

CHAPTER

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Preparing tomorrow's practitioners

Professional and academic collaboration when preparing students to work in a fast moving profession that itself is a work in progress.

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The CIPR and the academic community have long been intertwined through partnerships and accreditation. PR students have frequently benefited by having CIPR members visit the university and give live briefs as part of the students intended learning outcomes for classes.

This benefits the students who are able to build a portfolio of their work, it assists the academic by maintaining a connection to practitioners and skills they are looking for in students and ultimately the CIPR as this helps grow the professionals of tomorrow.

Often regional groups such as CIPR Wessex will collaborate with PR students to host "Meet the Professionals" network events at local universities.

However, there are two questions that arise from an academic view and professional interest: how can universities partner with professional organisations, such as the CIPR, to attract potential students to the PR profession; and how can universities maximise collaboration with professional organisations to ensure knowledge and skills taught today prepare professionals of tomorrow.

Recruitment to higher education

Before we can prepare students for an exciting career in PR, universities must figure out how to recruit students to the PR degree. With many factors such as lower birth rate, higher tuition fees and increasingly more diverse degrees being offered, universities with PR degrees are seeing a downward trend in students choosing a specialty degree.

I often ask my students about what attracted them to a PR degree. One second year student said his teacher had a friend who studies PR and spoke with to him happenstance when she was visiting his teacher. Another student sheepishly admitted that she chose the degree because there was no maths required at university level. The common theme has predominately been that the students knew someone who was

working as a professional.

The challenge is creating more opportunities for the CIPR and universities to have a symbiotic relationship in encouraging 16 and 17 years olds to consider a career as a PR professional.

The CIPR's Education and Skills Group commissioned research in 2012 to understand what influenced potential students to choose certain degrees and found that parents were the number one influencer. While this is unsurprising, if we look at the past six years and ask ourselves what we as a professional organisation have done to influence parents to encourage their children to join our profession - a rather surprising answer is revealed.

At an individual level, we do share our joy with our career choice with others, but at an organisational level we could see a growth in student membership and later accredited CIPR members if we invest in recruitment campaigns that benefit our profession as a whole.

Planning degrees to meet skills needed by our profession

The CIPR's *State of the Profession* 2017 identified content creation, media relations and strategic planning as the top three tasks professionals are engaging in. This annual report is an excellent opportunity for academics to identify the tacit, implicit know-how and skills of tomorrow.

However, the knowledge, skills and technical aspects needed by the PR professional must evolve at a rate that closely follows disruptive innovation and technology - which may be below the radar. For example, with the emerging importance of big data, professionals need a different set of analytical skills. Indeed, as the *State of the Profession* 2017 reported, quantitative and qualitative data analysis are perceived as the weakest skill set.

It could be that higher education PR programmes are reluctant to include a focus that highlights the importance of integrating mathematics and analytics knowing that many potential students try to avoid topics outside of their comfort zone. Contrarily, it may be that many of the academics in the field see those skills as being included at a higher level such as part of a Masters curriculum.

Ultimately, there remains the issue that academia has a slow lag time in adopting curriculums due to higher education's three year lifecycle of course modifications and adoption. This presents the challenge of ensuring academia is preparing students with the necessary knowledge and skills technological evolution demands.

One solution is having the CIPR integrated into the planning of the life cycle of the academic curriculum. Industry trends are equally important as looking at education trends. Regional CIPR groups present an excellent opportunity to provide a second level of evaluation of what higher education is teaching. I realise this may seem controversial to some and yet others are embedding the CIPR into their classroom activities already.

A win-win relationship

As a Bachelor of Arts PR (BAPR) programme leader, I have the advantage of seeing first-hand the excitement that students display when they find out that they will have live briefs or consultancy projects embedded into their learning curriculum.

There is a natural increase of adrenaline when the students find out they are being given the opportunity to work on real world problems and pitch their solutions.

This experience with interacting with professionals has inspired students to seek out careers in industries or sectors they would not have necessarily chosen themselves. For instance, several times I have had students inspired by a guest speaker or live client project to apply for a placement or graduate scheme in the non-profit or public sector.

Often students who have gone on placements return to higher education seeking to research and do dissertation topics that show how professionals can have a social and ethical impact on society. Some organisations support student research however we need to ensure the findings are more visible not just within universities, but also on the CIPR website and possibly within Influence magazine.

Finally, there is an opportunity for the CIPR to consider industry funded PhD research. This could provide even greater insights into how industry and academia could cultivate a better relationship that benefits the profession.

Recruiting and educating tomorrow's professionals is not an easy task. However, given the important role practitioners can contribute, whether from an in-house, agency or consultancy aspect in UK business organisations, it is imperative to ensure academia is delivering the knowledge and skills needed for tomorrow.

Partnerships between the CIPR and academia can help keep the profession growing in a manner that is socially and ethically responsible while being forerunners in communication in a global environment.

An investment in and collaboration today by CIPR and academia, ensures our profession will grow and meet the needs of tomorrow.



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