

## Re-engineering the Undergraduate Public Relations Education Curriculum

### *Abstract*

*Public relations education worldwide has a distinct American bias. A recent study of undergraduate public relations education in Malaysia concluded that there is a dire need for change in the Malaysian public relations curriculum. By merely adopting the US curriculum, non-American countries are endangering the future of the public relations profession in their societies. There are undoubtedly some issues and misconceptions surrounding the public relations profession that are common to all countries. Other problems in public relations, however, must be understood against the background of each individual society's cultural, political and media spheres, in order to determine a more effective and relevant system for public relations education and practice. No matter how efficient the American public relations curriculum may be, the complexity of societal factors in each individual country is a barrier to fostering skilled and responsive public relations professionals. Although not much research has been undertaken in this area, arguments persistently emerge that the US public relations education curriculum is not universal.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the dawn of the Information Age and ensuing globalisation, the rise in importance of public relations as a profession has corresponded with an expansion of public relations education. During the past 10 to 15 years, public relations education and practice have grown and changed prodigiously (Botan and Taylor, 2004; Bowen, 2003; Grunig and Grunig, 2002; Lattimore and Baskin, 2004). Scholars maintain, however, that public relations education has not kept pace with rapid globalisation, and that the existing worldwide body of public relations knowledge and curricula has a distinct US bias (Sriramesh, 2002; 2003). This is due to the fact that little research literature exists that has been written by non-American public relations scholars. That which does exist attributes differences in public relations practices between countries to political, cultural and economic factors, rather than acknowledging that public relations curricula are biased towards the US model. The absence of indigenous research and literature on public relations education from countries other than the US is one of the main reasons why American literature on public relations is so significant to most universities teaching the discipline, and also to organisations that practice public relations worldwide (Sriramesh, 2002).

Most Asian universities look to the US education system as the ideal model in developing their own curricula, and frequently invite American professors as visiting fellows (often aided by the Fulbright Foundation) to help set up their programmes (Sriramesh, 2002). Asian universities, including those in Malaysia, still harbour the view that the US offers the best public relations education and practice, and consequently follow the US model in curriculum, study materials, teaching modules, learning resources and the structure of exam papers. Given that the US leads the field of public relations, this approach may seem efficient, but it is done blindly without considering such variables as the political, economic, legal, media and cultural factors of the society (Botan and Taylor, 2004; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2001). For example, from the American perspective, maintaining good relations between the client and the organisation often involves all of the strategic publics and stakeholders, such as investors, clients, the media, the general public and so

on. In some Asian countries with authoritarian governments, however, good relations often involve only one specific public: the government (Sriramesh, 2002; Taylor and Kent, 1999; Van Leuven and Pratt, 1996).

Despite these differences, most academics teaching public relations programmes today in Asia and other regions (such as Eastern Europe and Africa) continue to use materials and curricula from the US, even though its curricula, textbooks, research, journals and periodicals carry very little or no representation of other regional experiences (Sriramesh, 2002). In Thailand, studies done by Ekachai and Komolselvin (1998) concluded that Thai public relations education at tertiary level should not be dependent entirely on that of the US for both its practice and instruction, because of differences in culture and values between the two countries. Similar studies carried out in other Asian countries such as Malaysia (Ahmad, 1996; Idid, 1994; 1998; Kaur, 2002), Singapore (Beng, 1994; Tan, 2001 cited in Sriramesh, 2002), the Philippines (Jamias and Tuazon, 1996), Indonesia (Putra, 1996), India (Sriramesh, 1992a; 1996; 2002), Korea (Sriramesh et al., 1999), China (1996a; Culbertson, 1993; 1996b) and Japan (Chen, 1996a; Sriramesh et al., 1999) found the incompatibility between public relations practitioner roles as designed by Dozier (1992) to be the result of the interplay of variables including politics, economic development, standards of living and levels of literacy.

### **Effect of the Interplay between Culture, Politics and Media on Public Relations Education and Practice**

Many factors have contributed to the development of Malaysian public relations into what it is today. Efficient mass media infrastructure (e.g. availability of cable and satellite television) allows more radio and television channels to operate. Although private ownership of the media remains under government jurisdiction, there are now more private radio and television stations than ever, which create job opportunities.

In Malaysia, the government uses the media to disseminate information to the general public in order to gain support for policies, such as the privatisation of organisations such as the *Tenaga Nasional* (electrical provider), *Pos Malaysia* (Malaysian Post) and *Telekom Malaysia* (Malaysian Telecommunications) in the 1980s. After opposition parties and some members of the public mounted aggressive ‘public opinion’ challenges to large-scale government projects such as the Petronas Twin Towers, the Sepang Formula One circuit and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the government became aware of the need to ensure that government policies were well-understood by the public. According to Idid (2005), the strategies developed for conveying such information to the public were uniquely Malaysian, because of the need to change the general public’s attitude towards these development projects by disseminating adequate information to the public in a timely and meaningful manner.

In this case, public relations benefited from the parliamentary system of government that relies on public opinion. Politicians and political campaigners must obtain public support for their election campaigns by disseminating information about their programmes and strategies. The government need for public relations tools has fuelled a demand for public relations graduates in the job market, which has in turn aided the growth of public relations education in Malaysia.

Despite these advances, it is obvious that the public relations industry in Malaysia is still struggling to define itself as a profession (Ahmad, 1996; Kaur, 2002; Selamat, 2001). Although the number of consultancies, internal public relations departments and public relations-related personnel are on the increase, the services required are very much technically oriented (e.g. writing) in contrast to the services required in more developed countries. This indicates that the public relations profession in Malaysia is way behind the development of the public relations industry in the United States (Kaur, 2002). Services in demand in Malaysia today, such as obtaining publicity in the press, are typical of what US consultancies and corporations were concerned with in the 1980s (Van Leuven and Pratt, 1996; Wakefield and Cottone, 1992). As in Malaysia, the dependent relationship between public relations and the press in Singapore is especially significant as the number of print

and broadcasting media outlets are limited (Beng, 1994). There is a great need for more public relations programmes in which practitioners have the opportunity to share their experiences of carrying out successful public relations manoeuvres with both their peers and aspiring entrants to the profession (Kaur and Abdul Jalil, 2002). The recent approval for accreditation status for public relations professionals by the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) indicates a strong desire for the development of better public relations education programs in the country (Idid, 2005).

The ideal public relations practice serves the public interest by developing a mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics, contributing to informed debates about issues in society, and facilitating dialogue between all interested parties. This assists complex and pluralistic societies in reaching decisions and helps them to function more effectively, often by bringing private and public policies into harmony (Lattimore and Baskin, 2004; Wilcox, 2001). The role of public relations today is no longer to merely serve the organisation but to build bridges and alliances with publics to create an environment conducive to the smooth operation of businesses, government, voluntary agencies and other bodies (McCoy, 2004). In order to achieve these goals, institutions need to develop effective relationships with different publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and the public at large. However, it will be difficult to achieve these objectives in many Asian countries (particularly Malaysia) where the government has power over both the organisations and over the organisations' control of their strategic publics.

In Malaysia, as well as in many other countries of Asia such as India, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, the media and the political, social and cultural environments vary from those of the West (Beng, 1994; Culbertson, 1993; Kim, 2000; Lowe, 1986; Shaari, 1997; Sriramesh, 2002; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003; Van Leuvan, 1996). Therefore, the practice of public relations in any country has to take into account the special circumstances of the various local environments.

## **Politics in Malaysia**

Politics in Malaysia can be conceptualised in terms of a steep pyramid (similar to that in Indonesia) where the state power of the Prime Minister allows him to dispense benefits to the nation's elite in a patrimonial fashion (Case, 2002). Case (2002) describes Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his government as incorporating social forces into the ruling party apparatus, which is headed by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the ruling coalition of the National Front (Barisan Nasional or BN), consisting of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and a few other smaller groups. These groups are formed around a core of ethnicity, Islam and 'Asian values', and are used by the political leadership in order to maintain the status quo.

The Malaysian government has introduced several controversial policies. These include the National Culture Policy and 'Rukunegara' or National Ideology to strengthen national solidarity and identity, and the New Economic Policy (NEP) to redistribute wealth and to achieve greater prosperity for all. The National Culture Policy was introduced with the hope of establishing a national culture that would bring together separate ethnic cultures without compromising cultural diversity. In practice, cultures became politicised and made differences more obvious. The '*Rukunegara*' outlined the five principles of the national philosophy for all Malaysians: Belief in God, loyalty to king and country, supremacy of the Constitution, the rule of law and mutual respect and good social behaviour. This declaration aimed to create unity among all Malaysians, to maintain a democratic way of life, to create a just society with equal distribution of wealth, to ensure a liberal approach to diverse cultural traditions and to build a progressive society. As with the National Culture Policy, the reality of the '*Rukunegara*' is debateable, particularly given the style of the 'Rule of Law' practised during the leadership of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. During his rule, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Dato Anwar Ibrahim, was detained for 'sodomy' (he was released in 2004 when the new Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, took office). 100 political activists were arrested under the Internal Security Act in 1981 (Welsh, 2000), and university students were barred from becoming involved with any formal political activities, due to special university

regulations and the University Colleges Act sanctioned by the government (Case, 2002; Gomez and Jomo, 1999; Muzaffar, 2003; Siang, 2004c; Welsh, 2000).

The Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1987 is another restrictive government measure that regulates the establishment of independent publications through stringent licensing requirements (Case, 2002). Under this act, the Home Affairs Minister (who is usually also the Prime Minister) has the authority to ban publications perceived as contravening national security, Malaysian interests or standards of public morality. This act has been modified twice, in 1948 and 1974, for the purpose of strengthening the government's control of the press (Case, 2002; Kas, 2004; Ramanathan and Mohd. Hamdan, 1988; Siang, 2004b; 2004d). Another example of authoritarian government policy is the Broadcasting Act of 1987, which empowers the Minister of Information to censor or remove broadcasting material that conflicts with so-called 'Malaysian values'.

One of the government policies that has polarised the Malays and ethnic Chinese in Malaysia is the New Economic Policy (NEP), which set up programmes at public universities and in businesses that have been accused of reverse discrimination through directives and quota-based systems. The unstated aim of this policy was to hold back the Chinese while 'developing' Malay capitalists and elites. Consequently, disquiet emerged in the community when the NEP led to exclusive and substantial growth of the ethnic Malay middle and business classes, who were lavished with political patronage. This apparent societal shift, combined with the implementation of the privatisation policy in the mid-1980s, enhanced private control of key economic activities and further concentrated ownership and control of corporate equity in the hands of a politically influential minority (Gomez and Jomo, 1999; Khoo, 2003). The NEP has not only fractured Malaysian society into Malay, Chinese and Indian social identities, but has hardened these divisions through occupational differences and economic inequalities (Case, 2002; Siang, 2004c; Yong, 2004). The Chinese in Malaysia are angry about what they perceive to be unfair treatment under national policies that favour the Malays. This is known as 'coincidental cleavage', which occurs when people continually divide on social, political and economic issues along ethnic lines (Taylor, 2000, p. 189). The NEP has also led government interference in

the public education system, with the implementation of ethnic-based quota systems for tertiary student intakes and the denial of promotions of non-Malays to higher positions in academia (Cheah, 2002; Chen et al., 2004; Giaw, 2004a; Siang, 2004c; Yong, 2004).

According to Culbertson (1996, p. 9), “Authoritarian governments have often restricted true dialogue”. He perceives that as long as the freedom of the press is restricted by authoritarianism, the development of public relations will also be restricted. For example, all television commercials must be produced in Malaysia and approved by the Ministry of Information (Ngu, 1996b). Culbertson’s (1996) argument may not wholly apply to the practice of public relations in Malaysia and most Asian countries, however, as most media organisations in Malaysia either belong to the government or large organisations, who in turn have a close relationship with the government (Gomez and Jomo, 1999; Idid, 2000; Kas, 2004; Khattab, 2001; Ramanathan, 1999; Siang, 2004b). In Malaysia, this situation leads to a different style of public relations.

## **Culture**

Culture is one of the key factors that influence communication (Holmes and O’Halloran, 2003, p. 68). Culture teaches an individual or group not only how to live but also how to exist in an acceptable manner, governed by the rules of society (Becker, 1999; Kaplan, 1972). In general, culture relates to one’s values, beliefs and rules (Charon, 2004) and also to one’s traditions and beliefs (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984). It is shared by society and cannot be easily imitated (Hall, 1976; 1989). For that reason, culture does not change frequently and may be opposed to ‘modernity’ and ‘modernisation’. Different cultures and even individuals within them hold different views regarding education, modernity and religion, as these are all deeply subjective matters.

Differences exist between Asian and Western cultures. The question is how wide the gap is, and whether that gap can be filled by relying on cross-cultural theory. Western cultures are more concerned with ‘truth’, openness to change, and being assertive and direct,

whereas Asian cultures are more concerned with virtue, non-assertiveness, and a sense of loyalty or deference towards leaders and the elderly.

In Asian cultures, the issue of virtue is particularly important, and it explains why non-Asians may find it hard to fully understand and operate in the Asian cultural environment. Europeans and Americans are more concerned with 'truth' than with virtue, but both these concepts, however contrasting them may seem, are related to society's attitudes towards time and traditions (Hofstede et al., 2002). One could argue that 'Asian culture' is not homogenous as Hofstede et al. (2002) seem to assume, as Asia is made of several diverse and heterogenous countries and cultures with different histories, civilisations, languages and most importantly, religions. Sheridan (1999, p. 4) argues that Westerners often assume they 'know everything' and that everyone else must learn what the West knows, which is a form of ethnocentrism. Sheridan (1999) quotes Samuel Huntington, a Harvard scholar who in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, wrote that Western civilization is not universal and ought to give up such pretensions, just as Asian cultures are not homogenous and cannot be taken as unitary.

In the countries of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), decision-making in organisations often follows a distinct pattern. Almost all of the decisions are made at the top by family members who own interests in the company, while authority and access to information are withheld from those at lower levels. Decisions tend to be more subjective than objective, and are based on intuition, informal communication and information networks. In contrast, in Western cultures, assertiveness is an appropriate expression of one's point of view. Assertive communication is widely applied and used in Western communities such as in the United States. Assertive behaviour is defined as standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways, which do not violate another person's right to do the same (Lange et al., 1976). Although assertiveness is an appropriate behaviour in Anglo cultures, non-assertiveness is valued in Asian cultures as part of the identity of the people, and assertiveness may be perceived as rude or disrespectful and thus may affect relationships.

Asian cultures reinforce and encourage behaviours that can be classified as non-assertive (Collier, 1986), which help those who hold power maintain the status quo.

Similarly, loyalty or deference is also highly valued by people in Asian countries and especially in Malaysia (Ordonez and Wang, 1984). Although often unwritten, anecdotal evidence suggests that loyalty or deference is practised in most Asian countries and is well understood within these societies. Anecdotal evidence also reveals that in some cases, loyalty or deference can inhibit the ability and advancement of an individual. Accepting the status quo on the basis of loyalty or deference could be due to the real or imagined inability of people to influence government decisions. This could be described as hegemony, that is, a situation in which those disadvantaged by a particular system or practice (such as favouritism, nepotism or authoritarianism) willingly and voluntarily accept it as being for their own good and do not seek to challenge it, owing to notions of loyalty or tradition. Antonio Gramsci described hegemony as implying a situation where a historical bloc of ruling-class factions exercise social authority and leadership over the subordinate classes, through a combination of force and (more importantly) consent (Barker, 2003). Hegemony in Malaysia manifests itself in matters related to administration, policy, ethnicity and education. Yong (2004) showed that in terms of the racial polarisation issue in Malaysia, it is commonplace for many of its victims (the non-Malays) to have become 'numb' to its fundamental injustice, and to have accepted it as an inevitable and unavoidable outcome of the development and restructuring of society. Yet what the non-Malays perceive as 'unavoidable' is actually what is described by Antonio Gramsci and other cultural theorists as 'contradictory consciousness', meaning a new common sense that would make political congruence appear normal (Adamson, 1980; Barker, 2003; Bocock, 1986; Laitin, 1986).

Mahbubani (1998, p. 30) feels that the greatest challenge lies in the need for Asian endeavours to develop the right blend of values. Such an ideal blend should start from a base of traditional ideals (e.g. attachment to the family as an institution, deference to societal interests, thrift, conservatism in social mores, respect for authority) and absorb the strength of Western values (e.g. emphasis on individual achievement, political and

economic freedom, respect for laws as well as for key national institutions). Family loyalty works well in family-owned organisations. In other organisations, nepotism, cronyism and 'loyalty' (in terms of hegemony) often result in a loss of talent ('brain drain'), manipulation, unfairness, low morale, inefficiency and discrimination.

### **Culture from a Public Relations Perspective**

Any companies operating outside their own country must consider the challenges posed by the differences in culture, social environment and political structure of foreign countries. Studies carried out on the professionalisation of public relations show that the role of public relations varies from country to country, and also reveal the enormous influence of cultural aspects on practical public relations (Alanazi, 1996; Coombs et al., 1994; Nessmann, 1995; Ruler, 2004; Tempere, 2004).

In a comparative analysis of international public relations, Coombs et al. (1994) investigated the similarities and differences between public relations practitioners in Norway and Austria in terms of professional orientation, fulfilment and practitioners' roles. One of their findings was that Austrian practitioners reported a greater sense of fulfilment than their Norwegian and American counterparts. Other differences and similarities were identified and explained using culturally specific, work-related values. For example, a sense of professional fulfilment in Austria is viewed as a function of the value Austrian culture places upon training and education.

The cultural context is essential in understanding and effectively managing conflict. Culture not only influences the issues people fight about, but also what is considered appropriate when dealing with conflict (DeVito, 2002). The way in which public relations is practised by individual cultures will likewise differ. For example, some public relations practitioner roles in the US (e.g. lobbying) may not be applicable in Asian countries. Malaysian private organisations, for example, do not lobby the government to change legislation, but instead apply good 'government relations' (Kaur et al., 2001; Sriramesh,

2002; 2003; Van Leuven and Pratt, 1996). In Malaysia, close relationships with government officials and bureaucrats can help organisations get the go-ahead with lucrative projects, and are considered the secret of corporate success (Gomez and Jomo, 1999; Siang, 2004e; 2005).

Apart from culture, other potential issues in international public relations include differences in language, longer chains of command stretching back to the home country, both subtle and obvious differences in customs, varying levels of development of the respective media and public relations fields, antipathy towards multinationals, and dislike grounded in factors such as national pride, past relationships, envy, and apprehension of foreign cultural, economic, political and military influences (Wilcox et al., 2003, p. 380). One cannot normally transcend one's culture without first exposing its major latent axioms and unstated assumptions concerning what life is all about. A given culture cannot be understood simply in terms of its content or parts. One has to know the whole system; how dynamic functions are interrelated (Hall, 1976; 1989).

Each socio-cultural system has its own unique features and history (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984, p. 13). For this reason, a culturally responsible curriculum for any given country must incorporate cultural elements that are important to daily human life, such as the way people express themselves, the way they think, and the movement of economic and government systems (Hall and Hall, 1990). If the curriculum needs an injection of cultural content to assist in the achievement of goals and objectives, then new ways must be sought for organising that cultural content (Beauchamp, 1981, p. 135). Culture helps govern and define the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed or interpreted. The entire repertoire of communicative behaviours depends largely on the culture in which people have been raised. Culture often acts as both teacher and textbook, and therefore should play a dominant role in every public relations professional's practice.

### **The Implications of the Media for Public Relations Practitioners**

No one can deny the power the media possesses to both disseminate and influence information. According to Nelson (1989, p. 14), “The media have the potential to exacerbate an issue, create much greater awareness than desired, and continuously find negatives in either neutral or positive news”. It is not easy for organisations to secure media cooperation. Therefore, from a public relations standpoint, it is crucial for organisations to maintain good contacts with the media in order to get their message across to their publics and to succeed in their businesses. As a result, media relations has become one of the most important functions of public relations practitioners (Seitel, 2004, p. 211).

Pavlik (1987, p. 59) sees the relationship between the media and public relations as fundamental, as while they are mutually independent, the media relies on public relations sources for access to businesses and other organisations, and public relations needs the media to disseminate messages to publics (organisations, clients, government and shareholders). This relationship is described by Pavlik (1987, p. 60) as “symbiotic”. He adds that tension between the media and public relations practitioners has a positive impact as it encourages each group to remain conscious of each other during the communication process.

The media in Malaysia actively supports private organisations, which is why most government and large corporate success stories are given prominent coverage, while their failures are never revealed. The strong relationship between the government, large corporations and the media ensures this state of affairs. According to Khattab (2001), the Malaysian media has purely mainstream, mechanical, and uniform modes of message transmission to an assumed passive public. In theory, the amount of attention given to an issue (whether by media personnel, members of the public or policy makers) represents the power of those individuals or organisations to influence the decision making process (‘agenda-setting’) (Dearing and Rogers, 1996; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; 1993).

For a country such as Malaysia where interpersonal networking and contacts with influential people are important to a public relations professional, good media relations

are important for an organisation wanting to disseminate its messages to the public and make them part of the media agenda. Rapid developments in information technology are making it vital for organisations to foster positive relations with media professionals. This helps organisations counter problems by releasing their versions of the story to the public during a crisis, as well as generally using the media as a vehicle to disseminate information to their target publics.

According to Khoo (2003, p. 109), because the mass media in Malaysia is controlled by the government, it is essential for organisations to have a good rapport with the government in order to maintain good relations with the media. Most medium-scale private organisations will have difficulty in dealing with the media in terms of favourable news coverage unless they know the relevant media staff well through personal contacts and networks. As a result, most organisations prefer to appoint former journalists to work in and manage their public relations departments.

This state of affairs explains why Malaysia was ranked 154<sup>th</sup> out of 193 countries in a 2004 global survey of media independence. Malaysia fell below Iraq, Russia, Yemen, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and was only slightly better than China, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, North Korea, Afghanistan and Brunei. In addition, Malaysia was placed third in the category of *Not Free* nations (Siang, 2004b). The extent of the freedom of the media has an impact on the effectiveness of public relations. This is because public relations has different relationships with different media in different systems (Vervic et al., 1996). McLuhan (1967; 2003) reveals that the media has a totally different role in different cultures, which indicates why the media's functions differ between countries. For example, the press in the US uses news, politics and personal entertainment to capture readers (McLuhan, 1967; 2003).

### **Must the Malaysian Curriculum be Dependent on the US?**

For centuries, colonialists led Asians to believe that the only way to progress was through emulation of the West (Mahbubani 1998, p. 23). As a consequence, as Sriramesh (2002;

2003) observes, many Asian countries still harbour the mentality that 'the West is the best' (p. 60) on many issues. This is the case in terms of public relations education, where Malaysia follows the US in matters related to curriculum development, reading materials and so on. Mahbubani (1998, p. 21) criticises Asians, saying that they have been mentally colonised to feel inferior to Europeans. His judgment is based on his assertion that only Japan and the countries he calls the 'four tigers' (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) have been able to fully catch up with to the West (Mahbubani 1998). This is a simplistic analysis, however, because despite widespread poverty, India is very successful in terms of science and technology.

Although some American theories are universal, others should be applied in combination with local guidance to accurately reflect a particular culture and society. Lifestyle, environment and assumption of meaning are shared among members of one culture, but may not necessarily be able to operate across cultures (Kaplan, 1972; Lado, 1968). In a survey by David Hitchcock (cited in Sheridan, 1999, p. 10), East Asians chose social harmony, accountability of public officials, openness to new ideas and respect for authority as the most important values in an orderly society. Americans chose freedom of expression, the right of the individual, personal freedoms, open debate, thinking for oneself and the accountability of public officials as their core societal values. In the personal values area, Asians tended to stress education more highly than Americans did. 'Success in education' in Asian countries is not just a matter of improving one's economic status, but is associated with 'saving face' (gaining respect from local communities) as described by Hofstede (2002).

Differences in culture are very much related to the behaviours of thinking, problem solving, creativity of the individual and his/her role or roles in society. This raises the question of why non-US countries (e.g. Europe and Asia) adopt US public relations textbooks as principal references when these books only present issues and cases from one single country. For example, the best way to educate students to understand a culture is through reading. In one of the major US textbooks used in Malaysia, *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics* (Wilcox et al., 2003), the case studies include Oracle and its public

relations firm (p.65), the Telstra Corporation of Australia (p.10), the XIX Winter Games in Salt Lake City (p.11), the West Point crisis (p.181), the Pentagon issue (p.362), viral marketing (p. 469), Mood Matcher lipstick in New York (p.475), Fineman Associates of San Francisco (p.321) and the Danish Post Office (p.364). More than 70% of the organisations mentioned and discussed in the case studies on offer are unknown to most undergraduate students in Malaysia. Therefore, many students may not be aware of the companies mentioned and may be unfamiliar with the subject matter discussed.

Some may argue Oracle is a worldwide company, and that in today's globalised world, the Olympics and happenings at the Pentagon are common knowledge. The fact is, however, that a lack of exposure through a dearth of readings and resources (such as computers with Internet facilities, provided by universities or otherwise) is a major reason why public relations students may not be aware of happenings in the world outside their own country or continent. This creates two problems: firstly, the students become disinterested in the subject matter and secondly, they are not able to apply what they learn. In the absence of Malaysian case studies, academics have no choice but to use the cases in US textbooks.

According to Idid (2000), one of the biggest obstacles to having a book of Malaysian case studies is the 'confidential' nature of most public relations exercises in Malaysia, that is, few practitioners or organisations want their shortcomings to be discussed in research publications. Apart from success stories that can be shared with the public, everything else is classified as 'P&C' (private and confidential). In order to benefit students and the public relations profession as a whole, it is important for public relations practitioners in both the government and private organisations to permit some openness by sharing issues faced by their organisations. Use of pseudonyms with less publicised cases could help address the issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

Hofstede et al. (2002) suggest solutions to differences in the five cultural dimensions between cultures by using what is known as 'synthetic cultures'. This approach consists of cross-cultural competencies that include awareness of different cultures, knowledge of how different cultures interpret the same issue, and skills facilitating interaction with other

cultures. Unfortunately, Hofstede et al.'s approach is not used by many of the most popular US public relations textbooks, such as *Effective Public Relations* (Cutlip et al., 1994; 2000), *Principles of Public Relations* (Newsom et al., 2000; Seitel, 1992; 2001; 2004), and *Public Relations Strategies* (Wilcox et al., 1997; 2003).

The majority of American references and textbooks do not examine their content from a global standpoint, but rather from an exclusively American perspective. Sriramesh (2002; 2003) has identified elements of ethnocentricity in US textbooks. While this is understandable as the books are, after all, written for American students, this ethnocentricity has a direct influence on public relations education in many other regions of the world. Given that the US is the leader in the field, the absence of holistic, multicultural perspectives in US textbooks and scholarship will inhibit the growth of public relations education worldwide. Although there are generic principles of public relations that are broadly applicable, a country's public relations programmes must include information on unique local practices and regional public relations issues and cases. Until these changes take place, it is not wise for academics at a tertiary level in Malaysia to depend entirely on US textbooks as major references.

Similarly, Sheridan (1999) charges Western policy makers with intellectual arrogance, as they are more concerned about Western disciplines such as economics than recognising the history, culture and values of Asian and other foreign nations. This may be due to self interest, manifesting as a desire to restrict Western students' acquisition of knowledge to Western economic issues. He argues that the intellectual failures in the West's policy responses to the Asian economic crisis reflect a sad and disturbing decline in Asian studies, which has lost priority and status in American universities, mainly due to cost-cutting measures. Sheridan reflects on the fascinating nature of one Asian society, saying that "for an outsider like me, Malaysia's racial mixture and cultural diversity are its most delightful aspects. It is not diverse in the same sense as the United States; you don't find people in substantial numbers from all over the globe in Malaysia. Malaysia doesn't set out to be a universal nation in the way the US does" (p. 83).

## **Summary**

Variables such as politics, the media and culture play an important role in shaping public relations education and its profession in Malaysia. The government is a highly influential body in Malaysia, shaping media contact and roles, as well as using 'Asian values' and other cultural claims to mould Malaysian society into orthodox modes of thinking (e.g. non-assertiveness and respect for elders) and to be accepting of government policies. This approach has and will continue to perpetuate unethical conduct such as cronyism, nepotism and corruption among government officials. Sadly, politics in Malaysia taints all of the variables that determine the structure and development of public relations education and its profession in Malaysia.

There is no doubt that many countries, including Malaysia, are beginning to recognise the enormous potential of education in public relations and the development of the profession. However, with strict government control over education policies, media support of the government's agenda, and a culture that rewards misguided notions of loyalty and deference and encourages reliance on superiors, it is nigh on impossible at the present time for Malaysian public universities to develop 'ethical' public relations in both education and practice.

Finally, it is important to recognise that there are differences between Malaysia and the West when one looks at educational needs from a cultural perspective. Public relations may have originated in the US, but this does not mean their methods have blanket applicability. As Elliot (1981) points out, "when it involves the curriculum, we always must look at things differently".