

# EDUCATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS. THE INVOLVEMENT OF COMPANIES IN EDUCATION

SORIN D. VINTILĂ, TANIA PETCOVICI  
"TIBISCUS" UNIVERSITY, TIMISOARA, NO. 4-6 LASCĂR CATARGIU ST.  
danielsorin9@yahoo.com, taniapetcovici@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Nowadays the modern state fails to keep pace with the current market needs. Moreover, it loses ground when it comes to the regulation of social problems that once were the preserve of its excellence. The winners are the big companies that take advantage of this gap and provide alternative education systems, build schools, equip libraries and laboratories, provide scholarships, organize seminars, etc. Through such activities, viewed as excellent from the public relations perspective, the promoters of these actions strengthen their market position and thus create very good images in the public eye. The recipients also have the winning bids as they integrate quickly and more effectively in the business environment and become aware of the philosophical vision that companies have about the new business environment of today.*

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The modern state has made its presence felt in all areas of social needs: health, welfare, public utilities, education and culture. The state has taken over these matters to the extent that it is hard to imagine their operation without its interference. It seems natural to consider the state as the only able to manage such problems.

For decades, the companies from the western business environment have shown that they can provide an alternative for many state-run social problems. Such is the case of the education. The companies derive benefits from the investments they operate in state education systems, or in alternative education systems, building schools, libraries and laboratories, providing scholarships, organizing seminars and summer schools. As it was well said: "the complexity of international public relations is reflected as well by the cultural focus of social relations ..." (Curtin, Gaither: 2008: 25).

Politicians frequently encourage the development of public-private partnerships in the education systems. We recall that the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, did this, a few years ago, in a speech for his party members and the minister of education, clinching to the idea, acknowledged that the state alone cannot create a better education system responsive to citizens' expectations: "The business environment can contribute to the improvement of the curriculum and it can offer business experience as well as provide jobs. The companies can also provide the government with assistance and financial support. Education is a joint enterprise—between teachers and students but also between schools and the wider community. Business can sponsor Specialist Schools and Academies. Business can contribute to curriculum enhancement. Business can offer work placements and work experience. Business can offer mentoring and governor support. Business can just pick up the phone to the local head teacher and ask how it can help", said D. Miliband in February 2003, at a conference analysing the role of business in education ([http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/9779/01/KELLY \(2004\) Intellectual capital schools.pdf](http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/9779/01/KELLY%20(2004)%20Intellectual%20capital%20schools.pdf)).

In Romania, for over ten years, multinational and domestic companies have been investing in education. The number of educational programs increases each year, but

their impact is difficult to determine. Overall, the objectives of these educational programs are: establishing good relations with the communities, creating a good business environment and training of specialists. They must become **operational** and have long-term **effects**.

A company that invests in education can obtain **three types of benefits**:

- *in brand management*, gaining notoriety and a good market image;
- *in human resources*, recruiting and retention of employees;
- *in marketing*, investing in and training future business partners.

Increasingly more companies develop educational programs to develop relationships with the communities in which they operate, or communities without access to normal channels of communication. Such programs are created by their own foundations or through partnerships with NGOs. (For example, in 2005, Connex (currently Vodafone) initiated the scholarships *Connex for high school*, in partnership with World Vision Romania, a program with the help of which the students from rural areas are supported to continue their high school studies) (cf. [www.praward.ro](http://www.praward.ro)).

The companies have also become interested to invest in the alternative forms of education. (Thus, Orange offers financial support for the *FameLab* competition, a British Council initiative encouraging young students interested in science, to develop their communication skills. Microsoft Romania finances the program *Community and Diversity*. Microsoft conferences, initiated by the Foundation "The Third Europe"; the objectives of the conferences, held in various places in the country by personalities from the cultural and scientific environments, are "to foster open multicultural citizenship and community solidarity through dialogue between the public and the protagonists of contemporary public life") (<http://www.revista22.ro/de-ce-ar-investi-o-companie-in-educatie-3822.html>).

The programs involving infrastructure development and introduction of new technologies such as Internet and telecommunications networks are particularly interesting for communities where multinational companies operate.

### ***Creating a better business environment***

The companies are increasingly aware that the educational programs themselves can influence the business environment in which they operate. Recently, two software companies, BTL design and S&T Software, have organized a debate on "The contribution of information technology to the development of Iasi county". The objective of this event was to establish ways of cooperation between big software companies, the local business community and the academia.

The educational programs are included in the long-term strategy with the help of which the companies are preparing the future professionals, employees or business partners. "We believe — say Orange representatives — that we have an important role in guiding and training young people and therefore we have developed programs for students: *Sales School*, *Marketing School*, *Communication School*, practical internships programs and seminars about career guidance issues" (cf. [www.pr-award.ro](http://www.pr-award.ro)).

For the Ozone Laboratories, the pharmaceuticals company, the educational programs are part of a strategy for **corporate social responsibility**. ("We intend to urge young people to engage in business as soon as possible and to develop their own projects in a labour market that is becoming more competitive," said Florentin Scarlat, Corporate Affairs Director, Ozone Laboratories ).Great attention is paid to career development programs, targeting students in terminal years. One of the latest projects of this kind is *Believe in U*, initiated by Arctic, consisting of a set of practical workshops for career planning (cf. [www.praward.ro](http://www.praward.ro)).

### *Training of future specialists*

The educational programs initiated by companies are designed to offer instruction in subjects interesting for their business area. The programs are addressing both students and teachers. (For example, SIVECO Romania for several years already finances the editions of National Competition in Informatics, on which occasion the company offers teachers seminars on using IT technologies in teaching activities. A similar strategy is used by Henkel Romania, the official sponsor of the National Competition dedicated to construction high schools. Within the program, the specialists of the company offer technical courses for teachers in construction high schools).

The **investments** in the traditional educational institutions are perhaps the most common form of educational programs. The companies develop partnerships with schools or universities, providing them with the necessary technology for training and research. One of the first such projects was conducted by Connex (Vodafone) in partnership with the Department of Telecommunications, assuming investment in scholarships for students, equipping a laboratory and a specialized library. Through the Partnership for Excellence, Life for Life Foundation, sponsored by Forum Auto (Volvo importer in Romania), it supports the Olympic lots for mathematics and physics.

In Romania, several industries have prevailed through corporate responsibility programs in education: IT, telecommunications, finance and banking, pharmaceuticals. Depending on the type of contribution, different forms of **sponsorship** and **involvement of employees** can be analysed. (Thus, through its foundation, Western Union, a banking company, grants finances for NGOs in education. On the other hand, MasterCard Europe, a company operating in the same area, supports a program whereby the employees of the company teach high school students specialized courses).

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the educational programs developed by companies is the **lack of evaluation and transparency**. It is recommended that programs have clear and measurable objectives to be evaluated, and performance and results should be regularly reported. The feed-back from the target groups and the community is important for the evaluation. Thus, the companies may gain exactly where the state fails.

The state education system does not respond fully (sometimes not at all) to the market needs, because it was not designed for these needs. It does not meet the expectations of its beneficiaries, because it is not the result of a relationship between the supply and the demand. This is, in fact, the chance of the companies: they can invest in education because the state missed this field, they show "interest for the future " (Davis: 2008: 173). They may find opportunities unexploited by the traditional education system, largely inadequate for the world today; they can provide the educational programs the necessary efficiency to operate on a long term. And last but not least, the companies may link the public expectations with the market needs, building educational programs for the benefit of both businesses and communities.

Through such activities, viewed as excellent from the public relations perspective, the promoters of these actions strengthen their market position and thus create very good images in the public eye. The recipients also have the winning bids as they integrate quickly and more effectively in the business environment and become aware of the philosophical vision that companies have about the new business environment of today.

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