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## **Internationalisation of the Public Relations Curriculum: The Challenges of Learning Using Global Networks**

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Current philosophy within tertiary pedagogy views internationalisation of curriculums as imperative for universities and many Australian universities have been working towards the goal of internationalisation of higher education (Harman, 2004). However, although many universities agree that internationalisation is an important factor in curriculums, there is no widely accepted definition of internationalisation (Peel and Frank, 2008), even though it is “one of the most significant drivers of change facing the modern university” (Taylor, 2004, 168). At the same time, the public relations profession has become a global industry with public relations education “playing catch up” (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2001, p.101). It has been argued that perhaps the most important development in public relations education and practice is that US dominance in research and theory is fading.

The rapid internationalization of our theoretic work and practice is critical to the future of the [public relations] field because it brings new cultural insights, political perspectives and histories to bear. (Botan and Hazleton, 2006, p. 11)

In a number of institutions, cross-cultural communication and international perspectives are listed as intended outcomes for graduating students (Leask, 2004). Indeed, the authors' own institution lists two graduate attributes as "an international perspective" and "cultural understanding". The body of knowledge in higher education related to internationalisation is extensive (Harman 2005), with Australian scholars contributing significantly. However, much of this scholarship is conceptual. This paper addresses this gap with a case study of a real public relations project conducted at universities in 12 countries across the globe. This paper offers new insights into the reality of 'internationalisation' for public relations education at curriculum level.

The following research questions are asked:

1. What are public relations students' views of an internationalised university experience?
2. What are the main challenges associated with internationalising a curriculum?
3. What are the main learning outcomes of an internationalised unit?

### **The Global Communications (GlobCom) Project**

As has been discussed, many universities strive to have 'internationalisation' as part of their curriculum and philosophy. For disciplines as diverse as marketing, geography or social work, at a practical level internationalisation has vast reaching implications for undergraduate courses (Johnson, 2004; Jackson, 2003). The pinnacle – or ultimate – way to internationalise, it appears, is for students to participate in 'international learning communities' using technology to communicate and work with students from other universities across the globe (Leask, 2004; Taylor, 2001). While universities are striving for internationalisation, industry is demanding graduates equipped with skills for global mobility. A recent Ernst & Young report (Bokor, 2012), highlighted global mobility, digital technology and integration with industry as key drivers of change for universities. Developments in education mirror an increasingly global work environment (Bokor, 2012) and globalisation has not only increased the importance of global public relations it has also provided an opportunity for introspection about practice and scholarship (Sriramesh, 2009).

This paper looks in-depth at a global communications project, involving international learning communities across 5 continents. The project was undertaken by communications, public relations and marketing students at 12 different universities in 12 countries (Australia, England, Germany, India, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, United Arab Emirates and the USA) across 5 continents. The authors' own university, Curtin University, the only Australian University to be involved, began in 2009. The aim of the project was for students to compete in global virtual teams to produce a public relations "pitch" document. For the GlobCom project, the students of the universities study public relations or communications at least in the third semester. There were nine international student e-teams formed with all countries represented in each team. Each international e-team received the same PR brief and had to develop and submit a PR solution as a ppt-presentation like in a real pitch. The students of the e-teams communicated and co-operated with each other through various social media outlets, by e-mail and Skype.

### **Methodology**

This paper explores qualitative and quantitative data gathered shortly after the culmination of the 2012 GlobCom Project at the symposium and finals in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Participants across all twelve universities were invited to participate in an 18 question online survey that was designed with the aid of Qualtrics Online Survey Software.

For the purpose of this paper we were particularly interested in the open ended sections that encouraged students to reflect on the learning outcomes and perceived challenges of their GlobCom experience. A total of 62 valid responses were received from eleven of the twelve participating countries.

### **Results & discussion**

A total of 91% of survey respondents were somewhat to very satisfied with GlobCom experience, despite 94% stating that they had perceived the experience to be somewhat to extremely challenging. However, only 66% of the same sample group believed that the experience had increased their understanding of international public relations. Instead, they emphasised the accumulation of generic business and 'life skills'.

This paper is believed to be the first in Australia to reveal students' experience of an internationalised public relations programme. It addresses a major gap in the public relations literature which has so far only called for more internationalised education (Sriramesh, 2002) and offered a "how to" for PR educators (Taylor, 2001). The paper is intended as a basis for discussion on issues surrounding internationalisation. It also intends to generate questions on the trend for universities to pay considerable attention to student "satisfaction" rather than student learning and outcomes. Further research would be useful to ascertain students' reflection on such a project as GlobCom once students have graduated and actually worked on international public relations projects within their workplace. The authors conclude that an internationalised learning opportunity like this real life client project may not necessarily be popular amongst the wider student cohort. However, internationalised projects provide a number of benefits, in particular in the context of capstone units that set out to prepare business students for a diverse career in an increasingly global, multicultural and complex field.

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