

Refereed Paper: Discussion paper

Mrs Rene Benecke

Mr Sibonelo Malinga

Professional development through a student association: Case of the Student Public Relations Association (SPRA) at University of Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

Student associations are traditionally established to enrich student life with the aim to enhance academic, political, social or religious interests of students (UJ website, 2013). Most institutions of higher learning both locally and internationally have a wide variety of student organizations as part of their structures with the aim to complement formal academic curricula with “real hands on” experiences. These activities may include volunteering for a charity, developing projects or campaigns for not for profit organizations (NPO) or helping their academic institutions to build its reputation in a specific community. Exploring how academic objectives and experiential learning practices may form part of student association activities will be the focus of this paper.

The Student Public Relations Association (SPRA) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) was established in 2012 with the required minimum of 30 members and the constitutional aim being to provide registered Public Relations students with opportunities to develop their public relations skills through their involvement in industry related community projects and Public Relations and Communication organisations (SPRA Constitution, 2012).

The paper will explore the opportunities available to students and academics to integrate academic outcomes and experiential learning activities within a student association in order to develop the professionalism of our Public Relations students. A survey will be conducted with various SPRA executive members in exploring the impact their involvement with this student association had on their professional development.

1. Introduction

One of the main objectives of all educational programmes and the focus of higher education institutions is to ensure that students who graduate are knowledgeable, competent and professional. Add to this institutional objective, the students' expectation of finding suitable and financially rewarding employment on graduating and you have the ingredients of a very complex and challenging state of affairs. In a recent address during an awards function for academic achievers, a young professional and 2013 SPRA chairperson told the audience that in order to stand out from the crowd you need to work hard, complete what you have started and get involved. Being involved may mean different things to different people and the wide variety of formal student associations at higher education institutions and their benefits may make the choice and level of involvement difficult.

Student associations are traditionally established to enrich student life with the aim to enhance academic, political, social or religious interests of students (UJ website, 2013). Most institutions of higher learning both locally and internationally have a wide variety of student organizations as part of their structures. The aim is to complement formal academic curricula with “real hands on” experiences. These activities may include volunteering for a charity, developing projects or campaigns for not-for-profit organizations (NPO) or helping their academic institutions to build its reputation in a specific community. Benefits to members include networking opportunities, leadership development and social events.

The reasons why students join as well as some of the challenges experienced by student associations influence their effectiveness and the value they add to the students' overall learning and ultimately the professional development of the individual. Understanding this in the context of a holistic approach to learning as the key objective of cooperative education, necessitates further investigation into the role that student associations may play in their professional development.

The aim of this paper is to explore how current student association activities are linked to academic objectives and experiential learning practices in order to develop knowledgeable, competent and professional graduates.

2. Student Associations

Student associations form part of student life and are structures developed by students for students. The development of student associations is also rooted in the shared needs and interests of the students resulting in uniquely developed constitutions, membership profiles and activities. Membership may consist exclusively of students or in some cases an 80/20 percent split with some faculty or institutional representation (IUPUI website). Annual registration of both the association and members is common practice at most institutions. Membership fees are generally very reasonable necessitating additional funds being generated through sponsors or fundraising events.

Different types of student associations include social, academic or religious interests and the activities are in line with the profile of the association. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on the development of an academic student association in the Public Relations

programme at UJ. Academic student associations pride themselves in organising events which will enhance the academic development of its members and will include guest speakers, student conferences and community outreach events.

3. Developing professional public relations students

The terms professionalism, profession and professional development are often used interchangeably and without a shared understanding of what is meant with these terms (Swick, 2000). In Public Relations specifically there has been numerous debates around criteria and practices associated with professionalism (Theaker and Yaxley, 2013:42). Notwithstanding the uncertainty regarding an all-inclusive definition of professionalism the importance of professional practice is not disputed but rather promoted. For the purpose of this paper professionalism is understood to include behaviour that demonstrates formal education and experience, practiced according to accepted standards by members of a specific profession. The general opinion is that professionalism must be taught and assessed and not assumed to exist as an inherent quality. Professionalism is also influenced by time and context (Wilkinson, Wade and Knock, 2009). This approach to professionalism implies aspects such as personal accountability, lifelong learning and professional development.

Professional development can be defined as the acquiring of relevant knowledge, skills, and personal development in a specific industry on a continuous basis to ensure relevant and contemporary globally acceptable practices (Theaker and Yaxley, 2013). Professional development further implies an involvement with formal structures such as a recognized professional body which may offer Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities as well as the standards of practice. These standards of practice are available online and in

various text books to all public relations scholars and should be studied in order for the practitioners to apply them to their own unique contexts.

4. Integrating student association objectives with formal learning objectives

Integrating various experiences of a student such as those found in formal classroom settings as well as informal experiences forms part of active learning and learning by doing promulgated in experiential learning theory. Experiential learning is a holistic approach to learning. It acknowledges the importance of learning through action and reflecting on experiences in order to change informal experiences into formal learning opportunities (Benecke and Bezuidenhout, 2011). Students involve themselves in academic student association activities such as listening to a guest speaker from industry or attending a conference in order to develop their own knowledge and to experience aspects of their future careers. In the case of Public Relations, involvement in student association activities may also afford students the opportunity to practice their event organising, stakeholder engagement and relationship building skills, making student association membership an attractive and entertaining option to achieve some of the experience needed to ensure employability. Ensuring that these experiences develop into formal experiential learning activities require planning, assessment and structure typical to all cooperative learning programmes. These requirements may present the student association and the faculty with a number of challenges.

Research done on factors motivating students to join student associations highlighted some challenges and issues such as time, perceived value or benefits and perceived professionalism of the association (Hegedus and Knight, 2002).

The issues of time and sustainability relate to the fact that students often find it difficult to involve themselves in the activities of student associations due to their academic commitments, work responsibilities and personal lives. Many students also commute by means of public transport which affects the time and opportunities to be involved with such activities.

The perceived value that membership may offer to students will depend on how well the objectives of the association correspond with the students' perception of their future careers and how it will assist them in developing further skills for the working environment (Wei and Zhonghang, 2010; Hegedus and Knight, 2002). It was a general finding in the studies conducted that students do think that membership and active involvement with a student association will aid them in developing various skills, especially in leadership. This was also supported in an exploratory group interview with leaders of the Student Public Relations Association at University of Johannesburg (UJ).

The perceived value and benefits that membership and involvement with the student association offers is also linked to the level of professionalism that the association displays. There seems to be a concern amongst the students that the level of professionalism of student associations needs to be improved (Hegedus and Knight, 2002). This perception influences their willingness to join and influence the reputation amongst external stakeholders of the value and contribution that membership may offer students.

From the faculty perspective, challenges include sustainability and continuity due to the fact that students spend a relatively short period at the institution. There is constant change in the membership and leadership of the student association, which complicates the integration of activities as credit bearing learning outcomes. In order to be a credit bearing component in the

curricula of programmes assessments need to be planned and formally conducted, ideally according to scaffolding learning principles. This requirement needs close coordination between faculty members and the student association leadership. This is difficult if a student association is strictly independent from any permanent institutional structures other than student governance. Current governing structures at UJ (UJ website, 2013) stipulate that student associations need to be independent of faculty structures. Annual association and membership renewal often result in members only becoming active and available for projects later on in the academic year. This limits the activities of the student association as well as possible integration of formal learning outcomes set by the curriculum and faculty.

5. Background to the Student Public Relations Association (SPRA)

Establishing a student association starts with a shared vision of like-minded individuals such as a group of senior public relations students. This highly motivated group of students wanted to address the needs of students to improve their academic results, develop a better understanding of the public relations industry, gain experience and establish networks. These would then assist them in finding work integrated learning placements during their final year and future positions in a very competitive market.

Negotiations with the formal UJ student governing structures were started by one of the founder members and 2011 chairperson, who had strong Student Representative Council affiliations. By April 2012 the constitution was in place. A membership recruitment drive resulted in the required minimum of 30 members joining and establishing SPRA as a formally recognized academic student association of the University of Johannesburg (UJ). An executive team of 11 members was appointed with ex-officio status granted to the curriculum chair of the Diploma in Public Relations and Communication and a lecturer in the Department of Strategic

Communication. Weekly meetings were conducted by the executive team and once a month with the members. Within the first two months of launching SPRA, members planned and held two community outreach projects, namely, Career Fair at Alexandra Township and Mandela Day at Helen Joseph Hospital, Auckland Park, Johannesburg. Both events were executed in partnership with internal UJ structures and external organizations.

Membership grew consistently. By the time of the all important Student Conference in October 2012, membership increased to more than 70 active members. The Student Conference was organized in conjunction with the professional body, Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) who assisted with key note speakers and sponsorship.

The executive team needed support on various levels such as resources i.e. a boardroom for meetings and telephones; assistance with institutional procurement practices; industry contacts for sponsorships; and media relations. Social media platforms were used to promote SPRA, to ensure an online presence and contact with members via their preferred means of communication. Active involvement by faculty members as ex-officio members of the SPRA provided support and guidance to the executive team. Most of the student executive team were completing their work integrated learning module (WIL) during this time resulting in meetings and activities taking place after office hours. Faculty members attended weekly executive meetings as well as the launch function and Student Conference 2012.

In line with institutional guidelines requiring annual registration of the association and members and due to the fact that all the executive team members had graduated, a new executive team had to be elected. The 2012 executive team selected the new leadership by shortlisting members who were actively involved in the association during 2012. They were interviewed to determine their

leadership skills and to match the various portfolios with the candidates. The ten (10) member new executive team was announced in December 2012 and orientation done in January 2013. The 2012 team played a role in orientating the new executive team but some support functions still needed to be done by the faculty members. The 2013 executive team embarked on a major membership drive and by mid-March had recruited 180 members. Various partnerships have also been developed between SPRA and internal departments such as Alumni and Corporate Communication. A number of activities are planned for the year which will include several of the 2012 projects but also a few new ones.

As an academic student association it was important to review the academic development of the members. The Student Conference in October 2012 hosted a wide variety of topics. Industry speakers aimed to develop a better understanding amongst students of the current practices in the public relations and communication industry. 110 delegates attended the event which was open to students from UJ and other local institutions. As the conference was organized by the students it provided the executive team the opportunity to practice their event management skills, their media writing and relationship management skills.

As mentioned before, many of the executive team was in their final year of studying towards their Diploma in Public Relations and Communication. Based on their involvement as SPRA executive members, some students used the different activities for their work integrated learning portfolio of evidence. The portfolio of evidence is used to assess learning outcomes for the WIL module which students register for as a credit bearing component.

Exploratory group interviews with three executive members of SPRA clearly indicated that a wide variety of skills have been developed or existing skills enhanced. All the respondents

shared the view that their involvement with SPRA and especially the leadership of this student association had enabled them to be better communicators, interacting more effectively with diverse individuals and groups, plan and implement various activities, write better and present their work with more confidence. They all indicated that the opportunity to “practice” stakeholder engagement and interpret public relations theory reinforced their knowledge or gave them the opportunity to change their approach. Affirmation and approval of specific approaches to problems and engagements acted as a confidence booster to the individuals, confirming that they can cope with future demands in similar contexts for example a working environment. These comments indicated reflective learning and support learning cycles as seen in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984).

6. Recommendations and further research opportunities

Developing professionalism through student associations requires the integration of activities by the association, the academic programme or curriculum, faculty and institution together with the professional body representing the relevant industry. In the case of an academic student association it is essential to ensure that formal learning outcomes are formulated, in collaboration with the specific programme students are registered for. These activities are assessed and credit bearing. A wide variety of assessment methods may be used in professional development as suggested by Wilkinson, Wade and Knock (2009) in their study involving healthcare professionals. These assessment methods are very similar to those used in academic and applied programmes and include observational and reflective reports, client feedback, self assessments and group evaluations. Evaluating the achievements of student associations will assist in gaining the necessary reputation and professional status required to recruit members and secure the support from faculty members and industry representatives.

Support and enabling structures are essential to the success of a student association. Due to the temporary nature of its membership these associations cannot function entirely independently from faculty. Students need to understand that the various activities both in class and organized by the student association form an integral part of their learning. It also gives them an opportunity to gain experience in the relevant industry they are preparing for. This aspect links closely with the key principles of experiential learning and cooperative education.

Developing leadership skills has been cited by many as one of the key benefits of student association membership. Student associations and the various executive leaders are important role players in ensuring that the faculty and curriculum developers are in touch with the needs and developments of their students. It allows for establishing long term relationships with academia and future student association leadership.

A closer link between the various structures and the activities will not only consolidate and integrate these but will also enable students, faculty and industry to achieve better results and will benefit the student association members. The industry will benefit in that the professionalism of future practitioners will be developed and faculty will benefit in this holistic approach to learning.

Further research is necessary to determine the value of these practices and the most effective types of activities academic student associations should include in their annual calendar.

7. Conclusion

Achieving professionalism through student association membership is a challenge. It needs the combined attention of student association leadership, faculty members, institutional support structures and industry partners. These are similar requirements in successful cooperative

education programmers and for this reason an organization such as the World Association of Cooperative Education offers a suitable platform for further developments in this area.

8. References

Benecke, D. R and Bezuidenhout, R. 2011. Experiential learning in public relations education in South Africa. *Journal of Communication Management*. Vol 15 (1). P55-70

Hegedus, Christine M, and Knight James. 2002. Student Participation in Collegiate Organizations – Expanding the Boundaries. Retrieved March 11, 2013.

(<http://www.leadershipeducators.org/Resources/Documents/Conferences/Lexington/Hegedus.pdf>)

Kolb, D.A. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. New Jersey.

Lizzio, A., Wilson, K., and Simons R. 2002. University students' perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes: implications for theory and practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 27(1):27-52.

Theaker , A and Yaxley, H. 2013. *The Public Relations Strategic Toolkit*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Wei, L. and Zhonghang, B. 2010. The analysis of the impact of college student organization on the overall quality of the college students. Vol. 2: 295 – 298.

Wilkinson, T.J., Wade, W.B. and Knock, L.D. 2009. A Blueprint to Assess Professionalism: Results of a Systematic Review. *Academic Medicine* 2009: 84 (5):551–58.

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis website. Retrieved, March 11, 2013 (<http://life.iupui.edu/osi/student-orgs/>).

Northwestern University website. Retrieved March 11, 2013. (<http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/graduate-life/student-associations/index.html>).

Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa website. Retrieved March 11, 2013 (<http://www.prisa.co.za>)

University of Johannesburg website. Retrieved March 11, 2013. (<http://www.uj.ac.za/EN/StudyatUJ/Undergraduate/StudentLife/StudentSocieties/Pages/home.aspx>).