



WAIKATO

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

MANAGEMENT SCHOOL

Te Rauapa

Public relations in action:

Social issues, experiential learning and reflection



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Introduction

Real world experience in the public relations curriculum is usually delivered via internships and industry experience. In this initiative all students, in their final semester of a public relations major, experience working with a client to design, plan and implement a public relations campaign. The aim of this project is to allow students to experience the 'real world' as public relations practitioners through

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relationship building, collaboration and effective communication at a number of different levels . Since this experiential learning paper requires human research, human interaction and surveys and other qualitative research methods, it is essential that ethics approval is received from the Ethics Approval Committee of the institution.

To enable sharing of this interactive Good Practice Publication, it is divided into the following sections:

1. Aims and objectives
2. Graduate attributes and learning objectives
3. How to choose a topic/client organisation
4. Running an experiential team-based paper over a 12-week learning semester
5. Course outline, learning outcomes and assessments
6. Evaluation tools
7. The student voice
8. Contact details and acknowledgements

Aim and objectives

The central aim of this initiative is to provide students with an authentic learning experience of working with a real-world client, collaborating with others in an agency, developing client relationships and to build their own networks with industry professionals within the field of public relations. The outcome of such an initiative prepares students for the workforce and introduces them to the variety of roles available to them as communication professionals. Furthermore, the objectives of the initiative are for students to:

- Develop an awareness of, and critically engage with social issues
- Promote public relations as a “force for good”
- Experience the complex nature of human interaction evident when working in large teams
- Build confidence and embrace their own abilities to provide creative communication solutions

The initiative is also aligned with the graduate attributes of the University of Waikato Bachelor of Communication Studies (BCS) degree and prepares students to be work-ready at graduation.

“We learn by making mistakes. Having the opportunity to actually implement this campaign drove much more learning [read more]...than simply writing an assignment. Having the opportunity to go out there and get involved with the public, put the face to face PR skills we have been reading about for the last three years into action, and visually seeing the results of our work. Having the opportunity to get your hands dirty, and step back and evaluate what you did is a priceless learning situation.”

Graduate Attributes and Learning Objectives

Waikato Management School has developed graduate attributes and learning objectives for each of the degrees taught in the School. This aligns with the accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Schools of Business (AACSB) and is reviewed every five years. The attributes and learning objectives of the public relations major are:

1. Commercial context
 - 1.1 Graduates demonstrate appropriate PR skills for working in the business environment
2. Connectedness:
 - 2.1 Graduates demonstrate their ability to facilitate the communication needs of organisations within the local and global environments
3. Citizenship
 - 3.1 Graduates are able to apply ethical decisions to their roles in business and society
4. Critical thinking
 - 4.1 Graduates are able to research, analyse and synthesise literature and other sources of information and evaluate it for its validity, appropriateness and usefulness
5. Communication
 - 5.1 Graduates are able to write documents effectively for different audiences in a variety of genres
 - 5.2 Graduates give effective pitches and presentations
 - 5.3 Graduates are able to effectively gather, interpret and disseminate information through a variety of media
6. Collaboration
 - 6.1 Graduates work effectively and efficiently in teams

How to choose the topic/client

The focus of this teaching initiative is to provide students with a real-world client working for better outcomes in New Zealand society. Concepts of [social justice](#), ethical behaviour, and critical engagement with social issues allow for a wider engagement with the community. It is also possible to work alongside NGOs and smaller providers of [social services](#).

The choice of client is often dependent on availability and willingness of clients to participate in the project. The client is asked to present an overview of their organisation and give an indication of some of the issues the organisation faces in terms of its public relations needs. Small not-for-profit organisations see clear benefits from having 50-60 students working with them to develop PR campaigns that are implemented.

It is important to have one person in the client organisation to work as a liaison with the lecturer and students. The client needs to be well-informed of the direction and development of the student campaigns to ensure that these campaigns are aligned clearly with the organisation's vision, mission and values. Often, student campaigns use social media as a communication channel and it is vitally important that the client signs off the collateral and designs that incorporate the logo.

For this initiative we worked with Organ Donation New Zealand (ODNZ). The lecturer approached ODNZ with the proposal to develop a number of PR campaigns for the organisation. The proposal was discussed with the client and the requirements of participation were clarified by both parties. ODNZ wanted to develop campaigns to communicate clear messages that individuals should talk to their family and friends about their wishes about organ donation. For example, they requested that the campaigns should use non-coercive language and should conform to the values and messages already circulated by the organisation.

As the project has developed, possible clients are approaching the university to be considered as a client for the PR Campaigns paper.

[Link to ODNZ website](#)

Running an experiential team-based paper over a 12-week learning semester

The initiative was developed to sit within the 12-week teaching semester timeframe. It was designed to bridge the world of study and the world of work to ensure that graduates will be “work-ready”. The actual implementation of the campaigns is a point of differentiation from many public relations capstone campaigns courses. The practice was developed to address the lack of work experience of our graduates before moving into the workplace.

At the beginning of the semester, the students electronically sign up for a tutorial time at the beginning of the semester. As we are able to more or less predict the number of students in the class, we identify the most practicable number of students for each tutorial time. There are often difficulties of clashes with other papers and tutorials, but these are eventually ironed out and students are in tutorials of equal numbers.

In this project there were four tutorial classes of 12 students in each. Each tutorial formed a PR agency. The agency identified a group coordinator and deputy and then decided on the particular specialisation areas in which they wished to work, such as creative team, social media team, sponsorship, and [events team](#). The team members signed a group agreement as to how their tutorial time would work, including lateness and cell phone usage. Each team member filled in a time sheet for work completed the previous week. The time sheets were collected by the team coordinator(s) and signed off by the tutor.

“...I have learnt a heck of a lot from it about PR campaigns, myself and other members of the team and the general public”.

Each week, the team met for two hours with the tutor and developed their campaigns. Some teams worked in a casual round circle meeting and then divided up to work on particular areas. Other teams developed a more professional meeting space with reviews of the work conducted in the previous week, a timely discussion of on-going work, and a programme for the [coming week](#).

It was up to the agency to develop their own methods of working on the project and the lecturer and tutor were available for guidance on a regular basis. Just-in-time Teaching (JiTT) allows teachers to focus on particular problems as they arise and provides an effective feedback loop to student preparation prior to the tutorial or lecture session (Gavrin, 2006).

Each week there is a two-hour lecture in which there is guidance on the preparation of a PR campaign, guest lecturers talking to students about their own

experiences and advice, as well as a time to discuss time-frames and particular problems. However, if students identified problems that needed solution then a process of Just-in-Time Teaching JiTT would prevail where the lecture would focus on that particular problem. This allowed a targeted approach to the students' needs as the initiative progressed.

The first six weeks of the semester are used to develop ideas for campaigns. This can be done through student discussion in tutorials, as well as more formally through an assessment of requiring each student to undertake background research on the organisation and topic, develop one or two ideas about a possible direction for a campaign and present to their agency .



"I loved the team work side of it - although I know that is what a lot of people dread [read more]..... The reality is that most of the time you will be a part of a team in the workforce and they might not all be like you so it's important to learn how you choose to deal with that and it is a learning process. We are always learning!"

The second stage of development is to put together a proposal for the campaign by clearly articulating the goal, objectives, target audiences, key messages and tactics. It is at this stage that students require the most guidance. Our experience shows that although the theory for putting a campaign together is

well-understood, the application of the theory into a workable campaign is more difficult. This provides further opportunities for face-to-face communication and JiTT in smaller groups to focus on specific problems and crafting of goals, objectives and key messages of the campaigns.

The second half of the semester is devoted to finalising the campaign strategy and tactics, together with a communication action plan. The campaigns are implemented by the students and, it is at the implementation stage that the benefits of having large groups become evident. In many of the campaigns, students organised events to reinforce ODNZ's messages as well as using social media to provide information to raise awareness and promote [activation](#) .

The course ends with each agency producing a campaign document and evaluation. Each agency then presents their campaign to a panel of judges,

including public relations practitioners and academics at a public event. [Each student](#) receives a Certificate of Achievement and on agency receives the Public Relations Campaign Award for the year .

[Link to ODNZ PR Campaigns event](#)

[Link to "Spill the Beans" documents](#)

"The campaigns paper is the perfect way to finish a communications degree, as it culminates everything that has been taught in the preceding papers, and gives students a taste for implementing them in the real world. Beyond the benefit to the students, it represents a contribution to the wider community, and with a focus on parts of the community that really need it makes a huge impact. It is a good reflection on the university, as part of their CSR, and it also helps to instil a sort of charity into the students. Students should be encouraged to wait until their last year to take this paper, rather than taking it early which some students do. I regard this paper as one of the most valuable and well-designed I have taken at university. The way it utilises the students' learning, and captive attention, to create value to a part of the community shows an entrepreneurial vision. All the value was created by student work that would otherwise have simply been expended into marked work. Therefore the value has been created out of work that was being done anyway, and has simply made it more profitable by redirecting it. I would like to see this type of redirection and vision spread throughout the university, and would be very happy to contribute any further to help this end or with the research involved."

Course Outline Introduction, Learning Outcomes and Assessments

[Link to course outline](#) (instead of using this material)

The students enrolled in the course receive a course outline at the beginning of the semester. This is used as a guide for lecturer, tutor and students. Since this course is a “capstone” course for the public relations major, drawing on learning from previous courses, it is necessary to explicitly discuss every aspect of the paper. It is also an opportunity to introduce students to the concept of the capstone course by explaining that the experiential learning that takes place will draw on their previous courses and enable them to apply theory to practice. It is absolutely essential to explicitly discuss the way the course is taught, the process the students will follow, and the roles of the teaching team.

“This paper effectively brought together the preceding public relations papers that I had completed. On reflection, I think this was a great opportunity to apply skills in a real-life setting as well as actually making a difference in our community. The coupling of social issues and business is something that I wish to pursue in the future, so this paper showed me that this is a possibility from a communications practitioner perspective as well as at a higher more strategic level.”

Although the students work collaboratively together to produce a campaign, it is vitally important to design assessments that are evaluated as much as possible on an individual basis. In this way, it is possible to prevent “free-loading” and provide individual grades for group work. In this initiative, the only group marks awarded are for the actual campaign and presentation which make up only 20% of the final grade.

Students are asked to evaluate their own contribution to the group as well as the contributions of their peers. They also critically evaluate the campaigns of the other three groups in terms of the documentation and presentations. The final assessment is a reflective essay which asks students to reflect on their own learning throughout the course in terms of their own individual and class learning outcomes; their experiences and accomplishments; examples and reflections; and overall writing competency ([Response 1](#))([Response 2](#)).

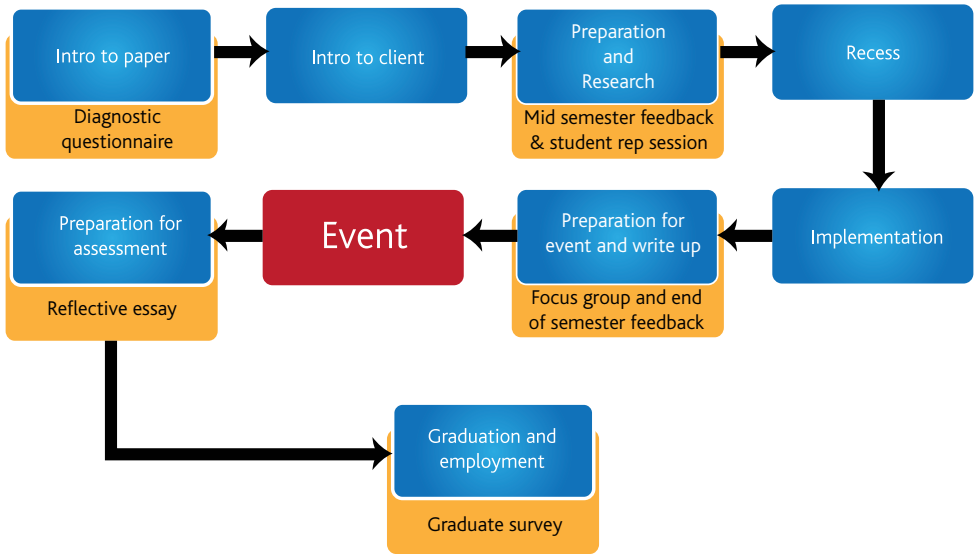
[Link to marking rubric for reflective essay](#)

[Link to marking rubric for campaign evaluation](#)

[Link to marking rubric for group contribution](#)

Evaluation Tools

To ensure that everything was on track for the students, we used a number of different feedback mechanisms.



At the beginning of the course, students fill out a [diagnostic questionnaire](#) which asks them to indicate the courses they have taken prior to this capstone course and their expectations of the course. Students talk regularly to one another about courses they are taking or have taken which builds up certain expectations. As part of the introduction to this initiative, we informed students that the course was changing and would now include an implementation component. This caused some minor upsets which were articulated by students that they were “upset they were being used as guinea pigs”. It was important to explain the benefits of implementing a campaign and how the course is designed to prepare them for the workforce.

The diagnostic questionnaire provides considerable information about the students’ attitudes and expectations and their ambitions. We ask them what they understand a PR campaign is and whether they are able to provide an example of both a good and poor campaign. We then ask them to mark agree, disagree or don’t know to a number of current social and political issues occurring at the time in New Zealand. This is to indicate the level of engagement of the student with current events, trends, and the current importance of social issues and their contexts.

This questionnaire provides important feedback to the lecturer and the tutors to gain an understanding of where the cohort is situated in terms of their current engagement in societal issues. This is useful to keep in mind as teaching resources and examples are given. From the questionnaire, the teacher is able to gauge the level of understanding and pitch the course material appropriately.

An open class discussion took place just prior to the semester recess (facilitated by a third party) which addressed the concerns and the strengths of the course. In this case, the concerns were negated by the strengths of the course but they provided an opportunity for open discussion with the entire class. This illustrated that there were different levels of commitment amongst the students, as well as different comprehension of the discipline and the competencies associated with putting a PR campaign into action. From the feedback, we found that on the whole, students were happy with their progress and were aware that this initiative was excellent preparation for their future work.

Concerns of the students mainly focused on the issues of having one client for four agencies and the competition for resources that this generated; personality clashes amongst members of the agencies; the feeling that the work had not advanced sufficiently to implement the campaign within the time frame; the lack of commitment of some students by not attending lectures; and the size of the groups. This data allowed us to re-evaluate the time frame for the course and to put safeguards in place to support the students as they worked towards completing their campaigns. The feedback also contributed to our own understanding of how the initiative was going and student responses to it.

The student class representatives play an extremely important role in the communication between students and the teaching team. They need to be proactive in finding out what people are experiencing and discussing issues with the lecturer. This allows the teaching team to intervene appropriately by identifying specific concepts that need clarification and guiding the agencies to the next step of their development.

The third phase of data collection took place at the end of the semester after the campaigns had been implemented but before the final competition evening. We developed a [follow-up questionnaire](#) (based on the original diagnostic questionnaire) to assure ourselves that the learning outcomes were achieved. In answer to the question "Has this paper

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provided you with a worthwhile learning experience?" 96% of students responded "yes". They were then asked to explain their answers and this data proved to be extremely rich. Another important question was "Do you believe that by taking this paper, it has prepared you for working in PR?" Again, 96% of students responded "yes". A focus group was also conducted on similar questions to those in the questionnaire and a formal appraisal was generated through the university-wide system. This provided further information on three aspects of the course to be maintained and three aspects that should be changed. In terms of change, most of the comments were focused on the way the test was administered.

The final data collection was the reflective essay . Each student was asked to reflect on their own work throughout the semester. This also identified the value of the initiative undertaken in the course and the preparation of the students for the world of work. The

"As I sat down for our first lecture, I was prepared for yet another university paper where they seek creativity and innovation [Read more]..., yet the teaching team won't let you break beyond their set mould. University had become for me, what I believed was a standardised methodology in order to replicate past successes rather than allow students to create new ones. "...I was particularly excited by the teaching ethos that concerned itself not only with the capabilities and skills we would acquire through a co-construction of knowledge, but the accountability of each and every class member to something bigger than them – their agency. ... More than this, being able to plan, implement and evaluate a public relations campaign has made me more aware of the impact that communication can have in changing perceptions or opening people up to new ideas and information regarding social issues."

majority of students talked about a positive experience and having developed an understanding of what PR work entails . Many also discussed their own personal development through the semester and their increased confidence in applying for jobs and entering the [workforce](#) .

One further follow-up survey was collected eight months after to course was completed. The students had either graduated and were working, or were in the process of completing their degrees. Of the 48 students enrolled in the class in 2012, 23 students (48%) responded to the [survey](#).

"This was the most relevant public relations paper that I did. It consolidated all the theory into practical roles. All parts of the campaign are very relevant to a number of different roles, particularly the ones relating to types of media and their effects on the overall outcome of a campaign."

The student voice – In their own words at the end of the course

"I would encourage doing this paper for a more hands on approach as opposed to learning through pure theoretical applications. Also improves knowledge on how to deal and work with real organisations".

"...I have learnt a heck of a lot from it about PR campaigns, myself and other members of the team and the general public".

"We learn by making mistakes. Having the opportunity to actually implement this campaign drove much more learning than simply writing an assignment. Having the opportunity to go out there and get involved with the public, put the face to face PR skills we have been reading about for the last three years into action, and visually seeing the results of our work. Having the opportunity to get your hands dirty, and step back and evaluate what you did is a priceless learning situation."

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The graduate voice a retrospective

We asked the question: On reflection, how relevant was having this paper in your degree?

"This paper effectively brought together the preceding public relations papers that I had completed. On reflection, I think this was a great opportunity to apply skills in a real-life setting as well as actually making a difference in our community. The coupling of social issues and business is something that I wish to pursue in the future, so this paper showed me that this is a possibility from a communications practitioner perspective as well as at a higher more strategic level."

"It was SO IMPORTANT! I think people should do it at the end of their degree as it really wraps up everything so well and puts a lot of what you have learnt into practice. Taking it at the end of my degree meant I took it a lot more seriously and so got a lot more out of it and it is probably one of the only papers I write in my CV and have talked about in job interviews. The practical aspect of it, tying in all the theoretical knowledge we learnt throughout our time at uni, was extremely beneficial. I loved the team work side of it - although I know that is what a lot of people dread. The reality is that most of the time you will be a part of a team in the workforce and they might not all be like you so it's important to learn how you choose to deal with that and it is a learning process. We are always learning!"

"The campaigns paper is the perfect way to finish a communications degree, as it culminates everything that has been taught in the preceding papers, and gives students a taste for implementing them in the real world. Beyond the benefit to the students, it represents a contribution to the wider community, and with a focus on parts of the community that really need it makes a huge impact. It is a good reflection on the university, as part of their CSR, and it also helps to instil a sort of charity into the students. Students should be encouraged to wait until their last year to take this paper, rather than taking it early which some students do. I regard this paper as one of the most valuable and well-designed I have taken at university. The way it utilises the students' learning, and captive attention, to create value to a part of the community shows an entrepreneurial vision. All the value was created by student work that would otherwise have simply been expended into marked work. Therefore the value has been created out of work that was being done anyway, and has simply made it more profitable by redirecting it. I would like to see this type of redirection and vision spread throughout the university, and would be very happy to contribute

any further to help this end or with the research involved.”

“This paper was a good paper to tie in all the theoretical PR papers we have taken throughout our university degree and to add value to what we have learnt. I am someone who does not learn from theory as such, I have to put it to practice. So to be able to practice what we have learnt in a ‘real life’ situation under the guidance of our lecturers before we leave university in the big world enables us students to leave university, confident with constructing a PR campaign, and with relevant experience to put on our CV.”

“This was the most relevant public relations paper that I did. It consolidated all the theory into practical roles. All parts of the campaign are very relevant to a number of different roles, particularly the ones relating to types of media and their effects on the overall outcome of a campaign.”

“The practical application of the campaign was hugely beneficial (ie partaking in implementation not just theoretical development and discussion). Also the whole process of campaign requirements further assisted in helping me see the full requirements needed to successfully implement a campaign. This paper was very relevant to my degree as I major in PR and marketing; this paper utilises both of these areas.”

“Massively relevant. The campaign went beyond the classroom and the traditional ‘one way’ communication of lecturer to student and had me immersed in gaining actual communications experience. Far more interesting, involved, practical, and applicable than the majority of university papers and subsequently one of my favourites.”

“I found it relevant to the application of skills learned throughout the rest of a PR/Marketing degree. It allowed me to see the real-world application of theory which we had learned, and for me personally, changed PR into something desirable as a career which the theory alone had not.”

“This paper was essential in preparing us for the workplace. It brought all of our PR papers together and helped us understand how the skills we learned could be used in the workplace. It provided us knowledge and skills to take into the real world but it also taught us practically how PR fits into society. I had always struggled to see how my interest in events could fit within a PR role but the campaign gave me the answers. The paper was structured in a way to give students independence in developing and delivering our campaign. There

needs to be more papers throughout the course that encompasses the same level of practical work as MCOM333. I enjoyed it immensely.”

This paper was the most relevant, informative and interesting paper that I completed during my degree. I was able to add theoretical knowledge from previous papers and see how they relate to actual practice. Applying prior knowledge and acquiring new skills was the best way to finish a public relations degree, as it enabled me to expand upon elements that were only briefly explained in [other papers].”

“It was very relevant and beneficial. Throughout the degree, the only practical experience we did was presentations. Campaigns was actual hands-on work from scratch - we started from the bottom to work our way to the top. This is what you do in the workplace - not theory all the time.”

“The biggest thing I think I learnt was how to work in larger groups and with often difficult people which is exactly what you have to encounter in the workplace. I think it was a good idea to make the groups larger as opposed to groups of 3 or 4 as you actually learnt to deal with communication issues and coordination of so many people which was definitely a good experience especially since most groups in uni are small and you can deal with one person not doing work, whereas in [this course] when one person doesn't do something their lack of work is felt within the whole group as everyone relied on each other for different aspects of such a large campaign.”

“It was really relevant in terms of the potential experience to be gained. However the format of the paper meant that I was unable to learn valuable skills. I think that members of the agencies should have a chance to work in any of the different roles as I feel that I missed out on important experience in creating a Comms plan. It was too specialised to be of much value to me. It seems like a good idea until you are one of the agency members who doesn't get a chance to deal with the important roles.”

“Without this paper I would have no real experience with campaigns or events. I have all my theory from previous papers but without the real practical work I wouldn't know where to start. I strongly believe a lot of our learning and skill building is done on the job but this paper has given me a head start and confidence for when I start applying to real agencies (or paid work).”

“Honestly, if this paper had not been in the degree I would feel I did not have

the knowledge to begin full-time employment. UoW could add so much more value to the BCS course by creating more papers like PR Campaigns. Now working full-time in public relations I have been able to see how theoretical the BCS degree is. In my opinion, students would benefit from far more practical elements in the degree. At least through the PR Campaigns paper I had a basic knowledge of first-hand experience dealing with the media (copy writing, pitching, delivering) that I had not really gained from other papers in the BCS course. I now deal with the media many times daily. Some aspects of what I have learned through the duration of my degree were outdated and irrelevant compared to how public relations works in "real life". However, in saying that, the PR campaigns paper was able to prepare me for what to expect. I learned on a different level and I owe gaining successful employment straight out uni to this paper."

"This was a good, practical paper that gave us a some great skills and relevant experiences to add to our CVs and put into practice some of the skills we learnt in other university papers. This paper was very relevant to my degree and I am glad I was able to be a part of the first one. It was relevant as I was a PR major and we had to implement a PR campaign - can't get much more relevant than that! It may have aided in getting the graduate role I am currently in but it is difficult to say, I may have also got the role without the paper. I apply little to none of the skills I gained through the campaigns paper in my current role - I think it would be much more likely that I was if I was in an events or PR role, which I would quite like to be in but am not!"

"Very relevant. Loved working with a real world organisation."

"This was probably actually one of the papers I did throughout my four years at uni where I felt I was actually doing something relating to what I wanted to do career wise."

