

CORPORATE CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION-RELATED CAUSES: DO BOARD CHARACTERISTICS MATTER? A PROPOSAL

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Abstract: *The diverse characteristics of board members offer different perspectives on strategy and the implementation of philanthropic initiatives. Since the board of directors plays a key role in shaping corporate philanthropy decisions, further research is needed to explore how board characteristics influence these practices, particularly in the context of education-related causes. Thus, this article suggests a theoretical framework based on resource dependency theory to explore the possible relationship between board size, director independence, education level, field of study, gender diversity, and corporate contributions to education – related causes. The article aims to contribute to the literature on corporate philanthropy and resource dependency theory. Additionally, the recommendations offered may provide valuable insights for companies and stakeholders when assessing board member criteria, focusing not only on general social development but also on supporting the growth of the education sector.*

Keywords: *corporate social responsibility; corporate philanthropy; board of directors; education – related contributions.*

Research Background

Since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, education has become a key factor in socioeconomic growth. Over the years, there have been substantial changes in Malaysia's educational system, with a focus on equity, accessibility, and quality. In the 2023 budget, as much as RM55.2 billion and RM15.3 billion have been allocated to the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The focus on education by the Malaysian government continues as the MOE obtained the highest allocation in Malaysia Budget 2025 with a total allocation of RM64.1 billion (Rajaendram, 2024).

The Malaysian government has developed various initiatives to dignify the field of education, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) for preschool and post-secondary education and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015-2025) for higher education. Recently, the Education Ministry introduced its Strategic Education Plan 2024 to 2030, which consists of five strategic thrusts (Iskandar, 2024). All of these initiatives are crucial in setting the direction for the country's education system.

Although the national budget consistently allocates one of the greatest amounts to the education sector (Senin et al. 2019), there is no doubt that some issues persist and need to be mitigated. These include the access to (the cost of) higher education, as well as the building and maintenance of schools, universities, and curriculum development, which calls for significant funding.

It is also important to pay attention to the post Coronavirus diseases (COVID-19), which continues to impact the students' capacity to continue their education. Based on the World Bank et al. (2022), the learning poverty¹ rates worldwide have increased from 59% to 70% in the period 2019-2022. It showed some increment as compared to pre COVID-19 with 53%-59% of learning poverty for the period 2015-2019. Even prior to the pandemic, the learning poverty rate in Malaysia has reach 43%. In fact, it was indicated 42% have not achieved the minimum proficiency level in reading by the end of primary school in the year 2019 (World Bank, 2022).

Similarly, the learning difficulties encountered by the B40² students are influenced by family socioeconomic factors. Some B40 students choose to quit school due to the incapacity of paying their school fees while some were dropped out of school to help their families in earning income (Kashfi et al., 2022). There are no exceptions to the disparity between educational facilities in rural areas, some of which continue to lag behind those in cities with greater educational opportunities (Ahmad, 2022). The same is true for the education gap in Sabah, which is particularly pronounced in its rural parts (Ahmad et al., 2022).

The government should not bear the full responsibility of efforts to improve the educational system. Making sure that education remains a priority requires the participation of industry players and private businesses. Previous corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate philanthropy studies indeed show that corporate citizens in Malaysia typically involve in the areas of education for its CSR programmes (Haji, 2013; Hizam et al., 2019; Senin et al. 2019 Yusuf & Joseph, 2025). However, the company, especially the top management, needs to pay greater attention to the area of education by ensuring collaboration between the public and private sectors.

¹ Learning Poverty defines as inability to read and understand a short, age-appropriate text by age 10.

² B40 refers to the "Bottom 40%", which is the 40% of Malaysians who are in the household group with a low socioeconomic position.

It is important given that education is the primary factor in creating future human capital. Private sector particularly the corporations may help to boost access to high-quality education, minimise educational inequities, improve the quality of the workforce, and create relationships with educational institutions by sponsoring infrastructure, offering scholarships, and supporting educational programmes. Nonetheless, collaboration by more private sectors is crucial for the Ministry of Education (MOE) to achieve its national education agenda especially pertaining to children with special needs (“Fadhlin: Education Ministry”, 2024).

The benefits of a smart partnership between these two parties can help to expand knowledge, skills, and expertise, particularly when it comes to sharing data and resources. Information obtained from all parties is helpful for students' future development. Additionally, it can help to reduce the expense and financial strain that the ministry must bear (Senin et al., 2019). While previous studies have acknowledged the important roles of board in making decisions relating to the direction of the company's philanthropic initiatives (Coffey & Wang, 1998; Strandberg, 2008; Lev et al., 2011; Marquis & Lee, 2013; & Cha & Abebe, 2016), specific studies of the board of directors' function from corporate philanthropy perspectives are still limited (Pan & Huang, 2022). Thus, it is crucial to get insights on the characteristics of the board of directors that incline towards corporate philanthropy, especially on the education-related engagement. Undeniably, there were studies that focused on the relationship between top management and corporate philanthropy. However, limited studies were done to test the relationship between board of directors' characteristics and the corporate philanthropic contributions specifically in education causes.

In a nutshell, the article is expected to provide some insights on corporate governance and corporate philanthropy, particularly on the potential association between corporate education-related contribution and the composition of the board of directors.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

As the foundation of a corporation, the board of directors faces a complex environment with pressure from multiple stakeholders, including increased expectations for the company's community engagement in light of the Covid-19 issue that previously harmed the community worldwide (Paine, 2020). Thus, the board must take a proactive approach to ensure the balance between investors' interests and the company's long-term goals (Paine, 2020). One of it through involvement in corporate philanthropy.

Corporate philanthropy refers to voluntary donations by companies in the form of monetary and non-monetary contributions such as donations of equipment and supplies and charitable work (Ahmad et al., 2009). Madden et al. (2006) further define corporate philanthropy as the voluntary donation of cash, time, and in-kind resources, made without expectation of commercial benefit, with the primary aim of supporting the community. In Malaysia, among the common corporate philanthropic contributions made for educational causes include direct cash contributions, sponsorship of education programmes, partnership, scholarship, trainings and volunteering (Hashim, 2018; Senin et al., 2019; Yusuf & Joseph, 2025).

From the perspective of resource dependency theory, the board of directors not only oversees business operations but also plays a key role in providing essential resources, shaping strategy, and offering advice to the company's top management (Zahra & Pearce, 1989). This also include performing consultation function on corporate philanthropy (Pan & Huang, 2022). In this regard, the board significantly influences the company's propensity to corporate

philanthropy (CP) practices (Choi & Wang, 2007). Specifically, board members are instrumental in decisions related to the scope, objectives, activities, and strategic direction of the company's philanthropic efforts (Lev et al., 2011; Marquis & Lee, 2013; Cha & Abebe, 2016).

The combination of directors' education, skill, and experience enables strategic resources to be mobilised which can enhance strategy implementation and decision-making (Yusof, 2013). Boards of directors with relevant and diverse backgrounds are better able to contribute to a wider perspective (Michelon & Parbonetti, 2012; Musa & Oba, 2012). According to Van der Walt and Ingley (2003) and Hambrick et al. (1996), a diverse board of directors is associated with higher business performance due to the ability to gather more information, as well as efficiency and creativity in decision-making, including issues of ethics and social responsibility (Dallas, 2002; Ray, 2005). Perhaps, this enable company to ensure that relevant stakeholders are better served.

According to resource dependency theory, independent directors serve as conduits for diverse resources such as network connections, competence, and reputation (Haniffa & Cooke, 2002). Independent directors offer management recommendations that help to efficiently address the interests of different stakeholders, particularly those related to corporate social responsibility (Chang et al., 2012). They also play their role by promoting the importance of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility in addition to the financial performance of the company (Ibrahim & Angelidis 1995; Mallin & Michelon 2010).

By ensuring corporate's involvement in corporate philanthropy initiatives and social performance, they also help to balance the demands of various stakeholders (Ibrahim et al., 2003; Zhang et al., 2013). Additionally, Yusof et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between board independence and CSR among Malaysian Public Listed Companies.

Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 1: The independence of board of directors is positively associated with the corporate contributions to education-related causes.

A large board member size has been found to have a considerable impact on corporate contributions (Brown et al., 2006; Marquis & Lee, 2013). Wider stakeholder relationships are also a result of a big board size (Brown et al., 2006), which aids in the accomplishment of a variety of social goals. More stakeholder connections mean more pressure on directors to contribute (Marquis & Lee, 2013) possibly in the area of education.

Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 2: The size of board of directors is positively associated with the corporate contributions to education-related causes.

Generosity is positively correlated with higher level of formal education (Wiepking & Mass, 2009). The fact that educated people have higher levels of social values and cognitive abilities than less educated people lends some credence to this supposition. Their capacity to comprehend the needs of others influences the amount of philanthropic gifts they provide. Pro-

social behaviour and charity giving are more likely to occur among those with higher education levels than those with lower education levels (Bekkers & DeGraaf, 2005; Noor et al., 2015).

Students from both undergraduate and graduate levels in America and Europe pay significant attention to the community and social performance aspects of companies in career decision-making. They want to be associated with companies that contribute to the good of society (Backhaus et al., 2002) and are willing to give up financial benefits in order to work for companies that have a better CSR reputation (Montgomery & Ramus, 2003).

One possible explanation for the propensity to contribute is the strong cognitive ability acquired during the learning process, which raises a person's human and social capital. Furthermore, people's regard of higher education may influence their readiness to provide gifts or donations, particularly to educational institutions (Werbel & Carter, 2002). However, Amran and Khalid (2009) argue that managers' education level cannot be seen as a significant factor influencing their decisions or actions on CSR.

Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 3: The education level of the board of directors is positively associated with the corporate contributions to education-related causes.

People having a background in business, economics, or another subfield of social science are more likely to donate to charities than individuals with a background in pure science (Marr et al., 2005). The development of human capital through the application of social science education also helps to promote prosocial behavior. Bekker and DeGraaf (2005) assert that human capital affects the choices made by donors and volunteers. They found that when it comes to prosocial behaviour or activities, especially charitable giving, people with a background in social science are among the most productive. Additionally, they found that those with degrees in economics and law tended to exhibit prosocial behaviour.

Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 4: The social sciences field of study of the board of directors is positively associated with the corporate contributions to education-related causes.

The need for diversity of board members, particularly the participation of women in the boardroom, may help ingest information from various perspectives in the decision-making process (Gul Srinidhi & Ng, 2011). According to Williams (2003), the number of women on the board is correlated with the amount and scope of the company's charitable contributions. The study also found a correlation between corporate funding to community and arts programs and the number of women directors.

The tendency of female directors to focus on corporate social performance is not surprising given that the orientation and thinking towards welfare have been instilled at the education level. Female students tend to pay more attention to corporate social performance than male students (Backhaus et al., 2002). In addition, having women on board has been demonstrated to enhance the company's reputation through its focus on social concerns (Fayad et al., 2022).

Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 5: Women directors are positively associated with the corporate contributions to education-related causes.

The suggested theoretical framework (Figure 1) for this study encompasses the corporate contributions to education-related causes as the dependent variable and the characteristics of the board of directors as the independent variables.

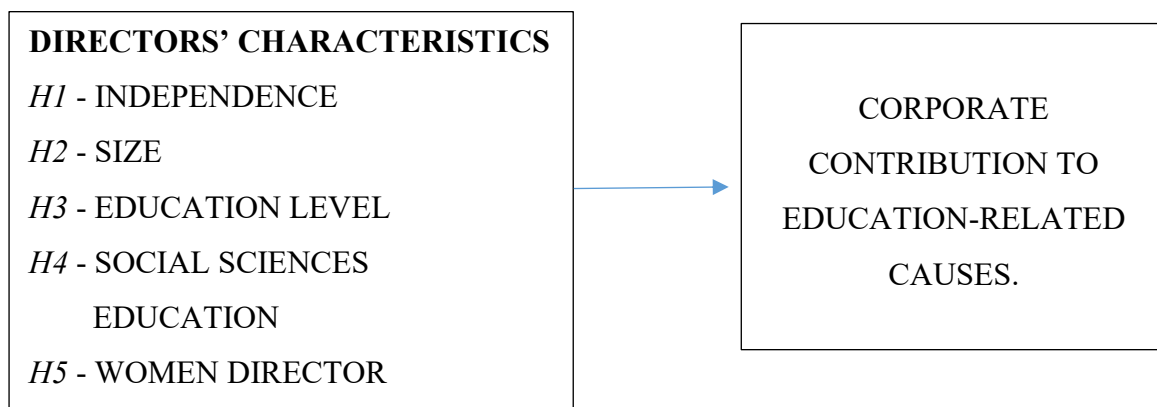


Figure 1: Suggested Theoretical Framework

Methodology

Data from the firm's annual report, integrated report and sustainability report will be used to gather information on the characteristics of the board of directors, the corporate contributions related to education causes, and company characteristics. The company's website and Bursa Malaysia both provide access to the annual report, integrated report and sustainability report. Mainboard companies from Bursa Malaysia will be chosen as a sample. A simple random sampling approach will be applied as this approach offers high generalisation in addition to reducing "bias" in sample selection (Cavana et al., 2001). This study will also employ a panel data approach using firm-year observations to capture the possible association between board characteristics and the corporate contributions to education-related over time.

To achieve the first objective of the study, content analysis will be applied. This method is seen as relevant in identifying philanthropic contributions related to education causes carried out by corporations through disclosure in the annual and sustainability reports. In order to achieve the second objective of the study, regression analysis will be used to identify the characteristics of board members that may influence the corporate contributions to education-related made by public listed companies in Malaysia.

The dependent variable of the study will be measured by the total corporate contributions in Ringgit Malaysia (RM) to education-related causes as reported in the reports. The measurement is adapted from Ahmad (2010) which measures corporate philanthropy involvement as the total of charitable contributions of both monetary (cash) and various other non-monetary (non-cash) giving as reported by firm in the key reports. However, the measurement in the current proposal is only focusing on the total contributions of monetary (cash) and other non-monetary (non-cash) giving in RM specifically to education-related causes. Table 1 summarises the measurements of five suggested independent variables namely the board independence, board

size, board level of education, board with social sciences education and women director. This include the measurement of the dependent variable.

Table 1: Variables Measurement

Dependent Variable	Definition / Measurement	Adapted From
Corporate contributions to education-related causes.	Total monetary (cash) and non-monetary (non-cash) contributions in Ringgit Malaysia to education-related causes.	Ahmad (2010)
Independent Variables		
Board independence	The proportion of independent board members to the total board members.	Fayad et al. (2022); Halid et al. (2021); Qaderi et al. (2022).
Board size	Total number of board members	Fayad et al. (2022); Halid et al. (2021); Vitolla et al. (2020); Qaderi et al. (2022).
Board level of education	The proportion of board members who hold an advanced degree (Masters and above) to the total board members.	Alexandrina (2013); Hashim (2018).
Board with social sciences education	The proportion of board members with social sciences-related education background to the total board members.	Hashim (2018).
Women director (s)	The proportion of women director (s) to the total board members.	Coffey & Wang (1998); Musa & Oba (2012); Chouaibi et al. (2022); Qaderi et al. (2022).

Conclusion

The diverse characteristics of board members offer different perspectives in terms of corporate strategy and contributions to education-related causes. Given that the board of directors makes decisions about corporate philanthropy involvement in part, if not entirely, further work is required to examine the relationship between the traits of the boards and these practices, especially from an educational causes perspective. Therefore, this study examines the possible association between directors' size, independence, level of education, field of study, and women directors and corporate contribution to education-related causes. The perspective presented in this article is expected to serve as a bridge to enrich the literature on corporate philanthropy and resource dependence theory. In addition, the recommendations from this article can also assist firms and stakeholders in examining the criteria for board members that not only contribute to general social development as a whole but also support the development of the education sector.

It is suggested that future research should investigate other board of directors' attributes including the directors' age, social status, community influence and perhaps country where directors obtained their tertiary education. Further study also can be initiated on the different

method to measure the involvement of corporation on education related causes. It is also interesting to explore how far the attributes of the chief executive officer's attributes might affect the propensity of corporation to embark in education-related philanthropic contributions.

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