

Speakers Share Corporate Social Responsibility Practices in PolyU SPEED 15th Anniversary International Symposium

With the growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability across different industry sectors, it is vital for companies to be aware of the latest trends and developments, and integrate them into their business models.

To enhance public understanding of CSR and sustainability as well as the challenges arising from these initiatives, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University-affiliated School of Professional Education and Executive Development (PolyU SPEED), staged its 15th Anniversary Public Forum Series (3) titled “International Symposium on Corporate Social Responsibility for Innovation and Sustainability” at Jockey Club Innovation Tower, PolyU on 14 March 2015.

Co-organised by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, the Symposium featured two keynote speakers, Prof. Robert Hugh Gray, Professor of Social and Environmental Accounting, School of Management, University of St Andrews, Scotland, and Mr Keith Pogson, Senior Partner, Financial Services, Asia Pacific, Ernest & Young. The expert panel session was joined by Mr Matthias Li, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Financial Officer, Ocean Park Corporation (Ocean Park), Dr Aidan Goddard, Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer – Asia Pacific, L’Occitane en Provence (L’Occitane), and Mr Pat-Nie Woo, Director, CSR, KPMG.

The Symposium also received support from The Chartered Institute of Marketing, Hong Kong, Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research of University of St Andrews, Scotland, World Green Organisation, Chartered Professional Accountants (Canada) Hong Kong Chapter, and the Campus Sustainability Committee of the PolyU-affiliated College of Professional and Continuing Education (CPCE).

Making a difference

Prof. Peter Yuen, Dean of PolyU CPCE, said in his welcoming remarks that the CSR International Symposium would provide an ideal platform for the exchange of views among academics, students and experienced professionals from different industry sectors. “We are committed to providing our students with learning opportunities, encouraging them to innovate and think about CSR and sustainable solutions,” said Prof. Yuen.

As a leading provider of self-financing sub-degree and top-up bachelor’s honours degree programmes in Hong Kong, PolyU CPCE’s vision is to enhance and support the development of students seeking to work in a knowledge-based economy. “CSR, innovation and sustainability have become the core values of PolyU across various academic disciplines. The PolyU community has been driving the sustainability initiatives through its research and community service activities,” said Prof. Yuen.

Insight given by experts

Symposium keynote speaker, Prof. Robert Hugh Gray, said that CSR and sustainability may mean different things to different companies and individuals. “Despite all the talk, there is a lot of ambiguity in the definitions of CSR and sustainability,” said Prof. Gray. Pointing out the different ways companies use to approach their CSR and sustainability initiatives, he believed there should be greater transparency in measuring accountabilities and responsibilities. “There is a lot of good news about the CSR development, but there is also a lot to be concerned about,” said Prof. Gray.

Another keynote speaker Mr Keith Pogson outlined how the changing social values are driving CSR and sustainability initiatives. “The issues around CSR and sustainability have grown too big for companies and organisations to ignore,” Mr Pogson said. “Today, when young people join a company, they are increasingly conscious about the importance of CSR in the corporate values.” He added that any companies aspiring for business success would need to align their CSR initiatives with the values upheld by the stakeholders, including employees.

Expert panel member Mr Matthias Li stressed that the CSR topics are deeply embedded in Ocean Park’s vision, mission and core values. “Through continuous innovation, we aspire to be a world leader in providing guests with memorable experience that combine entertainment, educational awareness and nature conservation. Ocean Park’s CSR initiatives also include training and vocational development programmes aiming at young people. Since 1992, over 700,000 Hong Kong students have benefited through the biology, nature and environmental conservation programmes developed by Ocean Park’s Education Department,” said Mr Li.

Another expert panel member Dr Aidan Goddard explained how the business operation of L’Occitane was guided by its core values. For example, the French company uses sustainable materials, and reinvests in the communities where its products are sourced. It also verifies the sustainable authenticity of its natural products. “We could use synthetic materials to grow the business faster, but we choose not to do so. We are not in a position to solve all the problems in the world. However, we do try to communicate our values and live up to our sense of responsibility,” said Dr Goddard.

Expert Panel member Mr Pat-Nie Woo revealed the survey findings that for companies looking beyond the bottom line with “higher purpose”, they tend to outperform their peers that focus only on shareholders’ interests. He believed that companies could improve their CSR and sustainability performance by having CSR experts in their boardroom. “Better understanding of CSR issues in the boardroom could help to elevate the performance of companies even further,” said Mr Woo.

Programmes meeting the changing needs of society

Dr Jack Lo, Director of PolyU SPEED, said, “With the growing importance of CSR and sustainability in the world, it is important for our students to catch up with the latest trends. To

enrich their learning experience, PolyU SPEED regularly invites leading industry experts to give talks to our students. Besides improving employability, these experiences would also prepare them to contribute to CSR and sustainability in their future career. ”

Dr Artie Ng, Deputy Director of PolyU SPEED, said that the Symposium had provided an invaluable opportunity for participants to learn about the CSR opportunities and challenges companies face. “I believe that the candid insights given by the keynote speakers and the knowledge shared by the industry experts will help the audience appreciate the benefits of CSR and sustainability, and also the need for strong leadership to implement these initiatives,” added Dr Ng.