The relevance of corporate citizenship

There are competing tensions facing a journal dedicated, as this one is, to matters, issues, theories, practices and protocols of corporate citizenship. Chief among these tensions is the pressure facing academic scholars in the field to publish papers acceptable, worldwide, to their respective bodies making judgment calls on the quality of their research output. Yet, at the same time, published research on corporate citizenship needs to not only satisfy the demands and imperatives of acceptable, high-quality scholarship but also to be relevant to, and usable by, the non-scholarly audiences that all of us working in this field must be talking to—namely, business, government and civil society in general.

Balancing those tensions is not easy and, as the incoming General Editor of this journal, I am acutely conscious of the need to steer a course for the journal that satisfies, to the best of our abilities, the multiple audiences that this journal must address if it is to be relevant, thought-provoking, ground-breaking and culture-changing—which I believe it must be.

Corporate citizenship will fail in its mission if it seeks only to become yet another stand-alone academic discipline, talking only to academics, and replicating existing research methodologies, theories and scholarly practices. If corporate citizenship is not about change in business, government and civil society, then it has no place, no relevance, and no future.

If it is about such change, then all of us associated with it in one way or another are involved in one of the most exciting, and challenging, examples of cultural praxis—one that seeks to diminish the various divides that have grown up over the years between business, society and government. Corporate citizenship, therefore, offers all of us opportunities to make a difference across sectors.
As such, that changes the traditional nature of much intellectual and academic activity, and challenges non-academic sectors at the same time to engage with the theory and practice of such praxis in ways that, traditionally for them, more often than not nervous and suspicious about the role of the academic in their domains, demand, as they do of the scholar, a willingness to change.

To that end, then, the role of a journal such as this is to provide a crucially important meeting point for scholars, business, government and civil society to engage with, sometimes reject perhaps, and, I would hope, to act on, new thinking, new developments and new ways forward.

The papers selected for this first issue in my role as General Editor reflect my concern not only to ensure a truly relevant approach to corporate citizenship but to build on the excellent work conducted by Sandra Waddock in her editorship of this journal since Issue 9 at the beginning of 2003, most particularly following her call in that issue for this journal to make corporate citizenship real by focusing 'explicitly on bridging the gap between the concept of corporate citizenship and its practice in today's complex and challenging organisations'.

Sandra took over the reins from the foundation General Editor, Malcolm McIntosh, who pioneered, through eight issues, a vision of corporate citizenship which has, at its heart, both a recognition, and celebration, of diversity—positioning the journal in its first issue in 2001 as 'an organic journal—open to change and development'.

I hope I can meet the very high standards set by both Malcolm and Sandra, and welcome the opportunity of joining with you on what is still a relatively new journey for all of us in an exciting, and challenging, field with all of its demands for those of us who are academics to learn how to redefine ourselves to ensure our work is relevant beyond academia. To those of us in business who face daily imperatives that often clash with the underlying principles of good corporate citizenship. To those of us in government who need, more than ever before, to face in particular the social, environmental and economic policy challenges implicit in corporate citizenship. To those of us in civil society organisations who are now beginning to recognise that they have far more to offer business and government than applications for funding. And, finally, to all of us as individual citizens, who need, more than ever before in the insecurities of the 21st century, to come together by breaking down the barriers that have often divided us across social, cultural and economic sectors.

My choice of papers in this issue, I hope, reflects these concerns, bringing together diverse voices, which, when taken together, challenge us all to ensure that if corporate citizenship is about anything it is, and must be, about making a difference.

David Birch, January 2005

David Birch is Professor of Communication and Director of the Corporate Citizenship Research Unit, Deakin University, Australia. He has published widely in corporate citizenship, communication and cultural policy and is on the editorial boards of several international journals. He is currently working with a large number of companies and organisations in Australia on corporate citizenship, including ANZ, Rio Tinto, Worldvision, Transfield Services and Mission Australia.

birchd@deakin.edu.au
www.deakin.edu.au/ccr