Corporate social responsibility in higher education

A study of the institutionalisation of CSR in Malaysian public universities

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Abstract

Internationally, higher education establishments have faced strong institutional pressures to embrace socially responsible practices. The body of literature, which has offered the theoretical and conceptual guidance in this space, has been the work on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Taking an organisation-centric perspective, this study aims to empirically examine the institutionalisation of CSR in six Malaysian universities. An in-depth case study approach was utilised using the data from two external sources (an external measure of university research performance and university self-reporting) as well as collecting data on side (interviews). Using qualitative and configurational analyses, a set of propositions about the institutionalisation of CSR in universities is formulated. The analysis depicts the pathways that lead to CSR outcomes.

KEYWORDS

CSR, institutionalisation, research performance, tertiary education

1 | INTRODUCTION

The principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR) are not new to universities, who have long worked to benefit society by educating new generations of people as well as by engaging in community service (Dima, Vasilache, Ghinea, & Agoston, 2013). According to Plantan (2002), "universities can provide the platform for community services as universities build bridges internationally, serve as national gateways for the sharing and dissemination of knowledge, and influence society through the ideas and values shaped by the humanities and liberal arts" (p.65). Universities have a broader responsibility beyond teaching and research, a larger mission in human and social development to be socially responsible to local communities by strengthening relationships with and between constituents (Alshuwaikhat & Abubakar, 2008; Haden, Oyler, & Humphreys, 2009). In developing countries, little is understood about the social responsibilities of universities (Gomez, 2014; Mehta, 2011; Nejati, Shafaei, Salamzadeh, & Daraei, 2011).

This paper reports on research that aimed to empirically examine the institutionalisation of CSR in six universities in the developing country of Malaysia. The study took an organisation-centric

perspective of institutionalisation. The research investigated (a) the operational aspects of CSR within each university, (b) each university's approach to the institutionalisation (pace and stability) of CSR, (c) the role of initial drivers for CSR, and (d) the relationship between each university's research performance and CSR outcomes (benefits from CSR and quality of the CSR reporting). Data for this study were gathered from several sources, namely, semistructured interviews, annual reports, and the Malaysian Research Assessment (MyRA).

Few studies have considered the institutionalisation of CSR. More frequently, studies focus on the drivers for adoption of certain CSR practices such as philanthropy of community employee volunteering (Angus-Leppan, 2010) or provide conceptual suggestions as to how the institutionalisation of CSR might be achieved (Castka, Bamber, Bamber, & Sharp, 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore, few studies have considered the institutionalisation of CSR in developing countries (Lee & Carroll, 2011). This study worked, in part, to reveal how the initialisation of CSR evolved in the developing country of Malaysia. Likewise, very few studies investigate CSR issues in the public sector, and existing CSR studies in Malaysian universities are also limited (Ahmad, 2012; Othman & Othman, 2014). Although a number of

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international studies have examined CSR in universities (e.g., Dahan & Senol, 2012; Hayter & Cahoy, 2018; Nejati et al., 2011), there is not much research reported on CSR in developing countries (Nadeem & Kakakhel, 2011). No prior studies have employed the configurational approach even though such approach seems appropriate to unravel the complexities of CSR institutionalisation.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

2.1 | CSR in higher education

A significant number of recent studies (Dima et al., 2013; Kotecha, 2010; Parsons, 2014; Vallaeys, 2007) focus on the suggestion that CSR should be one of the core functions of the universities. Kantanen (2004) claims that universities play a vital role in social development as well as economic growth, and therefore, the purpose and function of a university must be for the benefit of the society. Vasilescu, Barna, Epure, and Baicu (2010) argues that universities are considered as a pillar of the society. Kotecha (2010) highlights that "the need for a wider debate around the role of public universities in promoting the public good and in helping to address development challenges facing our society." As a result, adopting of CSR is suggested as a suitable approach for universities to become responsible corporate citizens for stakeholders, communities, and societies (Alzyoud & Bani - Hani, 2015).

In a recent study, Parson (2014) claims that CSR should be recognised as one of intrinsic characteristics of universities and be embedded with their functions. Parson (2014) further explains that CSR is a part of the core function of the university and it cannot be viewed separately. It is one of the approaches used by the university's management to oversee the university (internal dimension) and to maintain a reputation outside the university (external dimension). In addition to this, Vallaeys (2007) suggests that social responsibility is not a philanthropic activity but rather an orientation that is integrated into the mandate and programming of the university. Hayter and Cahoy (2018) take an instrumental perspective to continue with a similar argument. They argue that CSR at universities is a strategic initiative that is deeply rooted in universities' infrastructures. Consequently, the infrastructure that is aligned with CSR allows to maximise universities' social impact through "the alignment of strategy and resources."

Universities have used the principles of CSR as a way to understand the linkage between their internal operations and the external impact on local communities and society (Brown & Cloke, 2009). Such a linkage has been previously promoted in the business sector (Castka et al., 2004a,b). The literature shows that to a certain extent, CSR has influenced universities' operations. In the United States, a university alliance—Campus Compact—is committed to imbuing students with valuable skills through students' involvement in community service activities (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Rosner & Stephens, 2000). In Sweden, interaction with the community as a service component of a tertiary institution was incorporated into the University Act in 1998. In Finland, the University Act has been improved by streamlining the social role of universities. Universities are expected to engage and interact with the community and share their research findings as one of the university's social contributions (Kantanen, 2004). In Thailand, universities are expected by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to focus more on social development and communities in the Asian region and worldwide (Sinhaneti, 2011). The role of universities to meet a societal demand for producing professional leaders for responsible business has also received a great attention from the United Nations (UN). Under the UN umbrella, the Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative was launched in 2007 to facilitate the new future of universities. The aim of the Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative is to encourage universities, particularly business schools, to adopt CSR in all disciplines of teaching methodologies, curricula, research, and university's strategies.

Overall, this literature suggests that progress has been made in implementing CSR on an international scale. Yet, at the same time, little has been written on CSR's institutionalisation in the context of universities in developing countries.

2.2 | CSR in Malaysia

As a developing country, Malaysia started to experience a trend of growth in CSR activities two decades ago (Nasir, Halim, Sallem, Jasni & Aziz, 2015). Recently, the involvement of the government in CSR has received more attention from scholars in Malaysia (Ismail, 2011; Lu & Castka, 2009). Amran and Devi (2007) explored the influence of government in CSR reporting among companies in Malaysia, revealing that the government has a significant role to play in influencing the implementation of CSR practices more intensively. In Vision 2020, of the nine challenges initiated by the Malaysian government, three are CSR-related initiatives and include moral and ethical communities, a caring society, and an economically just society.

In Malaysia, public universities are closely monitored by the government through the MOHE, which also provides funding to universities (Mok, 2010). Similar to other sectors in the Malaysian economy, the MOHE plays a significant role in leading the institutionalisation of CSR in the Malaysian higher education sector. The work of the MOHE is guided by Malaysia's National Blue Ocean Strategy. The impact of the MOHE is illustrated by this quote from the participants in this research:

> I believe the encouragement from MOHE has caused wide-spread of CSR in all the universities. The government gives funding to us to implement CSR. After CSR is established, we have a monitoring process. MOHE will make sure that all the processes work properly. There is a reporting process and we have to report on the activities we have done back to them.

2.3 | Key aspects in studying CSR institutionalisation

This study takes an organisation-centric approach to studying CSR institutionalisation. In other words, the study focuses on the institutionalisation within individual universities and focuses on scrutinising university approaches to CSR and what outcomes universities achieve. The study takes an instrumental approach (Garriga & Mele, 2004) and focuses on the potential of organisations' benefit as a result of engaging in CSR. The following aspects are used as a conceptual basis for the study.

2.3.1 | CSR drivers

Understanding the drivers of adoption is often considered key in CSR-related studies, in particular in studies into institutionalisation (Lu & Castka, 2009). The landmark papers of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 1991) conceptualise the coercive, mimetic, and normative forces. Many followed the footpath of institutional theory—considered to be an effective approach to understanding organisations (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Lammers, 2011). Amran and Devi (2007) suggest that the institutionalisation of CSR is indeed influenced by normative, coercive, and cognitive pressures (Castka & Balzarova, 2008) and recommend this approach especially for the public and nonprofit sector.

The coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures are embedded in every context, shaping and reinforcing social routines in organisations (Zucker, 1987). The institutional theory proposes that organisations adopt forms and policies that are in line with expectations that are considered legitimate in their environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For this reason, organisations will respond to these pressures in order to appear legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), given that organisations are social institutions that need legitimacy in order to survive and develop (Johansen & Nielsen, 2012; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). In this study, a particular consideration is given to the institutional forces especially because of the coercive pressure that universities face from the government. At the same time, it is also recognised, that some organisations do not necessarily seek legitimacy and can be proactive in the institutionalisation process (see, for instance, Castka & Balzarova, 2018; Castka, 2018).

2.3.2 | The internal context as a "host"

Apart from understanding of the drives, it is also important to comprehend the internal context of an organisation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). *Internal context* refers to anything within the organisation that affects the operation of the organisation as it attempts to achieve its objectives (Pojasek, 2013). Examples of internal context are governance and management structures, existing policies and objectives, resources, cultures, decision-making processes, and operating models adopted by organisations (Cherunilam, 2010). The organisation's decisions and strategies are influenced by this context and therefore affect organisation's success and survival (Cherunilam, 2010; Pojasek, 2013).

In the case of universities, *internal context* refers to the operations of the universities. The study therefore scrutinises the internal context in terms of demographics, presence of best practices and the maturity of the universities' practices, policies and regulations; and the research performance of the universities. In general, the approach is to understand how the universities operate and, consequently, how the operation and contextual variables impact the institutionalisation of CSR (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

2.3.3 | Initiation and evolution of CSR

The CSR adoption and its institutionalisation is a temporal process: starting from initiation and later focusing on the evolution of CSR. The literature suggests that it is important to understand how the decision is framed and how organisations proceed with the adoption—both affecting the outcomes (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976). The early implementation phase encompasses all decisions related to implementation: why universities decided to adopt and how the adoption was planned. This early phase is also closely related with the CSR drivers, for example, the institutional forces that influence the adoption of CSR. In the case of CSR in higher education in Malaysia, it is mainly related to the pressure from the Ministry (MOHE). In response to this pressure, universities decide on the adoption and its plan. Furthermore, the universities also decide on how to proceed with the adoption. The literature suggest that the adoption should be measured by investigating the degree of stability and the degree of pace (Lawrence, Winn, Jennings, & Winn, 2001; the details are further discussed in Section 3.3).

2.3.4 | CSR outcomes

Finally, at the organisational level, the adoption and institutionalisation of CSR produces distinct outcomes and leads to CSR-related benefits. The details on outcomes and how the outcomes are measured are provided in Section 3.3.

3 | RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 | Selection of case study organisations

The case study sites were public universities in Malaysia. There are 20 public universities in Malaysia. Public universities are differentiated into three categories: (a) research universities, (b) comprehensive universities, and (c) focused universities. From these 20 public universities, six were selected for this study—two from each category. The cases were selected on the basis of purposive sampling (Creswell, 2005) while also aiming at a reasonable number of cases. Eisenhardt (1989) recommends 4–10 cases for investigation of complex problems—such as the problem that is reported in this paper. The researchers consulted with the experts in the field to get the most stratified sample of cases possible. Furthermore, the saturation logic served as another check for case selection (Yin, 1994). In line with this

logic, saturation means that no issues were omitted from the investigation. Saturation was observed across all variables in our sample, and therefore, no further case study organisations were added to the initial set of six cases.

3.2 | Data sources

Data for this study were gathered from several sources: (a) semistructured interviews, (b) annual reports, and (c) the MyRA. Semistructured interviews were conducted in each university; a total of 28 respondents were interviewed. Social responsibility reports were obtained from each university, and a total of 27 reports were analysed. Data on research performance were obtained from the MyRA; a total of 12 assessments were included in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the case study universities and the data sources for this study.

The semistructured interviews were conducted from December 2014 to January 2015. The interviews were conducted on university campuses face-to-face. These interviews were conducted in English or the national language, Bahasa Melayu, upon request by the participants. Each interview session was 45–90 min. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and the transcriptions in Bahasa Melayu were translated into English for data analysis purposes. Secondary data were also utilised. For document analysis, annual reports were used. Annual reports provide a powerful source of information, especially for longitudinal studies, as they can provide valuable insights into the changes to organisations and their processes over time (Barr, Stimpert, & Huff, 1992; Gray, Kouhy, & Lavers, 1995). Annual reports have important advantages for data purposes. Most notably, they are accessible to researchers and are issued on a regular basis with consistent intervals (Othman & Ameer, 2010). In studies of social responsibility, annual reports are considered to be useful sources of knowledge for tracing the development of socially responsible practices in organisations (de Bakker, Ohlosson, den Hond, Tengblad, & Turcotte, 2007) and have thus become credible sources for scholars analysing the development of social responsibility (Alnajjar, 2000; Hossain & Reaz, 2007). The findings were triangulated with semistructured interview data for this study. Twenty-seven annual reports from the six public universities over 5 years from 2011 to 2015 were collected and analysed. The CSR activities of these universities were identified.

3.3 | Variables

Several variables were examined in this research.

3.3.1 | Year established

The case study universities were categorised into one of three groups: (a) established (established in the 1970s or earlier), (b) moderately established (between the late 1970s and up to 2000), and (c) recently established (established on or after the year 2000). The exact year of establishment has been omitted for confidentiality reasons (it would be easy to identify case study organisations if the year of establishment was disclosed).

Student population was determined as (a) high (more than 20,000 students), (b) medium (3,000–10,000 students), or (c) small (less than 3,000 students). The data are based on 2014 data and are sourced.

University category refers to types of universities as defined by Malaysian government. Each university is categorised as a (a) research university, (b) comprehensive university, or (c) focused university.

3.3.2 | Research performance

Data for this variable were obtained from the MyRa. Data were available for the period 2011–2014.

TABLE 1 Case study organisations and data sources

No.	Year established[a]	University type/student population[b]	Interviews (total interviews 28)[c]	Document analysis (total annual reports 27)
1	Established	Research university/medium	4 interviews: 2 TM and 2 MM	University annual reports 2011–2015: section in CSR reports.
2	Established	Research university/medium	4 interviews: 2 TM and 2 MM	University annual reports 2011–2015: section in CSR reports.
3	Middle-aged	Comprehensive university/medium	5 interviews:2 TM and 3 MM	University annual reports from 2011 to 2012. The university did not published the reports in 2013–2015 (was verified by the university's representative).
4	Established	Comprehensive university/large	5 interviews: 2 TM and 3 MM	University annual reports 2011–2015: section in CSR reports.
5	Recent	Focused university/small	6 interviews: 3 TM and 3 MM	University annual reports 2011–2015: section in CSR reports.
6	Recent	Focused university/small	4 interviews: 2 TM and 2 MM	University annual reports 2011–2015: section in CSR reports.

Note. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

[a]Year established is broken down into three categories. The exact year of establishment is left out for confidentiality reasons. [b]Student population is classified as small, medium, or large. [c]TM=Top Management, MM=Middle Management.

3.3.3 | Maturity of CSR practices and activities

This variable was determined as high, medium, or low on the basis of both CSR management practices and CSR activities components. The score was determined as relative to the score of other case study organisations. The data on practices were collected through the interviews with the participants, and details were verified in CSR reports. The question "What kind of CSR policy, regulation, norms, and structures have been carried out in your university over the last 5 years?" was asked to open the discussion with further probing to understand CSR management practices and CSR activities. Both are explained in further detail below:

i. *CSR management practices*. This variable refers to the way each case study organisation approached the management of CSR. CSR management practices included (a) the extent to which a systematic and structured management system was in place, (b) the maturity level of CSR-related policies, (c) the extent to which CSR was an integral part of a university's objectives, (d) the extent to which a university had a clear set of key performance indicators, (e) whether a university measures the impact of its CSR, and (f) the level of staff involvement and level of commitment from senior management. Each element was assessed as high (a strong focus), medium (less clear in focus) or low (vague or unfocused).

ii. *CSR activities*. This refers to a portfolio of activities that each case study organisation pursued. The activities could include (a) community based-research, (b) community and industry-based engagement, (c) collaboration with other universities, (d) knowledge transfer programs, (e) the presence of CSR in the curriculum, (f) a focus on impactful activities, (g) the level of CSR publishing and reporting activities, and (h) the level of student and community services. Again, each element was assessed as high (a strong focus), medium (less clear in focus), or low (vague or unfocused).

3.3.4 | CSR implementation

This variable was determined using two elements. Both elements have been drawn from Lawrence et al. (2001), who assert that the central factor in supporting the stability of institutionalisation processes "is the set of power relations." The two modes of power are referred to as episodic power and systemic power (Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, & Kleysen, 2005). In this research (and consistent with the work of Lawrence et al., 2001), the two elements are as follows:

i. *Degree of pace*. This element evaluated the approach to the implementation of CSR. The cases are categorised as slow (meaning reliance on negotiation with the target of power, which slows the process) and fast (meaning that the implementation does not rely on negotiation with the target, hence leading to rapid change).

ii. *Degree of stability*. This element describes the centrality of CSR in running each university: low (requires continuously repeated application of power to sustain an institution) and high (is embedded in routinised systems that do not require repeated activation).

All definitions are taken from Lawrence et al. (2001). The data were collected through interviews. The probing question "How did the university accomplish its CSR?" was asked and was followed up by probing questions to access the level of pace and stability.

3.3.5 | Initial driver to CSR

This variable refers to the university's involvement with the institutionalisation process. The cases are classified as either (a) leading or (b) following. *Leading* refers to cases where the case study organisation was directly involved in the determination of the CSR institutionalisation process. *Following* refers to cases that were not proactive in the process. The data were collected through interviews. The opening question "What were the driving factors for the university to engage in CSR practices?" was asked, and this was followed by probing questions to understand to what extent the organisation was involved in the CSR institutionalisation process at the country level.

3.3.6 | University benefits

This variable was measured by (a) an increased ability of a university to attract new staff and (b) an increased image and reputation. The overall benefit was based on these two measures and was determined as high, medium, or low relative to other case study organisations. The data were collected through interviews and annual reports. The opening question "Do you think the implementation of CSR has benefited the university and why?" was asked and followed up by probing questions and investigation of the evidence provided in the annual reports.

3.3.7 | Quality of CSR reporting

This variable was based on the evaluation of CSR reports for each university between 2011 and 2015. The criteria for analysis included the extent to which each CSR report (a) detailed CSR practices as policies, (b) detailed a mission and values relating to CSR, (c) offered systematic data relating to CSR activities, (d) offered summaries of key facts and figures, (e) offered CSR data in a comparable format, (f) presented future goals as well as past practices, and (g) included bad news as well as good news. These criteria were based on a study by the Centre for Corporate Citizenship (2010), and university CSR reports were coded by the researchers for the quality of material reported as 1 (*poor*), 2 (*fair*), 3 (*good*), 4 (*very good*), or 5 (*excellent*).

3.4 | Assessing reliability of coding

Reliability refers to the degree of the consistency of the variable through multiple measurements (Milne & Adler, 1999). According to

Collis and Hussey (2014), *reliability* refers to the demonstration that the coding can be repeated with a similar result. The reliable data consequently lead to the rigor in interpretations and findings (Creswell, 2009). In this study, reliability was determined on the basis of inter-rater agreement (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). This method is utilised to confirm the data gathered are reliable and without significant bias (Burnard et al., 2008; Deegan & Gordon, 1996). The coding was performed by two researchers independently, and the consistency was compared. After the initial round of training, the agreement between coders was constantly above 80%, proving a high level of consistency (Miles et al., 2014).

3.5 | Approach to data analysis

The data analysis process followed suggestions from Miles et al. (2014). Miles et al. (2014) propose that the process of data analysis is described by a concurrent flow of activities: (1) data condensation, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing or verification. Data condensation involves selecting, focusing, abstracting, and/or transforming data to complete texts of interview transcripts, written-up field notes, and documents. Such interaction was employed at two different levels: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. The within-case analysis involved coding of the set of variables (presented in Section 3.3). It should be noted that the final set of variables emerged as part of this process. Despite having the conceptual framework at the beginning (see Section 2.3), the variables were fine-tuned based on the coding of the data during the within-case analysis. The outcome of this stage of the research was coding of the variables in each case study university.

Next, the researchers started to compare the cases in order to explain the interrelationships amongst variables—cross-case analysis. The analysis started with meta-matrices (presented in Section 4). These tables show the relationship between variables and outcomes. Based on the findings from these tables, the researchers went back to the data to verify the relationships and to seek further explanations. As a result of this exercise, a set of propositions were formulated. After this analysis of relationships based on meta-matrices was finished, a configurational approach was employed to investigate if the outcomes could be explained by various combinations of variables. FsQCA software was utilised for this analysis (Ragin, 2008b). The fsQCA software allowed us to model the outcomes and to propose a set of pathways to an outcome. In line with the suggestion of Ragin (2008a), the cut-off point for consistency was set to 80%, and only the models above this threshold are presented in the findings of this paper.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Explaining the benefits from CSR

The Malaysian universities in our sample reported different levels of benefits from CSR in their organisations. Table 2 provides an overview

TABLE 2 Cross case comparisons—Variables linked to benefits from CSR

Case	Research performance (MyRA, 2011)	Research performance (MyRA, 2014)	Degree of stability	Benefits
1	6	6	Low	Low
2	6	6	Low	Low
3	5	4	High	High
4	2	3	High	High
5	1	3	Low	Medium
6	2	3	Low	High

Note. CSR = corporate social responsibility; MyRA = Malaysian Research Assessment.

of the results across the cases and also shows results of research performance of each university. In the interest of clarity, only variables with significant relationships are shown in the table (in this case, degree of stability and research performance; see Section 3.3. for the detailed explanation of each variable).

First, research performance of each case study university is negatively associated with the level of benefits from CSR. As it is evident from Table 2, high research performers (Cases 1 and 2) report low benefits from CSR. Both case study universities scored the maximum score in the MyRA in the last two assessments and also have high performance over time (as evident from the results of 2011 and 2014 assessments; see Table 2). Conversely, other case study universities (which score significantly lower in research performance) report high benefits (Cases 3 and 4) from CSR. Case 5 is further evidence of the impact of research performance on benefits: This case study university improved research performance faster (in comparison with other cases) and reports medium benefits from CSR.

> **Proposition 1a.** High levels of research performance are associated with lower levels of benefits from CSR.

The degree of stability indicates a centrality of CSR in running of each university, hence their approach toward CSR. Low stability is manifested by an ad hoc management of CSR. That is, CSR is not fully embedded in the operational context of an organisation. High-research-performing universities have low degrees of CSR stability, indicating that CSR efforts need to be repeatedly activated by the management (Lawrence et al., 2001). In contrast, high stability involves routine or ongoing activities, and no continuous stimulation is needed from the management. This leads to more stable and highly established CSR. High stability means CSR is no longer being added, deleted, or transformed (Lawrence et al., 2001; Lawrence, 2008).

Table 2 reveals a positive association between degree of stability and benefits. Cases 3 and 4 show that a high degree of stability is important in reaping the high benefits of CSR. According to Lawrence et al. (2001) high stability assumes organisations handle CSR as an ongoing activity and, as a result, achieve stability in CSR. High stability can be manifested in several ways. For instance, CSR might be closely embedded in the curriculum in a case study organisation.

On the other hand, low stability tends to be associated with low levels of benefits. Cases 1 and 2 are examples of such negative association. A low degree of stability means that CSR is based on project activities and not embedded in daily routines. Cases 1 and 2 pursue a project-based approach and, more importantly, focus on the leverage of their expertise through community-based projects. The only exception is Case 6, where a low degree of stability leads to high benefits. In this organisation, the low degree of stability is moderated by a low level of research performance. Despite the unusual finding in Case 6, the overtrend in between the organisations leads to the following proposition.

> **Proposition 1b.** *The higher degree of stability of CSR in organisations is associated with higher benefits from CSR.*

4.2 | A configurational analysis of antecedents leading to high or low benefit

The previous section focused on the discussion of relations among the key variables of interest. In continuation of this discussion, this section further analyses the cases using a configurational approach. This analysis is done in two steps. First, variables (antecedents) that lead to high benefits are scrutinised. Second, the analysis also focuses on variables leading to low benefits. The configurational approach assumes that there are one or more pathways leading to an outcome (here, the outcome is high or low benefits from CSR). Tables 3 and 4 provide an overview of the results. "⦁" refers to logical AND, and "~" represents a negation of a condition. For instance, Model 1 in Table 3 reports that universities with a high degree of stability, a low degree of pace, low research performance, a low initial driver to CSR, and a low level of maturity of CSR practices achieve high benefits form CSR. All tables also report key measurement terms—solution coverage (measures the proportion of memberships in the outcome that is explained by the complete solution) and solution consistency (measures the degree to which membership in the solution [the set

of solution terms] is a subset of membership in the outcome)—as suggested by Ragin (2008b).

There exist three pathways leading to high benefits from CSR (Models 1–3, Table 3). There is only one path leading to low benefits. All models show high levels of coverage and consistency as specified by Ragin (2008b). Noticeable from both tables is a consistent negative (positive) research performance that leads to low (high) benefits from CSR. Therefore, Proposition 1a is also confirmed if a configurational analysis is considered. Consistent with previous discussion on the role of the degree of stability and benefits from CSR, there exist two paths in which a high degree of stability is associated with high benefits. However, there also exists a path in which a low degree of stability leads to high benefits. This combination further consists of a high degree of pace, low research performance, a low initial driver, and high maturity of CSR practices. Therefore, Proposition 1b appears too limited from a complexity perspective. Still, it is likely that in a large sample, and employing a symmetrical statistical analysis, this proposition would stand.

4.3 | Explaining the quality of CSR reporting

The assessment of 5-year CSR reports (2011–2015) from six case studies demonstrates a different level of quality of CSR reporting. The relationship between quality of CSR reporting and a set of influential variables is presented in Table 5 and discussed in this section.

First, the impact on the initial driver to CSR seems to be particularly influential in explaining the quality of CSR reporting. Cases 1, 2, and 4 encompass organisations that were considered as "leading" in the institutionalisation process in the tertiary sector. These three cases show that this approach is associated with higher quality of CSR reporting.

On the other hand, there was a significantly different result for universities where the driver was classified as "following" (Cases 3, 5, and 6). In line with the institutional literature, *following* refers to a mimetic approach (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of this

TABLE 3 Antecedent conditions leading to high benefits from CSR

Model	Degree of Stability	Degree of Pace	Research Performance	Initial Driver to CSR	Maturity of CSR practices	Coverage		Consistency
						Raw	Unique	
1	⦁	~	~	~	~	0.37	0.22	1.00
2	~	⦁	~	~	⦁	0.38	0.24	1.00
3	⦁	⦁	~	⦁	⦁	0.38	0.24	1.00

Note. Solution coverage: 0.84; solution consistency: 1.00. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

TABLE 4 Antecedent conditions leading to low benefits from CSR

Model	Antecedent conditions					Coverage		Consistency
	Degree of stability	Degree of pace	Research performance	Initial driver to CSR	Maturity of CSR practices	Raw	Unique	
4	~	⦁	⦁	⦁	⦁	0.80	0.80	1.00

Note. Solution coverage: 0.81; solution consistency: 1.00. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

TABLE 5 Cross-case comparisons—Variables linked to quality of reporting

Initial driver to CSR	Maturity of CSR practices and activities	Research performance (2011)	Research performance (2014)	Degree of pace	Quality of CSR reporting
Leading	High	6	6	Fast	High
Leading	High	6	6	Fast	High
Following	Low	5	4	Slow	Low
Leading	High	2	3	Fast	High
Following	Medium	1	3	Slow	Medium
Following	High	2	3	Fast	Medium

Note. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

study, *following* means that the organisations (universities) tend to observe others and imitate other organisations to establish and develop CSR. It often means that the organisation is not proactively working with other stakeholders to shape up what CSR will mean for the sector.

> **Proposition 2a.** *The leading (following) nature of the initial driver to CSR leads to the higher (lower) quality of CSR reporting.*

The second variable of interest is the maturity of CSR practices and activities. Table 5 shows mostly positive association between the maturity of CSR and the quality of CSR reporting. Cases 1, 2, and 4 show a high degree of maturity. For instance, in Case 1, CSR has changed to more staff involvement, a systematic approach in CSR operations, and a more effectively structured management.

The maturity of CSR practices and activities can also be observed from CSR reports, for example, the number of CSR programs conducted by the students. In Case 4, the number of programs conducted (main campus only) was reported at about 200 programs in 2012, and the numbers have increased by 192% in 2013. In 2014, the numbers continued to increase by 2% and finally reaching 17% in 2015. The consistent increment of CSR programs in the 4-year duration (2012–2015) supports the relationship between a high degree of CSR maturity and a high quality of CSR reporting.

> **Proposition 2b.** *The higher degree of maturity of CSR is associated with higher quality of CSR reporting.*

The third variable of interest is the degree of pace. Table 5 shows a positive relationship between the degree of pace and quality of CSR reporting. The degree of pace is defined as a length of time for the evolution and institutionalisation of CSR (Lawrence et al., 2001). The pace of CSR is divided into two levels: the fast pace and the slow pace. The fast pace means CSR is directed and needs a continuous encouragement from the management, whereas the slow pace means that the CSR is adopted and negotiated.

Cases 1, 2, 4, and 5 indicate that a fast pace leads to high (or medium) quality level of CSR reporting. For instance, in Case 1, CSR is directed by the top management. CSR has become an important component in their key performance indicator and one of the criteria for internal promotion. Therefore, the involvement in CSR is compulsory and not negotiated. Such approach ensures that the reporting is timely managed and of high quality. In contrast, a slow pace of CSR

is associated with medium and low quality of CSR reporting. This is evidenced in Cases 3 and 5. Even though such approach may be beneficial in the long run, it negatively affects the quality of reporting.

> **Proposition 2c.** *The fast (slow) degree of pace is associated with higher (lower) quality of CSR reporting.*

The fourth variable of interest is research performance. There is a positive relationship between the level of research performance and quality of CSR reporting. The rating of research performance is the assessment exercise in the MyRA by the MOHE. For example, in Cases 1 and 2, both scored maximum ratings and were identified as high performers for 2 years with high performance over time and producing high quality of reporting. In contrast, lower research performers show low or medium quality of reporting (cases 5 and 6, for instance). Case 4 shows that a decreasing research performance is also associated with a low level of quality of reporting (even though this is just one case in the study).

> **Proposition 2d.** *High levels of research performance are associated with high quality of CSR reporting.*

4.4 | A configurational analysis of antecedents leading to high or low CSR reporting

In this section, a configurational analysis is further employed to scrutinise a relationship between antecedent conditions and an outcome of interest (high and low quality of CSR reporting). Tables 6 and 7 present the results obtained from the analysis.

The analysis is performed in two stages. First, the relationship between the variables (antecedents) that lead to a high quality of CSR reporting was analysed. As a result, two pathways were identified (Models 5 and 6; Table 6). Second, the variables that lead to a low quality of reporting were scrutinised and revealed one pathway (Model 7, Table 7). All models show high levels of coverage and consistency as specified by Ragin (2008b).

The results indicate three out of four antecedent conditions are symmetrical in nature, also confirming the propositions that were previously discussed. For instance, the *initial driver to CSR* antecedent condition appears positive in Models 5 and 6 and negative in Model 7. This result would suggest a support for Proposition 2a. Similar observation is made for the two other antecedent conditions (degree of pace and maturity of CSR practices and activities). Hence,

TABLE 6 Antecedent conditions leading to high quality of reporting

Model	Degree of stability	Degree of pace	Research performance	Initial driver to CSR	Maturity of CSR practices	Coverage Raw	Unique	Consistency
5	•	•	~	•	•	0.34	0.21	1.00
6	~	•	•	•	•	0.55	0.42	1.00

Note. Solution coverage: 0.76; solution consistency: 1.00. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

TABLE 7 Antecedent conditions leading to low quality of reporting

Model	Degree of stability	Degree of pace	Research performance	Initial driver to CSR	Maturity of CSR practices	Coverage Raw	Unique	Consistency
7	•	~	~	~	~	0.57	0.57	1.00

Note. Solution coverage: 0.57; solution consistency: 1.00. CSR = corporate social responsibility.

Propositions 2b and 2c are aligned with the configurational analysis as well. However, both positive and negative research performance lead to high-quality reporting, suggesting that both alternatives are possible. At the same, the low degree of research performance is offset by the high degree of stability, and high research performers (with low stability) also achieve a high level of quality of reporting. Therefore, Proposition 2d is not fully supported. Similarly to the arguments on Section 4.2, the proposition might appear significant if a larger sample of universities is investigated.

5 | DISCUSSION

The institutionalisation of CSR is a complex process. This research scrutinises the institutionalisation at the organisational level (e.g., individual cases of universities) and provides several important findings that are organised into four takeaways. First, CSR is more impactful for less established universities (typically nonresearch universities), and these universities benefit more from CSR. Second, the coercive, mimetic, and normative forces at the sectoral level (e.g., tertiary sector in Malaysia) impact on the institutionalisation of CSR at the organisational level (e.g., individual universities), yet, at the same time, the strategic forces are of high importance as well. This finding suggests that the old and new institutional theories are both at play in the institutionalisation of CSR—a point that it is discussed further. Third, to achieve high benefits and high quality of reporting, universities can adopt different approaches. However, poor benefits and low-quality reporting are clearly explained by a single pathway. Therefore, this study supports the underlying nature of configuration approach (Fiss, 2007). In other words, this study proposes that there are multiple pathways to successful outcomes. CSR literature has not paid attention to the configurational approach, and this study contributes to the literature by enhancing this approach. Fourth, all universities improve their reporting over time; however, universities with a high level of CSR practices and a high level of initial maturity are more consistent in improving the quality of reporting. In other words, the established universities and universities with a high level of CSR practices and proactive universities have better competence in achieving

highly institutionalised practices such as reporting. Next, all four takeaways are discussed in detail.

> **Takeaway 1:** *CSR is more impactful for less established universities (or nonresearch universities), and these universities benefit more from CSR.*

The first takeaway suggests that universities realise different benefits from CSR. In other words, the level of research performance is negatively associated with the benefits of CSR. The findings of this study indicate that the higher research performers (Cases 1 and 2) have realised less of the CSR benefits. As presented in Section 4.1, both case study organisations have high performance in the MyRA for 2 years and consistent high performance with the maximum score over time. But they report low benefits. In contrast, the organisations that score significantly lower in research performance realise more of CSR benefits in their organisations.

Up to now, the literature has not covered the relationship between the degree of universities' research performance and the CSR benefits. There is a significant number of studies that scrutinise CSR and its benefits to higher education. For example, studies show a positive reputation and strong competitive advantage to higher education institution (i.e., Ahmad, 2012; Dahan & Senol, 2012; Ezekiel, Ruth, & Emmanuel, 2013; Mehta, 2011) and improvement of graduates' employability after attaining higher education (Marinescu, Toma, & Constantin, 2010).

Mehta (2011) argues that the benefits of CSR are not only for communities but also for the benefit of the universities. Therefore, CSR has become a long-term strategy for universities to establish their positive image and sustain their academic businesses in a competitive marketplace (Ezekiel et al., 2013; Othman & Othman, 2014). In the same vein, Ansoff (1977) states that in the business world, the corporation is successful in CSR practices if the benefits of the CSR can be seen in communities that it is serving. Porter and Kramer (2006) argue that in terms of corporate reputation, a corporation employs CSR to justify that it will improve their image, strengthen its product, and raise the value of its stock. Likewise, the higher education sector perceives CSR as an important marketing strategy to increase the employability of its graduates (Marinescu et al., 2010). Universities realise that in a

competitive marketplace, one of the strategies for their survival is to produce the quality of graduates defined by their employability. Overall, the literature seems to suggest that universities will benefit from employing CSR. This study adds to this literature by showing that the level of CSR actually determines the realisation of the benefits. High research performers are well equipped to embrace CSR as an institutional practice, but, at the same time, the benefits from CSR are lower in comparison with universities that are developing and that has a low level of research performance.

> **Takeaway 2:** *Coercive, mimetic, and normative forces at the sectoral level impact on the institutionalization of CSR, yet, at the same time, the strategic forces are of high importance as well*

.The institutionalisation is often impacted by coercive, mimetic, and normative forces (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These forces are important in the institutionalisation process of CSR. For instance, the actions by the government and HE Ministry is a clear sign of a coercive force that puts pressure on universities to embrace CSR and to follow its principles in order to comply to ministerial directives. It is unlikely that CSR would progress at such pace and with such a scope in the tertiary sector. However, it is also notable that many institutions have adopted a very proactive and strategic position (captured in the variable *initial driver to CSR*). These organisations are well-established players, and though they did not realise many benefits (as discussed in the previous section), these organisations used their proactive approaches to develop a better compliance with institutional practices (in the case of this study, quality of reporting, as discussed later).

> **Takeaway 3:** *There are different pathways to successful outcomes (e.g., low or high CSR benefits and low or high quality of CSR reporting).*

As previously noted, this study used the configurational approach to identify configurations of antecedent conditions (degree of stability, degree of pace, research performance, initial driver to CSR, and maturity of CSR practices and activities) that are associated with the outcome of interest (CSR benefits and quality of CSR reporting). It was identified that the universities can utilise a different pathway to achieve a high level of CSR benefits and a high quality level of CSR reporting. In Table 3, three pathways were discovered leading to the high benefits of CSR. While, in Table 6, two pathways were revealed leading to the high quality of CSR reporting. In contrast, the case of lower benefits of CSR and lower quality level of CSR reporting is clearly explained by a single pathway. This study proposes that there are multiple pathways leading to the successful outcomes. This means that the universities are potentially able to follow more than one pathway of CSR benefits associated with high benefits and quality of CSR reporting. At the same time, for both outcomes, there is only a single pathway leading to poor outcomes.

The configurational approach may carry important implications for the CSR literature. It provides an added value for better understanding of alternative configurations for organisations to achieve a positive outcome. This study supports the underlying nature of the configuration approach that the configurational analysis is not designed to identify the effect of the independent variable of a possible outcome. But it helps to identify a causal configuration of conditions, which relate to an outcome (Fiss, Cambre, & Marx, 2013; Ragin, 2008b), and also provides as alternative pathways towards the outcome (Andrews, Beynon, & McDermott, 2016). To the knowledge of the authors, no previous study in this area has utilised this approach.

> **Takeaway 4:** *All universities improve their reporting over time; however, universities with a high level of CSR practices and a high level of initial maturity are more consistent in improving the quality of reporting.*

CSR reporting is an important aspect of CSR institutionalisation (Milne & Adler, 1999). The studies largely disagree if the reporting is a symbolic practice or if reporting produces substantial account of the real organisational practices. In the case of tertiary institutions in Malaysia, the reporting has been mandated by the government, and every institution has to submit a CSR report on an annual basis. The study suggests universities with higher maturity of CSR practices and activities and those who proactively address CSR at the sectoral level (initial driver to CSR), provide better CSR reports. Especially, research-based universities are able to leverage their internal competence to provide strong CSR reporting. In other words, the established universities and universities with a high level of CSR practices and proactive universities have better competence in achieving highly institutionalised practices such as reporting.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are numerous opportunities that stem from this research. First, the presented study could be enhanced by using different samples. The study included six case studies from 20 public universities and from three categories of universities in Malaysia. Future studies might include more cases and also include private universities. This study was limited to public universities in Malaysia, and it is not intended to be generalised to all universities in Malaysia. The findings from this study can be also expanded by focusing on other government organisations or nongovernment organisations.

Second, the researchers may focus on a more in-depth study in one or two case study organisations. Such an approach would allow to consider a larger set of internal participants as well as to extend the participation of additional stakeholders such as the nongovernment organisations, industries, and community associations. By doing so, the findings would expand the current study and may provide further insight into CSR in public universities in Malaysia. The current study provides a substantial basis for such research. This study was not set up to examine all aspects of the role of the government in the institutionalisation of CSR, that is, the influence of the MOHE in

the CSR agenda in universities. This is because the main objective was to examine the process at the organisational level (e.g., university level). The role of the government and the government's influence should be further explored.

Fourth, the context of this study is Malaysia. Future research might compare the institutionalisation of CSR in Malaysian universities with that of universities from other developing countries, for example, Indonesia or Thailand. In Thailand, for example, universities have a lack of understanding of the term *social responsibility*, and social responsibility is used as a tool for marketing strategy. Therefore, universities are required to do the "right thing" in order to ensure that CSR in universities can benefit the society and the world (Sawasdikosol, 2009). On the other hand, CSR in Indonesian universities is not only for employability of students after graduation, but it is perceived as a platform for the students to continuously engage with society after attaining a higher education (Asia-Europe Education Workshop Knowledge Societies, 2011).

Finally, a longitudinal approach might provide further understanding about the institutionalisation of CSR. This study has considered some longitudinal aspects in the research (such as research performance of universities), yet the investigation within the case was conducted in a relatively short period of time. A longer window, 5–10 years, might tell more about the institutionalisation processes. It would also be of interest whether the configurations amend over time, and this aspect of research also provides opportunity for further study. It would therefore be important to identify whether the configurations observed in this study are present in longer time periods and in other organisational settings, for example, the private universities. In particular, the findings are premised on six cases, which may have limited the minimisation that emerged from the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), due to the relatively high degree of limited diversity. Nevertheless, the presented study provides a useful platform for such future studies.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents empirical evidence of the institutionalisation of CSR in Malaysian universities. This study is qualitative in nature and is based on the data collected in the case study organisations as well as draws from publicly available data. This study takes a "what and how" perspective at the organisation level (Miles et al., 2014) and investigates the institutionalisation by looking at the initial stage, the evolution stage, and the outcomes. In particular, this study focuses on the role on the internal university context, university approaches to institutionalisation (conceptualised by degree of pace and degree of stability), the role of initial drivers for CSR, and universities' research performance on CSR outcomes (conceptualised as benefits from CSR and quality of the CSR reporting). This study proposes six propositions that describe the relationship between elements (degree of stability, degree of pace, research performance, initial driver to CSR, and maturity of CSR practices and activities) that are associated with the outcomes of interest (CSR benefits and

quality of CSR reporting). This study contributes to research on CSR by providing a novel approach to studying the CSR institutionalisation process (by developing a set of variables and adopting a configurational approach) from an instrumental perspective. This study also provides a comprehensive insight of CSR institutionalisation for policy makers. The four takeaways reveal which variables and pathways lead to outcome benefits. Policy makers should consider these findings when setting up their CSR agenda.

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