

Assuring Graduate Capabilities

PR STANDARDS RUBRICS: PROJECT REFLECTION

The **overall aim** of this project was for us to create a meaningful and useful document for public relations students and graduates that will provide them with clear guidelines in terms of industry and degree expectations. This focus on our student cohort determined the research methodology and choice of language, as well as the actual richness/detail provided in the resulting Standards Rubrics.

The project team encountered a number of challenges along the way, most noticeably the tight project deadline. We acknowledge that the resulting document is – at best – a working draft, requiring further thorough editing and testing. The old adage applies: we didn't have sufficient time to develop a one page document for each standard – so we simply have to submit the five page versions.

After initially struggling to recruit appropriate project support (requiring industry experience, familiarity with our curriculum, but also a sound understanding of learning objectives) the background research for this project ended up being more comprehensive than originally anticipated. Rubrics content is based on feedback from all identified crucial stakeholder groups, covering a wide range of industry sectors (corporate, consultancy and not for profit representation ensured):

- Informal feedback & discussion from academic team members: n=7
- Focus group with graduating students: n=6
- Interviews with industry experts: n=12
- Interviews with graduates (3-5 years of experience): n=6

The team saw participation in this project as a unique opportunity to engage with the industry and to further strengthen our networks with professionals, advisory board members and Curtin graduates. The content of the interviews in particular has been very rich and will undoubtedly inform further curriculum and unit content reviews.

Furthermore, this has been a unique opportunity to bring together the teaching team, including sessionals, to discuss course content and expectations. The discussions unearthed a number of challenges, particularly relating to the tension between the massification of higher education and industry expectations. As a team we had to recognise that some of our students will struggle to meet the requirements of the industry (particularly some industry sectors), potentially opting for a different career path upon graduation. Setting graduate objective too high may result in high failure rates (or do we have to accept that a 50% pass mark may signify that course but not industry expectations have been met?). Aspirational objectives will also result in a high (potentially unrealistic?) level of pressure once the new TEQSA review process comes into action. On the other hand, however, low (and arguably realistic expectations when taking our entire student cohort into account) expectations will limit the amount of input and feedback that can be sought from industry representatives, potentially impacting on the reputation and perception of the Curtin PR degree. So far we have only concentrated on the Perth based PR degree, however, these tensions will further increase when taking offshore programs into account. Public relations is a young profession, which is still evolving in many of our partner locations/ countries.

Although confronting and challenging at times, this project has overall been extremely valuable and worthwhile, acting as an eye opener on many levels. As educators we are undoubtedly influenced by our student cohort and institutional recruitment policies / expectations.

These rubrics are only a starting point. Throughout this project I have crossed paths with a number of similar initiatives, e.g. a Marketing discipline cross university competency project and most notably the Business School's Assurance of Learning Project (in preparation for the AACSB accreditation), which has undoubtedly shaped the format of the resulting rubrics and will determine the development of future documents. As a team we are interested to further fine tune and evaluate/test the accuracy of the current standards, as well as to expand research to our offshore partners by benchmarking particularly industry expectations.

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