

Public Relations Education at the Crossroad: Trend and Realities.

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Abstract: This paper explores the issues of public relations academics credentials on teaching public relations at undergraduate level. Generally, most Asian universities look to the United States education system as the ideal model in developing their own curricula, and frequently invite American professors as visiting fellows to help set up their programmes. In addition, Asian universities, including those in Malaysia and Indonesia still harbour the view that the US offers the best public relations education and practices, and therefore follow the US model regarding any matters related to curriculum, study materials, teaching modules, learning resources and the structure of exam papers. Whilst seeming efficient, as the US leads the fields of public relations, it appears to be done blindly without considering such variables as the encompassing political, economic, legal, media and cultural factors of the society adapting these curricula that should determine the roles and functions of public relations practitioners in any given country. This paper concludes that US still offers the best public relations education in comparison to any Asian universities due to lack of academic credentials.

Key words: *Public relations education, globalization, public relations curricula*

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Public relations education has arguably become more important with the unfolding of the information age and rapid globalisation (Jamilah 2001; Botan and Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2001; Sriramesh, 2002; Van Leuven, 1989; Vercic and Ruler, 2004). Most scholars concede that during the past 10 to 15 years, public relations practice and education have grown and changed prodigiously (Grunig 1993; L'etang, 2002). At the same time, scholars claim that public relations education has not kept pace with the rapid globalisation that has occurred since 1992, and that the existing body of knowledge and public relations curricula around the world carries a United States bias (Jamilah, 2005; Sriramesh, 2002; 2003). This is due to the fact that little research literature written by non-American public relations scholars currently exists and that which does exist attributes these differences to politics, culture and economic environments, rather than acknowledge that public relations curricula are biased towards the US model. The absence of indigenous research and literature on public relations education from countries other than the US could be one of the main reasons why American literature on public relations is so significant to most of the universities that teach the discipline and also to organisations that practise public relations worldwide (Sriramesh, 2002; Vercic and Ruler, 2004).

Generally, most Asian universities look to the US education system as the ideal model in developing their own curricula, and frequently invite American professors as visiting fellows which often aided by the Fulbright Foundation to help set up their programmes (Sriramesh, 2002). In addition, Asian universities, including those in Malaysia and Indonesia, still harbour the view that the US offers the best public relations education and practices, and therefore follow the US model regarding any matters related to curriculum, study materials, teaching modules, learning resources and the structure of exam papers (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2001). Whilst seeming efficient, as the US leads the fields of public relations, it appears to be done blindly without considering such variables as the encompassing political, economic, legal, media and cultural factors of the society adapting these curricula, that should determine the roles and functions of public relations practitioners in any given country (Botan and Taylor, 2004). For example, from the American perspective, maintaining good relations between the client and the organisation often involves all

of the public relations strategic publics and stakeholders such as investors, clients, the media and the general publics. However, in some parts of Asia with authoritarian governments, good relations often involve one specific public, that is, the government in power (Jamilah 2005; Taylor and Kent, 1999; Van Leuven and Pratt, 1996).

Despite these differences between the US and their own country, most academics teaching public relations programmes today in Asia and other regions (such as Eastern Europe and Africa) continue to use materials and curricula from the US, although its curricula, textbooks, research, journals and periodicals carry very little or no representation of other regional experiences (Jamilah 2005; Sriramesh, 2002). In Thailand, for example, studies done by Ekachai and Komolselvin (1996,1998) and Satawedini et al.(1986) concluded that the Thai public relations education at tertiary level should not be dependent entirely on that of the United States for both its practice and instruction, because of differences in culture and values between the two countries. Similar studies carried out in many other Asian countries such as Malaysia (Jamilah, 1996; Idid, 1994; Kaur, 2002), Singapore (Beng, 1994; Tan, 2001 cited in Sriramesh, 2002), the Philippines (Jamias and Tuazon, 1996), Indonesia (Putra, 2000), India (Sriramesh, 1992; 2002), Korea (Sriramesh et al., 1999), China (1996; Culbertson, 1993; 1996b), and Japan (Chen, 1996; Sriramesh et al., 1999), found the incompatibility between public relations practitioner roles as designed by Dozier (1992) to be the results of the interplay of variables in politics, economic development, standards of living and levels of literacy.

Similarly, Singer (1987, cited in Pratt & Ogbondah 1996) criticises the cultural dichotomies of the major countries with which US public relations firms do business. He highlights the insensitivity and inadequacy of US educational practices to non-English speaking countries (e.g. those in Africa) in terms of new skills, such as foreign-language skills. In other words, the practice of public relations is very much in the American domain, and 'only they know best'. The work grapples with the question of why the forty-eight committee members on the US Commission of Public Relations Education (1975; 1987; 1999) which aims to evaluate the status of education in the US and make recommendations on the tertiary public relations education curriculum are all Americans.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION SCENARIO IN MALAYSIA

Undergraduate degree programs in public relations were introduced to public universities in Malaysia in 1972. They used US curricula at the time, a practice that continues to date. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that public relations graduates in Malaysia are not meeting industry standards or expectations. This is not a situation limited to Malaysia. Research on public relations education and cultural issues in Thailand (Ekachai and Komolsevin, 1996; 1998), India (Sriramesh, 1992a), Indonesia (Putra, 1996), Singapore (Beng, 1994), Malaysia (Jamilah, 2008; 2005), the Philippines (Jamias and Tuazon, 1996) and Japan (Nakane, 1988 cited in, Chen 1996) indicates that various cultures and environments engender vastly differing roles and methods of public relations. In other words, countries in Asia should consider developing their own public relations education curricula, tailor-made to suit their own needs, cultures, and political environments and practices instead of depending exclusively on those developed in and for the USA.

In Malaysia and other Asian countries, there exists a limited body of public relations materials, information and research related to and from Asia (Beng, 1994; Ekachai and Komolsevin, 1998; Idid, 1998; Jamias and Tuazon, 1996; Putra, 1996; Jamilah, 2005; Sriramesh, 2002). Among those very few references available were an out-of-date reference on public relations, which dates back more than a decade (Jamilah, 2005; Putra, 1996). Hence the preference of most academics from Asian countries and Europe (Hajos and Tkalac, 2004; Koper, 2004; Vercic and Ruler, 2004) for the US curriculum. According to Jamilah (2005) the main problem underlying this issue is a lack of research conducted by academics in public relations at a tertiary level in Asia, including Malaysia; researchers who can be categorised as 'inactive researchers'. If there is any 'scientific' research on public relation practice available in Malaysia, it is mostly based on anecdotal evidence and is normally unpublished and therefore difficult to access. However, Malaysia enjoys a vibrant public relations environment. This scenario clearly indicates that there is a lack of initiative to enhance the body of knowledge and improve public relations education in Malaysia, even though it should have been given some priority due to the existing professional environment in the country (Beng, 1994; Idid, 1978; Kaur, 2002).

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION SCENARIO IN INDONESIA

Many changes have been taking place in Indonesia in last ten years. Authoritarian political system has been replaced by a more democratic political system. The right of expression, assembly and the right of communication has been acknowledged in the amendment constitution. The media are getting freer and therefore freedom houses place Indonesia as country with partly free press, acknowledging that the press is free from government control and intervention though there is still control by social and cultural groups.

These changes have brought profound effect on communication practice including public relations practices. More organisation practices public relations and lift up the public relations department at their organizational structure (Putra, 2000a), though the practice is still in more technical model of public relations. Although there is not any data about the actual need of number of public relations practitioners, higher education institutions respond quickly the need by establishing communication study program with emphasis on public relations field.

The number of university offering communication studies program with public relations specialization increases dramatically in last ten years. Almost every state university now has department of communication studies either in the form of faculty or department. Private universities are also doing the same thing. At present, there are at least 300 department or school offering communication studies program in Indonesia. The number of students studying public relations increases sharply. In Yogyakarta, for example, people can study communication in at least 10 universities or higher education institutions. At least 1000 new students enroll at communication study department in Yogyakarta Specific Region.

Although the number of university offering communication study program and the number of student enrollment for the program increases dramatically, the quality of the program is in doubt. To evaluate the program several measures can be applied such as the curriculum including the body of knowledge for the teaching, the teachers, place for internship and industries that will employ the graduates.

Noeradi, as one leading practitioner having long life employment as a public relations practitioner in an oil company and now is one leading

public relations counselor argues that despite the increasing number of universities offering public relations studies and the increasing number of student taking course in this program, the problem of public relations education now is the same with the situation in twenty five years ago or even the situation long before that (Noeradi, 2004, see also Putra, 1996).

He mainly concerned with the quality of graduates finishing their study in public relations. According to Noeradi, public relations graduate is still lack of basic communication skill especially writing skill. Eventually, graduating from public relations studies program does not guarantee the graduate get a job in public relations as many graduates from other disciplines are also entering public relations job. He also asserts that, beside this basic requirement for public relations, the curriculum for education should consider social, political and cultural changes taking place globally and in Indonesia now and then. Therefore students or graduates can place themselves in a very competitive job market. For Noeradi, it is time for public relations education in Indonesia to be a more 'market oriented,' meaning that their graduates should be fitted with the need of job market (2004).

The problem of quality of public relations graduates is determined by several factors. One important factor is the limited number of lecturer in this field has practical experience (Dahlan as cited in Putra, 1996). Most lecturer in public relations study program is lack practical experience due to the fact that most lecturers directly become lecturer after they graduated from communication study program without experience in industry directly. Only few lecturers have experience in public relations industries or related job.

Other issues concerning the body of knowledge as one important basis for public relations education. Although many books on public relations subject have been written either by public relations educators or public relations practitioners, almost all books uses American text book or research as the basic references. This is caused by the fact that research on public relations either for theory development and for practical purposes is quite limited. Although public relations has become one of the most researched areas of communication (Botan and Taylor, 2004), research on public relations in Indonesia is quite limited. If there is any research, the publication of the result is quite rare. Therefore, when one want to

write a book, it is likely that the reference of the book will be an overseas text book which mainly come from the United States. One should aware that the political, social and cultural situation where we practice public relations is quite different.

One notable research on topic of the use of PR material by Indonesia journalist was done by Sinaga dan Wu (2007). Another research on public relations performance was done by Ananto for her PhD dissertation (2004).

Students are also very difficult to find place for their internship although the internship may not be a compulsory unit in many school of communication. Some organizations or companies are very keen to accept students' internship, but many are reluctant to accept students. In many organizations public relations are not managed strategically. Therefore, student cannot learned much when they are taking their off campus study or internship.

MUST PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM BE DEPENDENT ON THE US?

For centuries, colonialists led Asians to believe that the only way to progress was through emulation of the West (Mahbubani 1998, p. 23). As a consequence, as Sriramesh (2002; 2003) observes, many Asian countries still harbour the mentality that 'the West is the best' (p. 60) on many issues. Although some American theories are universal, others should be applied in the content of local experience to accurately reflect a particular culture and society. Lifestyle, environment and assumption of meaning are shared among members of one culture, but may not necessarily be able to operate across cultures. In a survey by David Hitchcock (cited in Sheridan, 1999, p. 10), East Asians chose social harmony, accountability of public officials, openness to new ideas and respect for authority as the most important values in an orderly society. Americans chose freedom of expression, the rights of the individual, personal freedoms, open debate, thinking for oneself and the accountability of public officials as their core societal values. In the personal values area, Asians tended to stress education more highly than did Americans. 'Success in education' in Asian countries is not just a matter of improving one's economic status, but is associated with 'saving face' i.e., with gaining respect from local communities, as described by

Hofstede et al., (2002).

Differences in culture are very much related to the behaviours of thinking, problem solving, individual creativity and his/her role or roles in society. The importance of these inter-relationships raises the question of why non-US countries adopt US public relations textbooks as principal references when these books present only issues and cases from a single country. For example, the best way to educate students to understand a culture is through reading. In one of the major US textbooks used in Malaysia for example, *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics* (Wilcox et al., 2003), the case studies include Oracle and its public relations firm (p. 65), the Telstra Corporation of Australia (p. 10), the XIX Winter Games in Salt Lake City (p. 11), the West Point crisis (p. 181), the Pentagon issue (p. 362), viral marketing (p. 469), Mood Matcher lipstick in New York (p. 475), Fineman Associates of San Francisco (p. 321) and the Danish Post Office (p. 364). More than 70% of the organisations mentioned and discussed in the case studies are unknown to most undergraduate students in Malaysia. Therefore, many students may not be aware of the companies mentioned and may be unfamiliar with the subject matter discussed. This lack of awareness creates two problems: first, the students become disinterested in the subject matter, and second, they are unable to apply what they learn. In the absence of relevant Malaysian case studies, academics have no choice but to use the cases in US textbooks.

In addition, one of the biggest obstacles to having a book of Malaysian case studies is the 'confidential' nature of most public relations exercises in Malaysia (Idid, 2000). Most organisations do not want their shortcomings discussed in research publications. Apart from success stories that can be shared with the public, everything else is classified as 'P&C' (private and confidential). For the benefit of students and the public relations profession as a whole, it is important for public relations practitioners in both Malaysia and Indonesia to permit some openness by sharing issues faced by their organisations. Use of pseudonyms and less publicised cases could help address the issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

Most American references and textbooks do not examine their content from a global standpoint, but rather from an exclusively American perspective. Sriramesh (2002; 2003) has identified elements of ethnocentricity in US textbooks. While this is understandable, the

books were, after all, written for American students, this ethnocentricity also influences public relations education in many other parts of the world. Given that the US is the leader in the field, the absence of holistic, multicultural perspectives in US textbooks and scholarship will slow the growth of public relations education worldwide. Although there are generic principles of public relations that are broadly applicable, a country's public relations programmes must include information on unique local practices and regional public relations issues and cases. Until these changes take place, it is unwise for tertiary level academics in Malaysia to rely entirely on US textbooks as major references.

SUMMARY

Variables such as politics, the media and culture no doubt play an important role in shaping public relations education and its profession in both Malaysia and Indonesia. Despite weaknesses lies on little publication written by local scholars, lack of acknowledgment of the profession as a professional profession, strict government control over education policies and constant media support of the government's agenda, it is difficult to elevate the status of both the education standard and profession. However, what academicians in Asian countries in general and Malaysia in particular to consider is perhaps strengthening collaborations and cooperation between various Asian public relations higher education institutions and professional associations for both the training and development of curriculum through exchange programmes; ensuring the Commission of Public Relations in the US (The Commission on Public Relations Education, 1987; 1999), includes input from Asian and other non-US academics and practitioners in order to obtain fair endorsement of their curriculum reviews; public relations academics and practitioners should also be more willing to share their views and experiences with students. These collaborations can be organised via guest lectures, internships and mentoring in collaboration with local and regional experts to share their views with students as visiting scholars and lastly by working closely with public relations association, for example in public universities should collaborate with the Institute of Public Relations in Malaysia (IPRM) to face the challenge of globalisation and use the benefits of accreditation to increase professionalisation. With such preventive measures taken there will deem possibilities for public

relations education and its profession to be developing in Asian region.

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