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### Public relations education in Singapore: Educating the next generation of practitioners on ethics

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## **Public Relations Education in Singapore: Educating the Next Generation of Practitioners on Ethics**

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This study examines if PR education adequately prepares students for the workplace, particularly in the practice of ethics in the context of Singapore, which has been described as one of “Asia’s economic tigers” (BBC, 2018). This study, thus, aims to first, elucidate the state of PR education specifically in relation to how PR ethics is taught in Singapore. Second, it examines how ethics education prepares students for the workplace in Singapore. Data comes from examining the syllabi of 14 universities in Singapore, both local and international, and interviews with 20 academics and practitioners. Findings suggest there are varying degrees in which ethics is offered by these universities, with clear variation between local and international universities. Findings also suggest that industry practitioners find the teaching of ethics useful for the marketplace while recognizing that ethics cannot be imposed or instituted on the individuals.

*Keywords:* ethics, Singapore, PR curriculum, international education, ethics education

The challenge in designing a public relations (PR) curriculum is to ensure that it is intellectually rigorous while at the same time relevant to the industry. Given the myriad of ethical challenges the industry has faced in recent years, the need to devise a curriculum centered on ethics is heightened. Ethical practitioners can guide organizations from avoidable crises and incorporating ethics in PR curriculum is historically and consistently recommended (Bivins, 1991; McInerney, 1998; Smethers, 1998).

The European PR Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) found ethics to be the most valued out of 27 listed courses (Cotton & Tench, 2009). In 2017, ethics became the sixth compulsory component of an ideal PR education curriculum (CPRE, 2018). This means PR education has to be properly designed and implemented to produce professionally competent and ethical practitioners who are able to further their organizations' interests while preserving stakeholders' interests. Ethical, professional practice not only contributes to an organization's image and reputation building, but also generates cost savings by reducing the occurrence or impact of crises. Similarly, the relevance of PR education lies in its pertinence to practice (Middlewood et. al, 1999).

In Singapore, PR positions are difficult to fill (Lee, 2015) as the industry generally prefers experienced practitioners who are assumed to have the requisite competencies, among which is a grounding in ethics (Pang & Yeo, 2012). Entry-level PR positions require a degree, a wide range of skills, and approximately one to two years of relevant experience. This poses an intriguing question: How does PR education in Singapore, particularly the practice of ethics, prepare students for the workplace? As a city-state with a population of approximately 5.5 million people, Singapore is a financial and business hub with a highly educated population (Gleason, 2018). Many multinational industries are located

in Singapore, and the city-state has been described as one of “Asia’s economic tigers” (BBC, 2018). Singaporeans believe having a college education is the key to success (Cheng, 2015) and are pressured into obtaining one (Davie, 2011).

Singapore’s tertiary education system consists of four public autonomous universities and 10 commercial private education institutions partnered with overseas universities. The National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) consistently appear in the list of global top universities. Based on the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (Davie, 2020), NUS is ranked 11th while NTU is ranked 13th.

Worldwide, public universities have stringent admissions criteria (Watts, 2006), and each year, thousands of applicants do not qualify for admissions (“4,400 A-Level students,” 2016). To provide an alternative (Waters & Leung, 2014), Singapore opened its doors to overseas applicants (Mok, 2008). Students from Asia and other parts of the world move to Singapore to enroll in universities, cementing Singapore as a global education hub (Sidhu et al., 2011). As of 2018, there were 65,600 students of different nationalities studying in Singapore (Leow, 2019).

Studies have examined the state of PR education in America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Zhang et al., 2012). Few studies, however, have examined PR in Singapore (see Lim et al., 2005; Lwin & Pang, 2014; Pang & Yeo, 2009; Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009). This study is arguably the first to examine how PR ethics is taught in Singapore. Although senior practitioners are valued for their competencies and experience, students should not be ignored as they are “customers of and investors in public relations” (Erzikova, 2010, p. 188) and become new practitioners and further the practice. This means PR education must be properly designed and implemented to produce professionally competent and ethical practitioners.

Ethical and professional practice not only contribute to an organization's image and reputation building, but also generate cost savings by reducing the occurrence and impact of crises. Similarly, the relevance of PR education lies in its pertinence to practice (Middlewood et al., 1999). As such, the teaching of ethics is geared toward preparing students for PR and not toward work in any particular industry.

This study aims to first expound upon the state of PR education and how PR ethics is taught in Singapore. Second, it examines how teaching ethics in universities based in Singapore prepares students for the workplace. This goal fits the theme of this special issue.

Increasingly, there has been a need to understand how PR and PR education are conducted in various contexts. This was the inspiration for the 2017 book by Kwansah-Aidoo and George, *Culture and Crisis Communication: Transboundary Cases from Nonwestern Perspectives*. By examining PR education in Singapore, this study helps to further build on this repository of knowledge of different contexts around the world. This study also supports the research found in the fall 2020 edition of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, which invited contributions from top scholars in regions such as Africa, East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Louisa Ha (2020), editor of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, wrote:

We know too little about the media and communication in these regions. Their similarities to or differences from the Western countries can validate existing theories, improve or modify current theories, challenge existing theories, and propose new theories. We want to . . . stimulate the interest of Western scholars on research in these countries and see the value of these studies. We also want to encourage authors from these regions to see what have been done on their countries that have been published in our journal. (pp. 569-570)

## **Literature Review**

### **Teaching Ethics in PR Education**

The need to cultivate professional ethics for practice and to establish a standard for conduct (Barry & Ohland, 2009) has led to a demand for PR ethics courses (Davis, 1999). Some researchers argue that ethics must become an element across curricula (Erzikova, 2010; Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003; McInerney, 1998; Smethers, 1998). This is due to universities being “viewed as the place where training in ethics should take place prior to graduates entering the workforce” (Moore, 2008, p. 6). Universities are also seen as instruments for inducing positive change in students’ ethical standards and behaviors (Pratt & McLaughlin, 1989) and the “major line of defense” (Watts, 2006, p. 104) before new graduates enter the industry.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) is the leading authority on PR education and provides recommendations on how PR is taught, and by extension, how PR ethics is taught. In the first of its 12 tenets of an ideal PR curriculum, the CPRE (1999) noted that ethical issues and ethical decision-making are necessary components in undergraduate PR education. According to the CPRE (1999), undergraduate students should obtain knowledge on ethical issues and ethical decision-making skills as well as on legal issues such as privacy, defamation, copyright, product liability, and financial disclosure. In addition, the CPRE suggested legal and regulatory compliance and credibility be taught to students. In its 2006 report, the CPRE suggested that ethics be integrated throughout the PR curriculum, “suggesting short one-hour courses or mini seminars can provide a meaningful ethics forum” (p. 24). In response, some educators argue that ethics should be incorporated into all PR courses (Silverman et al., 2014), while others believe that having an independent course, as well as integrating ethics throughout the curriculum, is the most ideal (Neill, 2017).

In teaching ethics, Ballard et al. (2014) suggested students develop communication ethics literacy through learning. This includes: (a) ethics in human communication, which is comprised of “ancient and/or contemporary theories of ethics to identify what is good, right, or virtuous in communication” (Ballard et al., 2014, p. 6); (b) drawing on moral instincts to understand ethical notions; and (c) conceiving communication and ethics as equal, symbiotic, and mutually-influencing. Ballard et al. (2014) argue these themes provide rigorous learning of communication ethics.

### **Teaching Ethics that are Locally Relevant**

Teaching ethics has become an international challenge (Austin & Toth, 2011; Bampton & Maclagan, 2005; Clarkeburn, 2002; Clarkeburn et al., 2002; Davidson et al., 2003; Goldie et al., 2002; Park et al., 2012; Smith & Bath, 2006). While the recommendations by the CPRE are highly relevant, there is an equally strong need to adapt these to specific contexts and not adopt materials “verbatim without any attempt to align the contents with the environmental contexts of the native country” (Sriramesh, 2004, p. 322). Echoing this, Wang (2011) argued for greater adaptation of Western theories and ideas to specific contexts in Asia.

The challenges facing the internationalization of ethics education are threefold. These include: (a) a shortage of educators in ethics; (b) educators lacking experience in ethics education (Avci, 2017); and (c) a lack of resources, unstructured syllabi, and packed curricula that handicap the development and delivery of ethics education (Byrne et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2010; Rasche et al., 2013). Compounding these challenges is the lack of a conclusively effective pedagogical method for delivering ethics education (Avci, 2017).

Studies on teaching ethics in different contexts return various findings. While ethics is often incorporated into the curricula of PR campaigns classes (81%), introductory courses (80%), and PR

management courses (47%) or is taught as a unit in Principles of PR, PR Writing, PR Case Studies, PR Campaigns, and International PR courses (Silverman et al., 2014), Chung and Choi (2012) found only 14% of U.S. universities offered PR Ethics. In the UK, 40% of universities offer a course in PR ethics, while in South Korea, 45% of its universities offer a course in ethics (Chung & Choi, 2012). Interestingly, although Thailand emulates the U.S. curriculum structure (Ekachai & Komolsevin, 1998), most universities offered at least two general or mass media ethics or law courses that taught codes of ethics, PR effects, or corporate social responsibility, but none was specific to PR (Chaisuwan, 2009). Similarly, ethics is integrated into open and generic courses such as Communication Ethics or Communication Law in Portugal (Goncalves et al., 2013), and in Spain, only 9% of Spanish universities with PR education had a PR law or ethics course (Xifra, 2007). Universities in the United Arab Emirates adapted courses such as PR History and PR Ethics and Law into PR and the Islamic/Arabic Heritage and Islamic Ethical Theory and Arabic Law (Creedon et al., 1995), and most universities in India offer at least two general or mass media ethics or law courses that taught codes of ethics, PR effects, and corporate social responsibility, but none was specific to PR (Chaisuwan, 2009). Finally, Austin and Toth's (2011) study of 39 countries besides the US found that ethics is not taught as an independent course but is integrated throughout the curriculum.

In 2018, the CPRE called for ethics to be integrated throughout the PR curriculum and argued that "ethics knowledge is essential to PR education; it is no longer optional or elective" (p. 67). Subsequently, the CPRE (2018) recommended ethics courses teach moral philosophy and conduct analyses using rigorous philosophical methods and critical thinking. Presently, there is no research examining the state of PR ethics education in Singapore, which leads us to the first research question: RQ1: Where does ethics situate in the PR curricula among universities



based in Singapore?

### **Relevance of Ethics Education to the Industry**

Although educators indicate students are well-prepared in regard to ethics education, reality suggests otherwise. New practitioners were found to overestimate their ability to advise on ethics (Kim & Johnson, 2009; Todd, 2014) and in terms of ethical awareness, 82.4% of new practitioners rated themselves as quite or completely competent in ethical decision making, while 34.2% of employers rated them as good or very good at it (Kim & Johnson, 2009). In their survey of Millennial employees at PR agencies using three workplace scenarios, Curtin et al. (2011) found these young practitioners preferred to avoid an issue by referring to a superior (53.5%) in the first scenario, waiting for someone else to respond in the second scenario (69.5%), or following the superior's orders (52%) to pose as an activist group member in the third scenario. Their results suggested practitioners may be either overconfident in their ethical capabilities or are being evasive, with the former suggesting a certain curricular success and the latter calling into question the relevance of PR education to industry practice.

Research that examined students' views of the relevance of ethics education is limited. U.S. students have been found to demonstrate an incomplete understanding of PR functions and inadequate knowledge of ethics, public affairs, and risk management, which leads them to not instinctively associate PR with ethics, feel that ethics is absent from the practice or poorly emphasized in school, and feel that PR is unethical and manipulative and has no strong ethical base to guide it (S. A. Bowen, 2009). Bowen (2003) argued that both educators and the industry were responsible for allowing the unquestioning perpetuation of negative connotations, which clearly highlights a need for integrating ethics across curricula to reinforce the practice's promise and devotion to high ethical standards.

In order to integrate theory with practice in ethics education, service learning was found to have advanced students' moral reasoning to the highest level (Waters & Burton, 2008) as well as honed students' knowledge of diverse publics and ethical responsibilities as practitioners (Motley & Sturgill, 2013). More importantly, Place (2018) found service learning strengthened students' ethics competency in a realistically simulated environment with assistance from their clients. Internships (Conway & Groshek, 2008) are a way for hands-on learning and application of knowledge, skills, and ethics in the industry and clearly demonstrate the industry has a crucial role in training and ethically preparing students for future practice.

Despite the many pedagogical approaches to imparting ethics, there is no consensus on which method is most effective (Avci, 2017). Universities are under pressure to design their curricula to meet industry needs, and in short, it is a simple matter of supply and demand. As Breaux et al. (2010) mused, "if recruiters do not value ethics . . . should colleges and universities offer these courses?" (p. 4).

Most educators concur on subjects that constitute a good PR curriculum (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003) and agree that graduates should possess ethical values and orientation, which are crucial leadership qualities (Berger & Meng, 2010; Erzikova & Berger, 2012). Silverman et al. (2014) found educators believe that teaching ethics to PR students is critical while the CPRE (2018) reported that educators and practitioners support ethics knowledge, skills, and abilities as crucial for entry-level practitioners. As practitioners, PR graduates function as their organization's ethics counselor (Bivins, 1991; Bowen, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier 2001), and it is imperative that students have relevant education, rather than be in another related communications field to "practice a more sophisticated model of PR" (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003, p. 4).

Teaching ethics to prepare students for the workplace involves increasing students' awareness of ethical issues (Conway & Groshek, 2008), strengthening their moral reasoning skills (Clarkeburn et al., 2002; Lau, 2010; Park et al., 2012), readjusting their simplistic or idealistic ethical thinking into a more sophisticated manner (Plaisance, 2007), having them participate in and interpret complex dilemmas (Ballard et al., 2014), and working on cultivating their future ethical leadership capability (Gale & Bunton, 2005). These actions demonstrate that ethics education is not simply teaching students to think and behave morally, but rather consists of helping them cultivate and internalize crucial skills in critical thinking, reasoning, analysis, and leadership. This helps contribute to students' personal, moral, and professional growth (Eschenfelder, 2011) and capability to serve as an organization's ethics counselor (Bivins, 1991; Bowen, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier 2001).

In Singapore, studies found that PR practitioners spend most of their time on technical duties (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009). Practitioners serve as generalists or technicians by virtue of their job scope, qualifications, skills, and background (Pang & Yeo, 2012). This leads us to the second question.

RQ2: How does teaching ethics prepare students for the workplace among universities based in Singapore?

### **Method**

For this study, we employ two methods: document analysis and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These methods enable us to obtain "convergence and corroboration" (G. A. Bowen, 2009, p. 28).

#### **Document Analysis**

Document analysis was used to analyze courses offered in undergraduate curricula from universities in Singapore offering mass communication and/or public relations programs. Programs that focused on journalism, marketing, advertising, media studies, or communication

design were not studied as they neither provided students with direct PR knowledge and skills nor a career pathway. Although there were institutions that offered double majors and/or double degrees, this study examines only the curricula components related to mass communication and/or public relations. However, programs that were accompanied by a journalism, marketing, or advertising specialization providing complementary skills and knowledge that would benefit a new practitioner were included in this study. Units of analysis consisted of course titles, description, and outcomes acquired via course syllabi. Four local and 10 overseas Singaporean universities were examined, with complete data from 12 of the 14 universities obtained. Data was acquired in October 2016, which equates to scientific validity of the study only corresponding to the academic year 2016-2017.

Previous studies (see Austin & Toth, 2011; Goncalves et al., 2013) that examined PR curricula did not name universities when comparing curricula, and no reasons were provided. Conceivably, it could be to describe the programs while being mindful of not downplaying any program. Even though this study lists all the universities studied, to protect the identities of the programs, this study follows a similar approach.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was first organized into prescribed themes. To develop additional themes for analysis, thematic analysis was carried out via “careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 32) and “coding and category construction, based on the data’s characteristics, to uncover themes pertinent to a phenomenon” (G. A. Bowen, 2009, p. 32). For instance, a digital/new media course was present in 11 syllabi. Descriptors were extracted, combined, and refined from course descriptions to construct an overall course category property. Emergent concepts were derived from examining characteristics drawn from each course description (G. A.

Bowen, 2009).

### **In-Depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were used to examine academics' as well as practitioners' views on the role of ethics in the PR industry. A semi-structured interview method was chosen to provide independence and adaptability in adding questions to the questionnaire (Owen, 2014; Pang & Yeo, 2012). Twenty interviewees were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. Curriculum directors (CDs) from local universities and private institutions, many of whom are subject matter experts in the field of PR. Among seven CDs, three were from local universities and four from overseas universities.
2. Educators were included only when recommended by CDs or serving as a substitute for non-participating CDs to ensure the quality of data obtained.
3. Ten senior practitioners in PR or corporate communications were included.

Interviews were conducted throughout November 2016, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. All interviewees regardless of role are considered subject matter experts with senior academics and practitioners serving as "elite interviews" (Bowen, 2008, p. 278). CDs helm curricular improvement, development, suitability, and rigor (Doll et al., 1958), and understand the industry's needs, while senior practitioners provide insights on hiring expectations and relevance of and improvements for PR education. The selection criteria created participant homogeneity (Guest et al., 2006) and similarity in responses (Bryman, 2012) to allow the study to reach saturation. Given these experts have shared knowledge and experience and "tend to agree more with each other with respect to their particular domain of expertise" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 74), 20 interviews were viewed as sufficient.

Data analysis began with re-reading the transcripts to identify codes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and used McLeod's (2003) immersion, categorization, phenomenological reduction, triangulation, and interpretation stages. Codes represent notions or observations in the data (Lancy, 1993) that can be based on themes derived from theories and research questions (Pang et al., 2017). During immersion and categorization, the data was scrutinized for meaningful details and categorized and sub-categorized using literature and research questions as analytical frameworks. During phenomenological reduction, immersion and categorization were cyclically repeated and improved as additional themes and interpretations emerged. Finally, themes and sets of connections were analyzed, evaluated, and connected to accepted entrenched theories, arguments, and interpretations.

### **Findings**

The first research question focused on where ethics situates in the PR curricula among universities in Singapore. This study examined undergraduate mass communication and/or public relations curricula of 14 universities in Singapore: four local, two U.S., four U.K. and four Australian universities based in Singapore. The findings for RQ1 are grouped according to the university's nationality for clear presentation and ease of analysis and comparison.

#### **Ethics in Singapore Universities**

Ethics and/or law are covered within a course in 10 of the 14 universities' curricula. Among the local universities, ethics was found within a combination of core or elective courses or was subsumed within another related course. Among the private, overseas universities, ethics was present as a core course and/or integrated into another subject.

Ethics was taught as both a standalone course or integrated into several courses among three of the four public autonomous universities. The standalone courses appeared to be comprehensively taught as they

provided students with basic knowledge on media law, ethics and policy as well as “practical grounding on media law and ethics by presenting a wide spectrum of legal issues and ethical dilemmas faced by media practitioners” (a local university), and “addresses psychological theories of moral development, ethical theories in public relations, models of ethical reasoning, professionalism, codes of ethics, ethical strategic management, corporate social responsibility, and the fundamental aspect of ethically managing relationships with stakeholders” (a local university). One aimed to help students “recognize and resolve moral issues, develop critical thinking and analytical skills, appreciate the complexities of ethical issues confronting communication management practitioners.” In particular, two of the local universities taught media ethics and law with a particular emphasis on Singapore. Among the three local universities, ethics was commonly integrated into writing courses (Basic Media Writing, Online Journalism, and Writing for Print and Emerging Media) and strategic media (Digital Media Entrepreneurship, Advertising Strategies, and Strategic Social Media Management). One local university exhibited low coverage of ethics, which was part of the persuasion corporate responsibility courses, as its communication program was offered as a major rather than a full bachelor’s degree program when compared to its local counterparts. Among the local universities, one university had 10 courses containing elements of ethics/law. This finding could be attributed to the fact that the program admits working adults and was designed to meet their career or professional needs. Although another local university’s program had nine courses with elements of ethics, it should be noted that two were related to journalism, one was listed under advertising, one was available only to honors students, and another was the objective for an Advanced Communication Campaigns course.

### **Ethics in Singapore-Based Overseas Universities**

Though ethics as a subject was found in three Australian programs,

it was not evident in the final program. Among the three Australian programs, two taught ethics as a standalone course, whereas one was taught as part of the Foundations of Public Relations and Influence and Impact in Public Relations courses. Ethics was also taught in another program's Radio News course where it helped students to "develop critical thinking skills and establish professional practices within journalism's ethical and legal parameters." The fourth program taught Workplace Law, which did not appear relevant to PR as course descriptions were unavailable for analysis.

Of the two U.S. programs, only one appeared to examine ethics using "selected texts dealing with one or more of the three basic concepts: 'The True,' 'The Good,' and 'The Beautiful'." Among the four U.K. programs, only one had a standalone ethics course, which provided an understanding on free speech and privacy "within a historical, philosophical and ethical context" and "a critical understanding of the historical and political framework" of media regulations. As the course description for Advertising: Research and Regulation was unavailable, the study would assume that ethics or law educational elements were present within the course by virtue of the course title.

### **Differences Between Singapore and Overseas Universities**

Ethics was primarily taught in a theoretical manner among the overseas universities and was given some form of practice in the local universities' writing courses. Although some of the local and overseas programs had practical courses (e.g., capstones, campaigns), ethics was not mentioned. While some courses appeared to examine issues (e.g., Managing a Communication Business, Contemporary PR Research), the titles can be nebulous and may not necessarily mean or refer to ethics and/or law. Lastly, it was interesting to note that Crisis Communication and Management, which invariably discusses ethics, was offered as a course by all four local universities, while it was largely absent in most of the



overseas programs except for one Australian program.

### **Ethics Forms the Bedrock of PR Education**

In response to the question of how important ethics is in PR education, one academic noted ethics forms the basis of a PR education:

Yes, of course, it should be in the curriculum because as part of the relationships between an organization and the society around it, PR people—as anybody who makes critical decisions—have a responsibility for ethical behavior, their own and that of the organization's.

Another respondent noted this reinforces the notion that ethics should be taken seriously in the workplace:

I think it is essential to at least signal to the students what the professional standards are because there is a real danger that in their enthusiasm to achieve their objectives, they are going to compromise on ethics . . . I think ethics have to be integrated into these classes.

### **Teaching Ethics in PR Education**

In response to the question of how universities devised their curriculum, one academic suggested that ethics should be integrated in all classes:

You should choose integration because the danger of the standalone is that maybe you are not getting the information about the OB [out-of-bounds] markers at the right time, maybe it seems like something you are learning for this course rather than learning to integrate into your professional life. So, the essential thing is ethics be integrated into cases, it is only valuable to the extent of sending a broad signal of where the boundaries are.

OB markers are defined as the parameters under which organizations work in Singapore. Euphemistically called OB markers or “out-of-bounds,” they included sensitive topics such as language, race, religion, foreign politics,

and unsubstantiated criticism of public institutions (Cheong, 2013). Pang et al. (2014) argued “practitioners acknowledged that the onus was on them to understand these sensitivities. Failure to do so would backfire on the organization even if there was no intention to breach any unwritten rules” (p. 282).

Another academic felt the way ethics was taught in a curriculum depended on the availability of educators:

If there is a mature PR curriculum that is diverse and has excellent teachers, those will be able to integrate ethical thinking into their courses. That’s one way of doing it. If you don’t have instructors or curriculum that lends itself to doing that, having a separate course is better.

In response to what this means for ethics in PR courses, one academic noted:

It is about the synergies. Although media law focuses a lot on defamation and etc., which is very much relevant to journalism, we have a huge chunk of it focused on PR and strategic communications, which is relevant to our key focus.

The second research question examined how teaching ethics prepares students for the workplace in Singapore.

### **Seeds Sown in Universities for Industry Practice**

Interviewees said learning ethics in university prepares students to understand expectations in the workplace. One practitioner explained, “Ethics is important especially in today’s world with the use of social media and the world being so porous, information just gets out there.” The practitioner argued that with so much information generated daily, the lines between generating original content and borrowing content are blurred, which is when ethical practice is important. The practitioner noted:

Previously, people did not share that much information or plagiarize, but today it is so easy to plagiarize content from anywhere. Especially those doing content development— they have to adopt ethical practices as well as practically everything else they do. It has always been about making sure that you are ethical and honest in your communication and that was always stressed.

Another practitioner argued the seeds of ethical practice must first be sown in universities, contending it is “especially important for some industries like medical PR. Although you can learn about the rules and regulations of the industry on the job, it is better to learn it in the universities.” Given the changing communication landscape, students prepared by universities would be better able to manage challenges than those who are not. One practitioner noted, “We need a very strong ethical framework before going to work because work will challenge you on what is ethical or not. Ethics also teaches you critical thinking and you need that so much in this business.” The practitioner argued that integrating ethics into different PR modules works better than teaching ethics in standalone courses so that students can see the relevance of ethics in all situations. The practitioner added:

If you set up certain ethical frameworks: how to make an analysis, the top questions to ask yourself, elements to look at, and if you bring that framework back into other courses, that would be fantastic! I would encourage that! Having students apply the code or principles of ethics to case studies would be an effective way of teaching. This translates to learning what is taught in universities to the workplace.

Another practitioner noted that “there must be guidelines on what you can say and do. Every organization needs ethical practices in terms of social media content sharing.” One practitioner explained that “Some of our

clients require us to take ethics tests. Every year, we have to log onto a website, listen to an online lecture and take a quiz where we must get all questions correct.”

### **Limitations of Teaching Ethics**

Interviewees argued that even if universities devised the best curriculum, preparing students on ethics in PR does have its limitations. One practitioner said, “It is a good course to have but you have practitioners who are naturally ethical and unethical. It is your character: are you an ethical person?” Another elaborated:

Ethics is something that you can discuss; it is very hard for people to conform. It is again person-specific. Some have very strong morals and ethics; so even if you don’t teach them a lot of ethics, they will not stray.

While another added that beyond the classroom, it was a constant reminder at the workplace to reinforce ethics:

In the course of work with clients, you have access to confidential stuff, so the ability to keep things to yourself is very critical. There are situations where we are privy to certain things that most people within the client’s organization do not even know about. I think it is good to constantly remind them that the trust factor is very crucial as there must be mutual trust between you and the client.

This extended to working with clients who are ethically-challenged. The practitioner noted, “Besides from the perspective of confidentiality, there are times where clients have questionable ethical issues, and you need to figure out how to manage that or [they] ask you to do certain things that may impact the business.”

Given all these diverse views, how can ethics be institutionalized so that minimum standards are kept? One academic suggested:

Every practitioner should have a sense of ethics. When we talk about ethics in Singapore specifically, we need to, in some

way, standardize . . . we need a yardstick, whether it is PRSA or IPRS. Ultimately, they have their own codes of conduct, and practitioners need to, in a way, have some alignment to ethical background.

### **Discussion**

Ethics in PR education is well-emphasized in most communication programs offered by Singapore's public universities. The subject is taught as a standalone course and is also integrated into several courses within their curricula. This demonstrates that ethics education conforms heavily to the CPRE's (2018) recommendations. Ethics could both be taught independently or emphasized and practiced in several writing and strategy-type courses. By integrating ethics into a practice-based course, students would have more opportunities to apply their knowledge before entering their internships or joining a new practice. In short, ethics education among local communication programs appears to have a healthy balance of learning and application and could be well situated at the rigorous end of the curriculum spectrum.

### **Teaching Ethics in Singapore as Compared to Other Countries**

The mass communication and/PR curricula in Singapore is focused on imparting essential skills and knowledge on students as those contribute to students' employability as new PR practitioners. Local universities offer more courses that provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge they acquire, which also includes ethics. To a lesser degree, the Australian programs are also able to achieve this. However, the U.S. and U.K. programs appear highly theoretical. Data suggests that ethics/law are poorly emphasized in the U.K. programs in Singapore. A fair evaluation of the U.K. curricula was difficult to ascertain as course descriptions for two universities were unavailable for analysis. In essence, within Singapore's curricula, ethics appears well-taught and integrated within the local universities' curricula, but the U.S. and U.K. programs appear to be

attempting to meet basic expectations of a good program by offering an ethics course. In terms of ethics education, the Australian programs are arguably more rigorous than their U.K. and U.S. counterparts.

The landscape appears to be different in the programs offered by the overseas universities. Although three of the four Australian programs have taught ethics as a standalone course at their home universities, findings indicate that ethics is not well-featured or integrated into the curricula taught in Singapore. This means the programs are likely to be situated in the middle of the spectrum whereby they partially-fulfill the CPRE's (2018) recommendations of providing a course in ethics with minimal and weak integration of ethics in other PR-related courses. Unlike their Australian counterparts, only one of the four U.K. universities in Singapore offering communication studies has a standalone ethics course and only one of the two U.S. programs featured ethics in its curriculum.

Among the local programs, ethics is integrated into several open and generic courses such as Organizational Communication, Ethics in Communication Management, Corporate Communication, and Corporate Responsibility in the Global Era, which bears some semblance to the Portuguese curricula (Gonclaves et al., 2013). Among the overseas programs, ethics is integrated into communication and media-related courses such as Radio News, Advertising: Research and Regulation, and Workplace Law, which appears to resemble the approach of programs in India (Chaisuwan, 2009). Thus far, ethics in PR education in Singapore seems to be of a pragmatic nature such that it allows for the application within the wide communications field.

One might argue that the differences between the PR programs in Singapore and its international counterparts are not significant. The differences are more evident between local universities and the overseas universities. Fitch (2013) argued that the curricula from overseas universities tend to be globalized rather than internationalized.

Internationalization is where courses were “offered either through a partnership arrangement (with a local education institution or a commercial operator) or at an international campus” and the curricula “seek(s) to relate abstract and general bodies of knowledge to local and foreign situations, reflecting the importance of social, political and geographical factors in education,” while globalized universities are “generic or universal programs that are produced in one location for global consumption” (Fitch, 2013, pp. 137-138). The ramification of the globalized university would be that graduates would have difficulty applying knowledge to local problems and contexts, which would cause the local PR industry to question the relevance of PR education for employment and practice. The globalized nature of some overseas curricula lends to the perception that these programs are “cash cows” rather than designed to meet the needs of the students (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 646).

### **Beyond the Classroom: What is Learned Must be Reinforced in Industry**

Chua and Ameen (2020) found that when confronted with ethical issues, students in Singapore universities are more likely to behave ethically, which could be a function of the education provided. This study argues that beyond awareness and discussions in the classroom, ethics has a utility function as it aims to equip practitioners to protect organizations’ business needs and allow new practitioners to meet the expectations of practice and their role. This means ethics has a practical relevance and value because the additional critical thinking skills gained from ethics courses and the trust built with clients can translate into business and earnings for an agency.

Pang (2013) argues that practitioners are vital in helping to shape public perception and to manage the information vacuum in times of crisis. This involves managing the media as well as utilizing an integrated

media approach (Pang et al., 2018). S. A. Bowen (2009) describes practitioners as “ethics counsel” (p. 271) for organizations, while Lee and Cheng (2011) describe them as demonstrating ethical leadership.

Even though PR education is still largely about the skills and knowledge needed for practice, an exploration into ethics in varying forms has sown the seeds for future practice in several ways. First, practitioners would have stronger critical thinking skills, which are prized by employers and the industry (Landis, 2015; Mayer, 2016). Second, new practitioners are less likely to overestimate their ability to advise on ethical issues (Kim & Johnson, 2009; Todd, 2014) as they would have learned that carefully considering issues and making decisions with far-reaching impact is difficult. Third, new practitioners are less likely to avoid tackling ethical issues or defer decisions to their superiors (Curtin et al., 2011), which would strengthen the value and relevance of ethics and PR education for employment. Finally, the above would arguably culminate in new practitioners being less reliant on employers to provide further training in ethics, which addresses the industry’s complaints of having to waste resources to train new practitioners (Tench & Fawkes, 2005).

Ethics taught in the classroom must be further cultivated and reinforced in the workplace (Bishop, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Shenkir, 1990). Carlson and Burke (1998) found shifts in thinking in adult students, from philosophical thinking to leadership action. Students employed analytical and conceptual skills to solve ethical dilemmas; were more at ease with uncertainty; developed an appreciation for limitations; and perceived the usefulness of managing ethics to affect organizational culture. This demonstrated that teaching ethics does have an effect on students and how PR is practiced.

With a foundation provided, the next steps of growth would likely come from examining case studies (Sparks & Cornwell, 1998) and experiential learning (Silverman et al., 2014). The CPRE (2018)



recommends simulations (Neill, 2017; Silverman et al., 2014) and case studies (Neill, 2017; Silverman et al., 2014) aimed at building a strong base of knowledge and skills (Garcia, 2010; Sriramesh, 2002). This favors a professional approach to PR education that is likely to be better received (Zhang et al., 2012).

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the state of PR education in relation to how PR ethics is taught in Singapore and how teaching ethics prepares students for the workplace in Singapore. Findings suggest there are varying degrees in which ethics is offered by universities in Singapore, with a clear division between the local and overseas universities. Findings also suggest that industry practitioners find teaching ethics to be useful for the marketplace while recognizing that ethics cannot be imposed or instituted on the individual and must be left to the individual's prerogative.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data were collected during the 2016-2017 academic year. Some of the curricula may have changed since that time; however, curricula generally do not undergo major changes quickly. Another limitation is that this study only examined degree-level PR curricula. Future studies could examine the diploma-level curricula of polytechnics and private education institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ethics is taught and how these could form foundations for degree-awarding programs.

This study elucidated the state, relevance, and value of ethics in PR education in Singapore as well as the local industry's expectations of new practitioners. It is one of the few attempts at describing the state of PR education in this part of Asia and more specifically in Singapore. It is our expectation that this study will build on other studies to generate a repository of knowledge to understand less examined markets.

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