Corporate Social Responsibility as an Emerging Industry in Australia: the ‘State of Play’

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July 2007

Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an increasingly significant phenomenon in Australia and around the world. While extensive investigation has ensued into what CSR entails and how it might be executed, very little attention has been devoted toward understanding the processes which surround this contentious social construction. This research adopts a non-normative, neo-institutional, case study approach to investigating CSR as an emerging industry in Australia. The objective of the research is to explore the CSR industry’s current state of institutionalisation (or ‘state of play’) by investigating: CSR practices, products and services; their endorsers; sources of institutional pressure shaping CSR; and strategic responses to these pressures. This research will provide a basis upon which to undertake meaningful evaluation of corporate social performance based on what is seen to be legitimate CSR practice in Australia. It will also provide insight into the possible trajectory of the Australian CSR industry as a whole and will raise important implications for the power of CSR as a tool for social change. This paper presents preliminary findings through a classification scheme of key actors within the Australian CSR industry.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In a world characterised by globalisation, it has become increasingly important for corporations to actively manage their social and environmental impacts. Trade liberalisation, technological change, shrinking governments and an increase in corporate power have all paved the way for changed societal expectations regarding the role of business within society (Habisch, Jonker, Wegner, & Schmidpeter, 2005). These changing expectations are occurring despite continued debate in academia, ranging from Friedman’s (1992) profit maximisation credo to Carroll’s (1979) more liberal view of additional ethical and discretionary responsibilities. The latter view is described by Davis (1975, 93) as the corporation’s ‘new social role of trusteeship’, also known as corporate social responsibility (CSR).

While there has been extensive investigation into what CSR entails (De Bakker, Groenewegen, & Den Hond, 2005) and opportunities for practitioners to gain marketing mileage from the concept (Arthur D Little Ltd & BITC, 2003), no attention has been given to investigating CSR as an emerging industry in its own right. Rather than just a concept for definitional debate or a firm-level marketing strategy, CSR may be viewed as a phenomenon resulting from - and in turn contributing towards - underlying ‘schemas, rules, norms and routines’ (Scott, 2004). As a preliminary step towards investigating the emerging CSR industry in Australia, this study identifies CSR practices, products and services; their endorsers; sources of institutional pressure shaping CSR; and strategic responses to these pressures. Preliminary findings are presented in a classification scheme of ‘key actors within the Australian CSR industry’.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Theoretical Background

Institutional theory follows a line of thought that seeks an explanation for the ‘nonrational dimensions of organisational behaviour’ (Selznick, 1949). The basic premise of institutional theory is that organisations respond to external social and cultural forces, rather than merely market forces (Selznick, 1957). This provides an alternative view to traditional economic theories of organisations (Hatch, 2006). Institutions act as guiding and stabilizing social frameworks (Scott, 2001) and have been described as what ‘grammars are to speech’ (Barley & Tolbert, 1997b, 96); they provide an interpretive framework that facilitates shared understanding.

**Legitimacy.** A central concept within institutional theory is that of legitimacy. Legitimacy can be defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ Suchman (1995, 574). Industry survival depends not only on industry size (Hannan, 1986), but also legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Legitimacy results from the ‘institutional nexus’ formed through a combination of typified ‘actors’, ‘actions’ and ‘situations’ (Weber & Glynn, 2007, 1645). DiMaggio & Powell (1983; 1991) argue that these elements are influenced by coercive (legal), normative (socio-cultural) and mimetic (competitive) pressures within the institutional environment. This leads to isomorphism, or ‘homogeneity in structure, culture and output’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 147).
Institutionalisation. The process by which institutions are created is that of institutionalisation - the subject of investigation by neo-institutional theorists. Foundational concepts are based on the work of Berger and Luckman (1967) who argue that reality (so far as it is perceived) is a social construction created through human interaction, and Giddens (1979) and Sewell (1992), who describe a reciprocal process by which institutions and actions simultaneously constrain and enable one another. Institutions constrain action, set bounds on rationality and increase the probability of certain types of behaviour (Barley & Tolbert, 1997a, 1997b), resulting in modified institutions; the process is repeated indefinitely. As stated by Giddens (1979, 70): ‘Every process of action is a production of something new, a fresh act; but at the same time all action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation.’

Legitimacy Strategies. A framework for understanding the progression from trust, to reliability, reputation and finally institutional legitimacy, is provided by Aldrich & Fiol (1994). Strategies for promoting these varying levels of legitimacy are described, with the implication being that the higher levels of institutionalisation are achieved through collective action. While the purpose of Aldrich & Fiol’s framework was to explicate the ways in which individual entrepreneurs may increase the institutionalisation (and hence stability) of an emerging industry, it will be employed in this study to assess the level of institutionalisation of the Australian CSR industry and implications for its legitimacy.

Rationalised Myths. Meyer and Rowan (1977, 341) argue that legitimacy, or ‘social fitness’ is gained or maintained through ‘rationalized myths’. These myths are ‘prescriptions’ generally accepted as being true (and are therefore highly institutionalized) but cannot be tested. For example, job titles, procedures or organisational structures within a certain industry. By incorporating such myths, in spite of their potentially negative impacts on efficiency or effectiveness, organisations appear legitimate. This leads to increased stability, access to resources and hence, chances of survival. In contrast, those organisations that fail to incorporate these rationalized myths ‘are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational or unnecessary’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 350).

Industry. Employing an industry level of analysis within institutional studies is recommended by key theorists in the field, as it is within such boundaries that institutional pressures are most keenly felt (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Meyer, 1983). An industry may emerge from what DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 148) describe as an ‘organisational field’:

‘…those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products’.

Organisational fields – a key development in institutional theory (DiMaggio, 1986; Scott, 1991), are socially constructed through ‘a shared industry model that defines typical organisational forms within a field’ (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton, & Kanfer, 1995). Little is known about this process at the industry level, however Vermeulen et al. (2007) note the constraining influence of field complexity on the ability of a community of actors to alter the status quo.
Emerging industries are characterized by a state of considerable change and uncertainty as order is constructed and norms negotiated. As noted by Aldrich & Fiol (1994, 648), actors must ‘learn new roles without having old models, and they must establish ties in an environment that does not acknowledge their existence’. It should also be noted that fledgling industries are more susceptible to the influence of external forces, as their ‘conformity to established institutional rules may still be in question’ (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, 645). Furthermore, the institutions themselves are in a state of flux. As noted by Barley & Tolbert (1997b, 96), ‘Institutions that have a relatively short history or that have not yet gained widespread acceptance are more vulnerable to challenge and less apt to influence action’. The state of institutionalisation of the Australian CSR industry and the resulting level of legitimacy are key to the industry’s growth and survival, as they facilitate access to capital, markets, and governmental protection (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994).

**Actors.** The notion of actors is similar to that of stakeholders: ‘Key stakeholders are those who have power and legitimacy, not just a passing interest’ (Stuart & Muzellec, 2004, 280). The exception is that actors innovate within the fields within which they operate – an activity both more likely and more accepted when fields are ‘turbulent or ill formed’ (Fligstein, 1991, 316). For this reason, it can be expected that an investigation into an emerging industry will glean more varied and interesting results.

**Institutional Entrepreneurs.** Particularly innovative and influential actors have been described as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (DiMaggio, 1988) – actors with ‘the ability to motivate cooperation of other actors by providing them with common meanings and identities’ (Fligstein, 1997, 397). Thus, in negotiating a collective identity, institutional entrepreneurs play a vital role in increasing industry legitimacy (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, 645-6). It is these actors and the ‘intentional (if boundedly rational), directive, and conflict-laden processes’ that they put in motion (DiMaggio, 1991, 268), which guide the developmental trajectory of the CSR industry.

**2.2 Research Context**

CSR has become an increasingly powerful phenomenon in Australia. This is reflected in studies of CSR in Australia conducted by commercial firms (Baker & McKenzie, 2007; KPMG, 2005, 2006), as well as peak and professional bodies (Business Council of Australia, 2002; Centre for Corporate Public Affairs, 2000; CPA Australia, 2005; Group of 100 Inc., 2003; Volunteering Australia, 2003). A variety of indices have been developed to evaluate the social performance of companies, notably the St James Ethics Center’s Corporate Responsibility Index (introduced in 2003) and the Reputex SR Index (introduced in 2005). An Australian CSR Standard (AS 8003 - 2003 has also been developed. In support of all these developments, peak and industry bodies such as the Australian Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability (previously known as the Social and Ethical Auditing Institute, founded in 1999) and Models of Success and Sustainability (MOSS) have emerged.

The governmental response has been one of strong encouragement, evident in the introduction of the Prime Minister’s Business Community Partnership awards, parliamentary enquiries into CSR (Australian Government Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee, 2005; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services, 2004) and related reports.
commissioned by government departments (Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, 2005a, 2005b; Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2005). Meanwhile, the corporate sector has developed CSR positions, departments and committees, while also seeking expert advice on CSR strategy development from niche CSR consultancies. CSR conferences and events have also become a regular occurrence in Australia, reflecting the topical nature of the subject and the wide range of actors interested in its development.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The beginnings of modern corporate social responsibility can be traced back to the 1920s (R. C. Hoffman, 2007). The concept rose into the public domain during the mid 20th century and has gained increasing attention over the past two decades (De Bakker et al., 2005; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003). The last five years have seen particularly strong triggers, such as the introduction of the Global Reporting Initiative in 2002 (GRI, 2007) and the United Nations Global Compact in 2000 (UN Global Compact, 2007).

Social construction of the CSR concept is reflected in the evolution of related terminology over the past 50 years. Such terms include corporate philanthropy, business ethics, corporate social performance (CSP), corporate social responsiveness, sustainable development (SD), triple bottom line (TBL) and corporate citizenship (CC) (Mohan, 2003). CSR and CSP are currently the most widely accepted concepts (De Bakker et al., 2005), with CSP forming an ‘umbrella’ concept (Carroll, 1999). Wood (1991, 693) defines CSP as:

A business organization’s configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm’s societal relationships.

As this definition acknowledges the process of CSR, it has been chosen to facilitate analysis of the process by which the CSR industry has emerged.

There is limited CSR related literature targeting Australia and the literature that does exist focuses on what CSR entails and how it may be executed. In terms of the ‘what’ of CSR, there is a notable emphasis on the concept of corporate citizenship (Batten & Birch, 2005; Birch & Littlewood, 2004; Kusku & Zarkada-Fraser, 2004; Lucas, 2004; Phillips, 2005). The ‘how’ of CSR has been addressed primarily through investigations into social and environmental reporting (Adams & Zutshi, 2004; Boele & Kemp, 2005; Deegan & Gordon, 1996; Frost, Jones, Loftus, & Laan, 2005; Herbohn, 2005; Trotman & Bradley, 1981), with case studies also addressing issues of implementation (Black, 2006; Brown, 2006; Redmond, 2005).

Australian studies into CSR tend to employ stakeholder theory (Foster & Jonker, 2005; Galbreath, 2006; Griffiths, 2007; Kimber & Lipton, 2005; Zappala, 2004), and fail to address macro processes and conditions surrounding CSR. This is reflected in broader CSR literature (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Walsh et al., 2003), however some recent studies have begun to investigate this area (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Campbell, 2006, 2007; Marquis, Glynn, & Davis, 2007). The majority of studies that do, in fact, investigate CSR from
an institutional perspective do so at the organisational level of analysis (Boxenbaum, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Egels-Zandén & Wahlqvist, 2007; A. J. Hoffman, 2001; Yamak & Süer, 2005). Very few studies investigate emerging industries using an institutional framework. A rare example of such a study is provided by Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger (2007), who use institutional theory to investigate organizational identity within the business coaching industry in Australia. Another example is provided by Déjean, Gond, & Leca (2004), who investigate the effect of institutional entrepreneurs and measurement tools on the legitimacy of emerging industries. This study is a preliminary step towards filling this void.

4.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The over-arching objective of this study is to understand what state of institutionalisation (i.e. ‘state of play’) the CSR industry is presently at and the implications of this for the future of the industry. This is addressed by investigating the following research questions:

**Research question 1 (RQ1):** What institutions exist within the CSR industry?

RQ1A: Who are some of the key actors (endorsers) typified in the CSR industry and how did they emerge?

RQ1B: What are some of the typical actions (practices, products and services) adopted within the CSR industry?

**Research question 2 (RQ2):** What are the sources and types of institutional pressures being placed upon the CSR industry and how might this impact upon industry legitimacy?

RQ2A: What are the coercive pressures being placed upon the CSR industry?

RQ2B: What are the normative pressures being placed upon the CSR industry?

RQ2C: What are the mimetic pressures being placed upon the CSR industry?

**Research question 3 (RQ3):** What strategies are being used to respond to/influence institutional pressures within the CSR industry and how might this impact upon industry legitimacy?

RQ3A: To what extent is there convergence around a dominant product/services design?

RQ3B: To what extent is collective action being taken?

5.0 RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Paradigm

The proposed study is characterised by an inductive research approach and is undertaken from a social constructionist paradigm. This aligns well with the qualitative data collected, as qualitative research is generally acknowledged as constituting ‘the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 22). This constructionist paradigm is reflected in the emphasis on incorporating the views of a diverse range of actors within the CSR industry. Constructionism assumes a naturalistic methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994), hence, face-to-face interviews are employed. Furthermore, document review provides otherwise unavailable
information to inform and contextualize the interviews. Having said this, the study is primarily a cross-sectional, designed to provide a discrete snapshot of the state of institutionalisation of the Australian CSR industry.

5.2 Research Approach
Exploratory research is undertaken into the emerging CSR industry in Australia through a case study approach. This approach has been recommended in light of the underdeveloped field of business and society and since no widely accepted framework exists (Jones, 1995). Given research into emerging industries is rare, this can be described as a ‘revelatory case’ (Yin, 2003, 42). Case studies typically employ observation, interviews and document analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This case study will employ the latter two through a three-stage process (see section 5.4). This multi-stage data collection is designed to facilitate an emergent understanding of the phenomenon, while also providing triangulation.

5.3 Sampling strategy
A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy has been employed for all three stages of data collection (see section 5.4). More specifically, a convenience sampling strategy has been employed for both stages of document review. A combination of ‘maximum variation’ and ‘criterion’ sampling strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 28) have been employed for interviews. A range of views will be sought from a wide variety of actors, however reputational criteria will facilitate participant selection. Having noted this, a degree of flexibility will be retained in selecting interviewees, as ‘the sampling plan needs to exist in dialogue with field incidents, contingencies and discoveries’ (Gobo, 2004, 436).

5.4 Data Collection
Data collection will generate an inter-subjective understanding of the process by which the CSR industry has emerged by seeking multiple sources of evidence (see stages outlined below). Both interviews and document review are employed as methods of data collection. Interviews allow data to be collected in a natural setting and allow data from nonverbal communication to be obtained (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). They have the important advantage of investigating participants’ perspectives, thereby creating a shared understanding of the social construction of the CSR industry. This is a major limitation of document review, which relies solely on the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Interviews are specifically designed to obtain data directly relevant to the research and can generate valuable insights (Yin, 2003). On the other hand, they may result in biased information due to flaws in question construction, response bias, poor recall and reflexivity (Yin, 2003). The input of third party researchers to cross-check interview questions, as well as triangulation and checks against archival documents will minimize these effects.

Document review complements interviews in a number of important and useful ways. The primary advantage of document review is that it allows for longitudinal data collection, incorporating major events and crises within the field studied. It also broadens the scope of data sources beyond the interviewees. Document review is also easier to replicate and is more efficient than most other types of data collection (Yin, 2003). Documents facilitate analysis (of interviews), checks and triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Having said this, document
review poses problems of biased selectivity, retrievability, embedded reporting biases and barriers to access (Yin, 1994). Biased selectivity has been minimized in this study through the process of document selection (involving cross-referencing across multiple sources of data). Retrievability and access issues have not been a problem in stage one as the documents have been publicly available. Embedded reporting biases are less salient in this study, as the purpose of industry and government reports is primarily descriptive rather than analytical: unlike academic research, these documents generally aim to provide a picture of the phenomenon up until a certain point in time, rather than having an analytical or interpretive agenda. Thus, they can be seen almost as raw data.

Stage 1 (Document Review): This stage involved analysis of approximately 20 government, industry and media reports from Australia. These reports were collected from within the last five years – a period in which the majority of practitioner interest in the topic has emerged. Reports were identified from a range of sources through the use of CSR directories such as the Deakin Centre for Corporate Citizenship Condensed Directory of Resources, electronic databases such as Factiva and search engines such as Google. These multiple sources were used to cross-reference results, thereby increasing reliability. Stage one data collection has a dual purpose. The first is to identify subjects for interviewing. The second is to provide contextual understanding of the evolution of CSR in Australia and facilitate familiarization with key issues and terminology, which will inform stage two data collection and aid analysis of results.

Stage 2 (Semi-Structured Interviews): This will involve 12-15 semi-structured interviews of key individuals within the CSR industry. Due to budget constraints, participants will be limited to the three largest Australian capital cities of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Selection will occur through document analysis in stage one. The aim is to identify who features the most regularly and is therefore seen as a legitimate figure in the CSR industry. Sampling criteria is therefore based on reputational objectives for participant selection, which ties back to the theoretical emphasis on legitimacy and the social construction of phenomena (reputation is socially constructed and lends legitimacy through status). Representation from a wide range of industry stakeholders is also sought. The instruments used in this stage will be the interviewer, audio-recorder and pen and paper for note-taking.

Stage 3 (Document Review): This involves analysis of current and historical organisational documents, or ‘artifacts’. Examples include websites, annual reports, newsletters and pamphlets/brochures. These documents will be requested throughout the course of stage two. The aim of this stage is to contextualize interviews, informing stage two analysis.

5.5 Data Analysis
This study employs within-case analysis, which focuses on ‘exploring and describing’ the phenomena within the case (Miles & Huberman 1994, 90). Miles & Huberman’s (1994, 12) framework for qualitative data analysis is employed. The data reduction stage will allow salient themes to manifest themselves through the use of manifest content (such as key words) to extract latent meaning. Early, descriptive coding will be guided by the theoretically based research questions. Data display will help establish a chain of evidence (Yin, 2003), also increasing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study – social constructivist criteria for quality qualitative
research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 480). Data display will be based on Miles & Huberman’s ‘conceptually clustered matrix’ (1994, 127), which will pave the way for drawing/verifying conclusions based on patterns and themes identified in the data. This will be achieved using computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) – particularly useful for its ability to ‘make visible a problem often hidden if manual methods are used – the problem of finding adequate categories and concepts for structuring data’ (Kelle, 2004, 473). Specifically, documents and interview transcripts will be imported into the NVivo computer program for analysis. Similar to NUD.IST, this program has been chosen because it is a ‘code-based theory builder’ (Weitzman & Miles 1995, 18). Having said this, the aim is not to build grounded theory, but instead apply and explore institutional theory in an area that has not previously benefited from this approach.

6.0 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Through the course of stage 1 data collection, actors identified resulted in the following classification scheme of key actors within the Australian CSR industry (see appendix 1):

- Peak & Industry Bodies
- CSR Consultancies
- Research Centers
- Media
- Federal Government (committees, departments & initiatives)
- State & Local Governments
- Businesses (committees, departments & officers)
- Third Sector Organisations
- Regulatory Bodies

7.0 DISCUSSION

Preliminary results of this study are significant in their ability to explicitly demonstrate the influence of a variety of actors on the creation of a CSR industry in Australia. CSR can be seen as an emerging industry seeking legitimacy in order to grow and survive. This legitimacy is created in part through key actors. For example: the government stipulating criteria for best practice in its PMBCP awards; consultancies advising on CSR strategy to corporate clients; various research organisations disseminating reports and other publications regarding CSR-related issues; third sector pressure groups competing for influence in setting the CSR agenda; CSR conferences drawing a range of stakeholders into a collaborative, information-sharing hub; and so on. Of particular note is the role played by institutional entrepreneurs, who may range from individual champions and elites such as chairman of Westpac, David Morgan, to organisations such as Westpac itself (as a leader in CSR according to the Australian Corporate Responsibility Index), to emerging industry bodies such as Models of Success and Sustainability (MOSS). It should be noted that not all actors may take on the role of being institutional entrepreneurs, as this role requires exceptional persuasive and relational skills (Fligstein, 1997).
8.0 CONCLUSION & LIMITATIONS

By answering the proposed research questions, this paper sheds light on the little understood industry of corporate social responsibility in Australia. It illuminates forces shaping the industry by identifying key actors within the industry and various government, normative and competitive pressures. The study constructs an idea of what is seen to be legitimate CSR, based on common practices, products and services within the industry. Finally, the study provides insight into stability of the industry based on consensus surrounding CSR and the extent of collective action being taken by actors. Through an understanding of these elements, the study will help elucidate the development of the CSR concept in Australia, broader social implications for the reputation and legitimacy of the CSR industry, ramifications for the adoption of CSR practices within corporate Australia, and the long term direction and survival of the CSR industry as a whole.

This study will also provide insight into the possible trajectory of the Australian CSR industry as a whole and will raise important implications for the power of CSR as a tool for social change. It has the potential to contribute to the development and survival of the Australian CSR industry by provide useful information to practitioners on how to influence action by actively legitimizing their practices and positioning themselves within in the CSR industry. The research will also provide a basis upon which to undertake meaningful evaluation of corporate social performance based on what is seen to be legitimate CSR practice in Australia.

The principle limitation of this study is its cross-sectional time horizon. Making sense of the ‘state of play’ of the CSR industry – where it is now - involves some degree of understanding of the longitudinal process of institutionalisation that has occurred in the emergence of the industry. As noted by Aldrich & Fiol (1994, 664), ‘The creation and institutionalization of new activities occurs through a dynamic process that cannot be captured in discrete snapshots’. This understanding is limited by the cross-sectional research design, excluding longitudinal data. This problem has been overcome through the use of historical industry and organisational documents, combined with interviews which include retrospective data. According to the key theorists in the field, this is quite an acceptable approach (Selznick, 1957; Barley, 1986; Barley and Tolbert, 1997). Having said this, it recommended that further research be undertaken over an extended period in order to gain a more contextually rich understanding of the CSR industry.

In summary, this study complements extensive practitioner interest with academic research. It contributes to a substantial void in the CSR literature by employing a theoretical approach and level of analysis underutilized to this date. By investigating the processes and conditions surrounding the emergence of the Australian CSR industry, it fills a substantial void in the literature. The study also provides a rare opportunity to engage in field research in an emerging industry. In doing so, it contributes to the scarce literature on emerging industries based on institutional theory. This study represents the first step toward understanding CSR as an industry. Thus, findings should be used to structure further in-depth research into the impact of various actors on this as yet unstable industry – particularly the impact of institutional entrepreneurs.
APPENDIX 1: Classification of key actors within the Australian CSR industry.
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