarily guarantee understanding of the relationship between existing technological solutions to social problems and the needs of the market and individual consumers.

This knowledge gap prohibits the ability of recent graduates to formulate convincing arguments that prove the potential for the implementation of these technologies in the market. Without the ability to operate with applied marketing concepts and indicators in the discussion of CSR initiatives, it will be very difficult for them to convince future employers of the need to implement the principles of responsible management and sustainable development of the business as a whole. Unless, upon graduation, the non-practitioner students find themselves in a managing position or in a function directly related to CSR, this gap is likely to expand as graduates further lose the ability to connect what they do on daily basis with CSR. Therefore, for the business school it is not enough to repeatedly explain the importance of environmental safety problems to the students, but rather stimulate them to link the two worlds through hands-on experience. In order to promote the more efficient dissemination of best practices in domestic business, it is necessary to design innovative educational technologies that could stimulate students to gain empirical experience of using business tools to implement practical business tasks related to the implementation of technological solutions to social and environmental problems.

The case of IBS-Moscow, RANEPA

Institute of Business Studies (IBS)-Moscow RANEPA is a leading Russian business school whose mission is to form the new generation of a socially responsible entrepreneurial and managerial elite of Russia, with a focus on training medium and large private enterprise leaders. The IBS team believes that this stratum is at the heart of current and future market reforms and is expected to be the core of the non-corrupted and socially responsible Russian business elite and the national civil society of the future⁸. The subjects of ethics, responsibility and sustainability are covered in stand-alone courses, while the school also organizes guest lectures, discussions and round-table talks on ethics, social responsibility and sustainable development led by well-known Russian experts. Theory is simultaneously integrated with practice through extra curriculum activities, such as involving MBAs and executives in charitable work with orphanages and plastic cap collection.

In order to help students overcome the gap that leads to an inability to align CSR principles with business goals, the school has introduced a mandatory requirement to include, for all graduation papers, a sub-section with the student's reflections

on the ethics- and social responsibility-related aspects of the research topic. Although this encourages the establishment of necessary connections of the research with CSR, this solution is most efficient for the students with practical experience, who work on a graduate thesis based on own business analysis or a business plan creation. In order to help the rest of the students to be able to cross the gap, it was decided that the school needs to aim at maximizing the empirical experience gained by students in analyzing markets of eco-friendly technologies through the use of the inverted class technique, online learning and gamification as tools for deep motivation and independent immersion in the context of the studied markets when completing course assignments.

As a result, the course "Analysis of international markets" was reorganized around the evaluation of international markets for green technologies: as part of a role-playing game, groups of students should gradually study the barriers and opportunities for promoting given technologies using the analysis tools presented in the course. Without a single lecture on green technologies, the impact on the environment or CSR, students had to use marketing methods and all available information around them to assess the market potential of smart technologies to find barriers in the minds of consumers and the business environment that prevent smart technologies from spreading as quickly as possible, indicate the best practices from around the world and suggest ways to introduce them in Russia to promote the use of this technology.

Students were divided into groups of 3–5 people, and were assigned a smart energy-efficient technology for analysis, while a specific foreign country was used as a reference. Each team chose a role (consultant-investor, manager of a large company or entrepreneur) and made an analysis based on it. For 6 weeks, they watched educational video cartoons with examples of marketing instruments application, studied market analysis examples, and then presented the results of the analysis in front of a commission of business practitioners: managers from IKEA, JTI, L'Oréal and Gazprombank – some of the largest CSR practitioners in Russia.

Individual achievements were measured by the number of earned stamps on the "green card of skills": (1) participating in debates, (2) creating an attractive visual presentation, (3) making a live presentation, (4) leading the project, (5) participating as a member of the evaluation committee, (6) project defense. Since within the framework of each seminar one student could receive only one stamp, each member of the team had to actively interact with the others and comprehensively show themselves in different roles throughout the course. Only a complete collection of stamps allowed to receive individual points for the course (20 points out of 100%).

Business practitioners evaluated student presentations based on a number of criteria, the most important of which was the relation of results to business practice. The purpose of this system was to help students balance the beautiful idea of green technology with what the business actually does and

what it really cares about, to learn how to find, present, and sell an idea or opportunity to make the environment a little safer.

In 2018, the course lasting 1.5 months was successfully completed by 115 students, 6 animated and interactive lectures were created, 8 full-time classes were held for 6 academic groups (21 teams/projects), and one multimedia platform was launched for communication with students. The final projects of students were presented at the international conference: “Eurasia: Digital Reality” on April 18, 2018 in Moscow. The students’ presentations and performances during the question and answers session indicated a huge shift in their understanding of the multifaceted relationship between business and the environment, including their own environmental impact. Overall, without a single lecture on green technologies in the framework of this course, students were able not only to master advanced marketing methods, but also independently align solutions to large socio-environmental problems with the real needs of business and consumers.

Conclusions

Overall, we encourage CSR educators to analyze their CSR teaching processes in search of a potential gap, which is able to prohibit the abilities of graduates to effectively link societal and environmental problems to markets and businesses as well as the implementation of technological solutions to these problems with real business goals and key performance indicators. In that respect, we argue that undergraduate and pre-work experience graduate programs face this complication more often. To overcome the gap, the design of innovative teaching methods is required, which would maximize the empirical experience gained by students during the study of marketing and other business disciplines, whereas CSR would take the place of a study context rather than a study focus. Therefore, the shift away from the importance-centered paradigm of CSR education can occur, with this lessening the possible alienation of students and graduates from the CSR concept.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ? ✓

Version 1

Reviewer Report 23 October 2020

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Valeria Dineva

University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria

The article discusses the current topic of CSR. The authors emphasize the need to integrate CSR in education. To this end, an interesting practical case is presented, which is an innovative approach to training and in particular CSR training. The case is presented in a logical sequence and coherence.

Recommendations:

1. It would be good if the purpose of the research are formulated ,as well as the materials and methods used (Methods for analysis and synthesis, analysis of secondary data, etc.).
2. Regarding the conclusions:
 1. It is advisable to derive, summarize and highlight the advantages and benefits of the applied innovative approach.
 2. Weaknesses (if any), difficulties / threats / risks that have arisen or are likely to arise in relation to the case under consideration could be indicated.
 3. If the authors have ideas for improving, expanding and perfecting the presented approach in future implementations, this can be shared in the conclusions.
3. The authors should continue to work in practical and scientific aspects of this interesting topic. In future research, they could develop the case (s) in a model / framework.

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Partly

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Partly

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Partly

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Partly

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Internal audit, Internal control, CSR, Fraud prevention

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 21 October 2020

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José-Carlos García-Rosell

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Thanks for the opportunity to review your paper. I find the idea of your paper quite interesting. Indeed, focusing on CSR education of practitioners can generate new insights about CSR learning in an organizational context. Although the idea is interesting and has potential, it is missing a clear theoretical framework as well as an explicit research question. Your paper would considerably benefit from creating stronger links to the literature.

As I agree with the comments made by the other two reviewers, I will offer a couple of additional comments that can help improve the paper. Indeed, I think that the comments provided earlier are very accurate.

1. The abstract is not clear and it omits the case discussed in the paper.

2. Although social entrepreneurship is linked to CSR, it represents a stream of literature on its own. The connection between social entrepreneurship and CSR is not so clear in the article.
3. Several of the arguments made on CSR education seem to be linked to the Russian context. In doing so, the paper neglects a large amount of work done on CSR education. Your paper will considerably benefit from establishing a stronger link to studies on CSR teaching and learning. Indeed, there are many strong arguments in the paper that lack support from the literature.
4. Where does the figure come from? Is it your own figure? If yes, on which theories/studies is it based? This could be made more explicit. As mentioned above, there is an extensive stream of literature on CSR education. How is the figure connected to previous studies on CSR education?
5. The paper offers a good overview of the case, but it is not clear how CSR was applied. How did students learn about CSR? What did they learn? It seems that the course was kind of a marketing course where students learned to develop a strategy for introducing clean technology. Perhaps at the beginning of the paper, you could offer a definition of CSR. It will help grasp how CSR is understood within the context of the study.
6. The conclusions are lacking substance and clarity. It is not so clear what can we learn from the case. I think that by following the recommendations of the other reviewers and the remarks above, you will be able to write a more robust conclusion chapter.

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

No

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Partly

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

No

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

No

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

No

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

No

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

No

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: CSR, CSR Education, Sustainability, Stakeholder Theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 09 October 2020

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Felix Okechukwu Ugwuozor 

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Main Observations

The motivation for your paper is good. That is, to build a CSR culture among non-working students. Thus CSR disposition should not be an “important” after thought but a “normal” way of life. Only MNEs practised CSR and students learnt CSR as important through lectures only. You therefore described a non-lecture [model] adopted by IBS-Moscow that simulated deployment of smart energy technologies for environmental-friendliness to fill the learning gaps

I therefore have the following observations:

1. Recast your opening sentence in page 1. It is unclear.
2. I don't understand Reference #2., which you used to make case for “existing research” (pg 3) that shows multinational enterprises (MNEs) are the main practitioners of CSR. I think you should cite more recent references to corroborate your case.
3. Your Reference #3 (pg 3) does not support the claims you made for Russia. It is important to separate the concept of Social Entrepreneurship and Corporate Social Responsibility. You may check <https://www.wforce.org/news/social-enterprise-vs-corporate-social-responsibility> and other online sources.
4. Please look for more solid references for your claims that Russia doesn't disseminate

information. References #3 and #4 are insufficient, if not invalid.

5. Further, describe (elaborate more on) the peculiarities of Russia – policy, culture and education – you stated with sufficient references that impinges on CSR education. Also provide evidence that CSR is for the “rich and the bored”.
6. Provide sufficient data or even a case study that proves that the current Russian CSR disposition is low to create a gap your study intends to fill.
7. The last sentence in Section 1 is unclear: “instead of concentrating on getting a louder presence in the conversation...” and it does not make for a good transition to the next Section
8. You were not clear on the stages of CSR education according to Sunley and Leigh (2017). I think you should be clear on the demarcations rather than being generic; you should also cite the pages where they sorted the stages of CSR education. Clarifying these stages will help us understand which stage is first or last. Thus, I find no basis for which you claimed a “transition from first stage to last” of CSR education.
9. Your Figure 1 showing the stages of CSR education is instructive. Please state the source – whether you made it yourself or from elsewhere. I further suggest, you should support the thesis with a figure showing a “theory of change” based on the gaps established in Figure 1. The theory of change chart or figure will describe the interactions of all the processes that culminate in the desired change in CSR Education. With this chart you may be able emphasize the full integration of CSR simulations for non-practitioner students.
10. You may also wish to indicate further limits of the cognitive domains of learning in CSR education. The implication of your thesis is that lecture-only CSR learning is limiting and at best theoretical. You posit that the non-lecture approach makes CSR education more effective. Thus, the affective and even the psychomotor domains of learning is implied. You may wish to situate the problem or contextualize the study around the domains of learning.
11. A major concern for me is on the Intervention you provided in the case of IBS-Moscow. I don't see how the “Analyses of International Markets” of green technologies is a CSR issue. While I understand that you are trying to build a case that deploying energy-efficient technologies as CSR, it is not sufficient. It is primarily cost-saving to the business despite its potentials to contribute to less environmental pollution.
12. However, you may need to describe the details of the “experiment” or Intervention that was conducted by IBS. You will need to dedicate a section describing in detail the methodology of this work.
 - You need to be clear on the grouping on students
 - What is the “smart energy-efficient technology for analysis”?
 - What is the specific country of reference?
 - Describe the roles that were chosen by the students – why, how and tasks assigned
 - Describe the contents (summary and learning objectives) of the educational videos for marketing and why they are relevant to the experiment

- What is “number of earned stamps” and “green card skills”? Describe all the measurements and evaluations associated with this. For example “participating in debates”, “leading the project”, etc.
- I don’t understand “only a complete collection of stamps allowed to receive individual points for the course (20 points out of 100%)”. Provide the basis for this benchmarking and summative evaluation.

Answers to Mandatory Questions

- Is the background of the case’s history and progression described in sufficient detail?

Not completely. The authors should provide sufficient evidence rather than anecdotes on the limitations of lectures-driven understanding of CSR

- Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes. The motivation for the paper is good. But they should cite more relevant literature. Also they need to be clear between the fine line of social enterprise and corporate social responsibility

- If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

No data and hence no statistical analyses. A more detailed experiment perhaps with treatment and control groups would have been more appropriate. However, they did not describe their methodologies robustly to warrant their success claims

- Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No data. No results based on data

However, they attempted well to make case for gaps in CSR learning

- Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Not quite. The methodologies as earlier indicated should be more discussed robustly to justify conclusions

- Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for other practitioners?

More details are required.

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Partly

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Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Education Philosophy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 20 May 2020

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Ekaterina Ivanova

National Research University — Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

Dear authors,

Thank you for letting me read about an exciting innovation in teaching CSR in the Russian context. Even though the teaching tool you are describing is worth attention of the international audience, I see several major problems with your paper:

1. The abstract is totally disconnected from the teaching innovation. It shifts focus from what you have done. Also, it raises a highly contradictory argument "... the poor statistics concerning social entrepreneurship growth in Russia contribute to particular flaws in CSR education". It is a very strange argument that requires justification.
2. I didn't see your research question in this paper? It would definitely help to understand your logic if you would be more clear and specific on this.
3. In your introduction I missed a clear identification of the research gap that you are trying to address. Why is this paper important, apart from straight-forward self-praise and description of the digital learning tool you have developed? So far, I see a speculation about prevalence of the large business in CSR debate in Russia with no grounding and connection

to existing empirical studies on CSR in Russia.

4. I was surprised to see almost no references to studies on business ethics, CSR, sustainable development and social entrepreneurship in the Russian context. Your argumentation would definitely win from connecting to works of Crotty, Ljubownikow, Blagov, Arai, Cheglakova, Bataeva, Melitonyan, Belyeva to name just a few. Especially, check out this publication: Blagov and Aray (2019¹).
5. Also, I see that you are missing literature on experiential learning. You could improve your narrative if you would connect to this stream of literature, check out works of: Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
6. Moreover, if you claim that your educational innovation was transformational you should better state your teaching goals in the paper and connect your analysis to the literature on transformative learning, see for example: Mezirow, J. (2003). *Transformative Learning as Discourse*. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1, 58–63.
7. What contribution are you trying to make with this paper? I miss the discussion. How does this teaching innovation contribute to shift in students' mindsets in terms of making them not only aware of CSR but put it in action? I would suggest that you read works on the Sustainability Mindset by Dr. Isabel Rimanoczy: Kassel, K., & Rimanoczy, I. (Eds.). (2018). *Developing a Sustainability Mindset in Management Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
8. I would also suggest checking your paper by a proof-reader. Sentences are too long, difficult to follow, and terminology is not always clear cut.

All in all, I enjoyed reading your paper, I believe it has a potential to contribute to the literature on transformative learning, sustainability mindset and CSR.

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Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: CSR, Sustainability, Russia

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