

## International Public Relations Education: A Perspective of Agency Leaders

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate public relations professional perspectives on international public relations education at a Thai university. This study is qualitative, by employing the semi-structured interviews with public relations executives of national and multinational public relations agencies based in Thailand. The findings show that the executives highlighted international public relations education as a combination of key knowledge and skills relevant to public relations practices in the international contexts. From the executive perspectives, the pedagogy of international public relations needs to promote students to become interdisciplinary learners, who acquire knowledge drawn on multiple disciplines, including international public relations and other related fields, and based on national and international approaches. During their learning, students who are encouraged to be multi-skilled learners mastering skills in social media associated with high order thinking skills necessary to the profession were also valued by the executives. Further, the executives emphasized that international public relations teaching and learning should be designed to support student efforts to improve their English proficiency while in and outside the classroom as English is widely regarded as a foreign language for the international workplace. The significance of this study is it offers instructors an initial guide for developing international public relations education in Thailand and a means of professional-instructor linkages in response to the public relations agency demands and expectations.

*Key words: international public relations education, public relations agency, Thailand*

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### 1. Introduction

Globalization is not new in the 21st century. It is regarded as a process in which the world is becoming increasingly interconnected in general. Particularly, scholars believe that the multiple facets of globalization such as cultural, economic, political, and social systems have critical implications for human life (Inda & Rosaldo, 2008).

In the area of public relations (PR), globalization is viewed as a phenomenon or condition influencing the practice of PR across the globe (Bardhan & Weaver 2011). Scholars in the field label the 21st century as the century of globalization of PR because of the impact of globalization on all components of PR including PR education and the profession (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015). As Seitel (2007, p. 475) points out, 'in the 21st century, public relations has become a global phenomenon'.

Additionally, the emergence of advancements in online communication channels, particularly social media presents opportunity and challenge effects on the PR profession. Motion, Heath, and Leitch, (2016), for example, suggest that social media tools, including blogs, social networks, and media-sharing sites, help PR practitioners reach broader audiences and communicate directly with their stakeholders, however, the challenge facing PR practitioners is social media audiences who are allowed to be content creators may deliver negative online information affecting organization reputation risks or damages.

Due to an integration of globalization of business and technological innovation, the demand and significance for international public relations (IPR) is increasing across organizations across the globe (Grunig, 2009). As suggested by Sriramesh (2009), IPR perceived as strategic communication management is practiced by all types of organizations that are involved with developing and maintaining positive reputations and relationships with various publics in different places around the world. Additionally, Wilcox and Cameron (2012) indicate that the IPR practices are 'the planned and organized efforts of a company, institution, or government to establish and build relationships with the public of other nations' (p.523). The growing number of international diffusion of the large multinational PR firms is one example of current trends worldwide illustrating the increasing needs for practicing PR internationally.

Evidently, multinational PR firms and their offices or affiliates located in the major cities and capitals around the world reflect the fact that the PR profession is in high demand at the international level. For example, Edelman, the world's largest independently owned firm, has around 60,000 employees in 65 offices worldwide (Edelman, n.d.). Burson-Marsteller, another international firm has 77 offices and 85 affiliate offices in 110 countries across 6 continents, namely Africa, Asia-pacific, Europe, Middle East, Latin America, and North America (Burson-Marsteller, n.d.). In accordance with this situation, scholars classify Thailand as a globalized country, according to the criterion that at least eight multinational PR firms are represented in the top ten global PR multinationals in a country (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2007). In Thailand, this currently includes established large PR firms such as Burson-Marsteller, Hill and Knowlton, and Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide.

Recognizing the growth of international contexts in PR, the influence of globalization and the power of social media audiences, many scholars (Walker, 2012; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015; Jain, 2017) have attempted to call for the restructure of the PR practitioners and increased education on the topic of IPR. For example, PR practitioners who can improve their ability for being social mediators on behalf of their organization are viewed as professional experts extending well beyond traditional media (Manley & Valin, 2017).

In relation to the call for IPR education, many scholars and professionals offered recommendations regarding integration IPR topics or issues and pedagogical approaches into the PR program. For example, Sriramesh (2002) advocated offering students IPR education as a compulsory course in PR program rather than establishing it as an elective. Tench and Deflagbe (2008) provided guidance for improving IPR education with a focus on different points of view. Hatzios and Lariscy (2008) proposed recommendations of the utility and importance of international involvement in PR curriculum. In addition, Garcia (2010) suggested that the management concept for instruction should be highlighted as a major topic of course content in IPR education. Tsetsura (2011) primarily emphasized the issue on a concept of multi-dimensions of diversity for the IPR classroom. Fitch (2013) recommended more internationalization of curriculum should be introduced in the PR program to meet industry expectations. Trembath (2015) provided a comprehensive review of IPR education and internationalization of the PR curriculum at undergraduate levels. Jain (2017) indicated that among various conceptual knowledge identified as essential for IPR education, the topic of cultural influences was considered to be the common concept for embedding in the IPR syllabi provided by universities across the U.S.

The literature review also indicated that a number of different ways of IPR teaching and learning were used or recommended by the scholars or instructors. Such ways were dependent on individual preferences and beliefs on their effects of maximizing teaching and learning in IPR. For example, Bardhan (2003) found that the delivery of material by guest speakers from industry was regarded as a preferred teaching method from the viewpoint of students who wish to study in the IPR course. Dickerson (2005) reported that teaching and learning that was provided in an IPR course can be enhanced by focusing that students visit multicultural organizations, which were located in a student's home country. Freitag's (2005) proposed two different options of approaches to teaching for educators, who wish to broaden PR instruction with international concentration. While the first approach was that students might visit international organizations in a home country after finishing their learning related to topics in class, visiting PR firms overseas with their instructor might be another approach. Sharpe, Simoes and Steffen (2005) engaged actively in student learning in PR campaign classes as a joined program between the university and its partner in a foreign country. Further, Sheil (2007) proposed public service learning that students conduct a campaign project for a community client in the IPR classroom. Onwugbolu (2013) indicated that European lecturers advocated an IPR course designed to be experience learning, particularly learning abroad within a university partnership. Mak (2017) found that most PR educators in the U.S focused on incorporating the topic or issue about IPR in the PR curricula rather than providing IPR as a single course. These educators also endorsed PR students to be internationally experienced persons participating in overseas exchange programs, international internships, or other foreign work experiences.

Overall, the majority of these studies have not been prevalent outside the Western countries. Thailand, for example, the literature reveals that empirical studies which directly address the topic of IPR education is lacking. It is thus necessary to explore how non-Western countries value education in IPR to

meet the domestic need. As scholars recommend, PR educators should not rely too heavily on a Western theoretical and practical model (Toth & Aldoor, 2010; Mak, 2017). Therefore, this study aims at examining the PR professional perspectives on IPR education at Thai university. The study may help understand how professionals think, need, and expect in IPR teaching and learning. The significant findings are to serve instructors as the first guideline for IPR education in Thailand. The IPR instructors may need to review or revise course content in light of the professional response. This guideline may contribute to the development of IPR curricula in response to the professional demands and expectations. Additionally, this study may make a contribution to the body of knowledge in a growing field in the study of IPR in non-Western nations.

## 2. Objective

To examine PR professional perspectives on IPR education at a Thai university

## 3. Materials and Methods

The study employs qualitative method as follows:

3.1 In-depth interviews were conducted with four chief executive officers, who were selected on a purposeful sampling basis from PR firms based in Thailand and with strong and positive reputations with regard to multinational and local organizations.

3.2 The semi-structured interview guide centered on three main themes: important knowledge for IPR education, essential skills to be taught in IPR, and instructor-professional collaboration for IPR education.

3.3 The coding categories used to analyze and present the data. Codes were derived from three sources: categories in the semi-interview questions; categories that emerged from participant responses but which were not anticipated in the questions; and categories emerging from the literature review.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion in this study reflects the perspectives of PR professionals that significant knowledge and multi-skills related to the industry needs are required for students who will be future PR practitioners on the international scales as follows:

### 4.1 Important knowledge for IPR education

According to the data, key content knowledge, which needs to be integrated in IPR education, includes understanding of the communication strategy, the concept of PR globalization, and interdisciplinary knowledge.

#### 4.1.1 Strategic communication

The PR executives agreed with an idea of the significance of strategic communication by arguing that the communication strategy is essential knowledge which Thai students require to learn in an IPR class. They reasoned that PR people of multinational organizations, who understand a multi-focal strategic area of PR and the different settings of host countries, will effectively conduct PR communication using different strategies in different countries. As one executive shared:

‘A more contemporary way to [understand] PR is as strategic. PR professionals are emphasized as strategic communicators rather than technicians. They need to work closely with and supervise communication activities to top management teams of the organization...An IPR course has to include knowledge that allows students to better understand that IPR needs various PR strategies in managing public perception and opinions across national and other borders...We look for upcoming PR professionals as PR strategists who really understand the direction and trends of PR work concerning a range of strategic management for each specific place and time’.

This perspective coincides with several authors (Alaimo, 2016; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015; Crookes, 2017) contending that the communication strategy is important knowledge that future PR professionals will be educated and trained to understand. University curricula, therefore, need to

prepare the next generation of PR professionals with strategic PR knowledge for international or global organizations, who work with their diverse stakeholders across-cultures.

#### 4.1.2 PR Globalization

The concept of globalization was viewed as an essential topic IPR education by the executives. As the PR executives proposed, students should learn to understand globalization as a condition of PR work in the globalized world. For example:

‘Conducting PR at all level can no longer be carried out without some conditions of globalization...PR students have to understand the interdependence between globalization and PR...They have to think through the consequences of global issues on PR conducting’.

According to Ritzer and Dean (2015), globalization has different dimensions and its processes can be identified at the local and global level. This concept is responsive to the PR executives, who asserted that a study of PR globalization at Thai universities must reflect local reality to students and they must also be provided with increasing recognition of the need to be learning two perspectives at once, global, and local. As the executive explained:

‘In studying IPR, students need to see not only the international concepts, but local knowledge too...A teacher should not copy all case studies from Western textbooks. Some cases do not echo local thinking and are far from the reality of Thai students’ lives...Thai students should be aware of both perspectives and learn how best they can balance the two’.

The above viewpoint resonates with the call to create curricula spaces in which local wisdom performing together with global knowledge becomes apparent as a major trend worldwide of internationalizing the curriculum (Leak, 2015; Stabie, 2016; Dorrel, 2018). Particularly, scholars suggest that PR instructors should offer students an opportunity to gain conceptual knowledge based on national and international frameworks (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015). Thus, creating IPR curricular content around globalization in this study reflects the belief that students need to recognize that there is a variety of perspectives both local and global, which can be brought to bear to understand the concept of globalization of PR.

#### 4.1.3 Inter-disciplinary knowledge

Educators and scholars (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Ingenhthff & Buhman, 2017; Sriramesh, 2009) in the field of IPR acknowledge that the study of PR in the international or global contexts is interdisciplinary, and the concept has been theorized from a variety of disciplines.

Based on the data, the PR executives interviewed for this study agreed with the notion above. They argued that students need to be interdisciplinary learners, who must have a wide breadth of knowledge both in the field of PR and in other related fields. The interdisciplinary set of knowledge in IPR education which students are expected to know a broader knowledge that is the range of PR involvement from current world events; to global organizations’ systems; and the relevant contexts on a global scale such as economic, cultural, and technological factors; and current issues on innovative technological communication. These perspectives were demonstrated as follows:

‘Global PR is growing fast...To have success as a PR professional, it is important to keep up with the latest news and techniques in the industry...You [students] need to have knowledge of what’s going on around your work like current events and issues that influence society related to PR...You [students] have to follow the world matters relating to their work such as competing organizations and public expectations’.

‘PR [professionals] do not work alone, they must involve the whole of the organization...They need to know the nature of the organization overall and other parts related to PR work...At the same time, working at the global or international level they need to know about different features of global organizations...We have information about our company’ networks servicing clients in many countries...This is helpful for our work in other nations’.

‘PR people are the persons who are versatile...PR students need to know more than just the mechanics of the profession...We expect they have to be well-rounded knowledgeable people...They need to be able to see the big picture related to PR in global economics, politics, laws, cultures, technologies and so on’.

‘The big thing is to be sure IPR education adequately addresses the sort of cutting-edge and up-to-date knowledge found in what the practitioners are saying, doing, and foreseeing...the curriculum design needs to be flexible and updated annually...Adapting continuously some sorts of content like cases, examples, or others to mirror movements and advances of the profession is meaningful for learners...For example, this year students learn about the influences of Facebook and Twitter in IPR, but it might change to issues of another social media platform next year, or in the future because of the fast development of communication technologies’.

#### 4.2 Multi-skills to be taught in IPR curricula

According to Wakefield (2008), practicing PR at the international level is viewed as the multi-faceted and complex performance rather than the domestic practice in PR and PR practitioners tend to work with a wide range of stakeholders at all levels both inside and outside of organizations. Facing the task of working professionally to manage multi-stakeholder opinions, via more uncontrolled channels, such as online channels like social media, and at diverse levels PR practitioners are perceived as people who must have multiple skills and communication competency (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2015; Manley & Valin, 2017). This concept echoes with the perspective of the PR executives focusing on IPR education of multi-skills involved, as part of and together with efforts to promote better preparation for the professional workplace by Thai students. These skills include social media and thinking skills as well as skills in a second language, at least one foreign language.

##### 4.2.1 Social media skills

Relative to communication strategies as previously discussed, the PR executives suggested that the social media strategy is becoming an integral part of PR practices for many organizations and offering the PR practitioner new options for every aspect of the PR process. They expected that IPR education should prepare students for future practitioners who master skills on many social media platforms. For example:

‘...Having a strong understanding of social media means that students are knowledgeable about how to use social media as tools for communicating with the public... In a social world, students should be provided an opportunity to be familiar with all forms of social media currently in use...We look for the future practitioner who is inspired by improving their digital and social PR skills’.

The above perspective is responsive to the 2017 Global Communication Study (University of Southern California’s Center for Public Relations, 2017) which reports that the social media ability is highly valued by communication and PR professionals. It also indicates that the future practitioners’ ability of storytelling on social media is ranked above the rest, followed by the ability of monitoring social media, making social responsibility, and analyzing big data.

##### 4.2.2 Thinking skills

The data from the interviews of PR executives, each of whom is involved actively in the PR practice both in the Thai and global environments, reveals that the executives prioritized high order thinking skills as significant skills of successful professionals in the workplace. The identification of key skills in thinking which emerged from their interviews included the skills of thinking analytically, critically, creatively, and solving problems. The executives indicated that such skills should be included in IPR education at Thai universities. They considered that PR students should be prepared to be skillful in analytical, creative, and strategic thinking rather than to have technical skills only,

‘A PR person is an ‘advisor’ who often gives advice and provides services when organizations or clients face the prospect of problems like crisis, conflict or risk situations... This task is under lots of pressure... It is important that PR staff can think analytically under pressure...When deciding, PR people have to generate alternative ideas, analyzing all their implications, and presenting as well as testing different solutions to problems...A PR person is a problem solver. This requires understanding of a problem as well as using new ideas and different thinking skills to solve it. It needs the ability to think logically, analytically together with critically and creatively because problems and solutions might be seen differently’.

‘We have a wide range of clients from various industries. They run their businesses to different targets in different nations. We service each of them as a unique task based on considering those

differences in factors... Good PR is not dull or plain. It is creative, artistic, and strategic... If a PR student wants to work with us, he or she will be a creative and strategic thinker recognizing that all PR work needs creative ideas'.

Consistent with the above perspectives, the findings of a study by Johansson and Ottestigs (2011) also assert, the profession of PR has an increased demand for a skilled analysis for the PR management function. This study indicates that a majority of PR professionals in many organizations move their roles from technicians to strategic and managerial communicators. Each of them is increasingly required to master skills of thinking to support the managerial roles where they are required to engage as 'a monitor and evaluator; key policy and strategy advisor; trouble shooter/problem solver; and issues management expert' (Johansson & Ottestig, 2011). Another study of PR professionals' perspectives across the globe also found, creativity, strategy, and analysis are valued as significant skills for the future practitioners in the field of PR (University of Southern California's Center for Public Relations, 2017).

#### 4.2.3 Foreign language skills

Working on the international scale, the PR professionals' possession of international or foreign language skills with fluency, both orally and in writing, demonstrates an ability to communicate with those international targets at a complex and sophisticated level. Consequently, people who possess such skills are in high demand for IPR. This observation is also consistent with the results of a study which reveals that the PR industry demand for 'a strong foreign language background' is a desired qualification for the PR professional for successful international communication (Hatzios & Larisc, 2008).

The above notion is supported by the perspective of PR executives confirming that foreign language proficiency is necessary to succeed in IPR. The executives pointed to English as a key skill that should be a PR graduate requirement for working in Thailand for an international organization, or working internationally in the following statements:

'The first important thing for IPR practice is the ability to use any foreign language fluently depending on the types of companies or countries PR people do work with ...It is an advantage for working in the international circumstances if PR students have skills of one or more foreign languages such as English, Chinese, and so on'.

'English language is absolutely important for doing IPR. Students who want to be a PR professional in international or multinational companies in Thailand or overseas should have sufficient English language skills including reading, writing, listening, and speaking'.

The PR executive further shared the view by giving a comment and suggestion:

'Thai students' lives are not connected to English...Thai language is only one official language...They do not have an opportunity to apply English in the real-world...Thai students who want to work internationally for in-house PR or agencies should have high motivation in English...Another way is an increase in the English environments on the campus. Universities might instill English into any PR courses including a course on IPR. This might help students to improve their English language'.

In addition to important knowledge and skills, the issue on the connection between instructors and professionals was valued by the executives interviewed in this study.

#### 4.3 Instructor-professional collaboration for IPR education

Collaboration between universities and business sectors is recognized as an approach to encourage innovation and growth in a knowledge-based economy which is defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development as a system in which the production, usage, and distribution of information and knowledge are essential to the process of economic growth (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1996).

According to Patil (2014), universities in coordination with industry is taken place in a broad range of contexts that is based on its diversity of purposes, forms, and levels in accordance with other several factors, such as policies, cultural aspects, and motivations of both universities and industry.

At the level of IPR education, the data from the interviews shows that the PR executives focused on the significance of the interactions between instructors and professionals. The executives indicated that the interactive management can enrich IPR education by bringing industry experience into the classroom.

They also raised the contribution of bridging between classroom courses and the context of actual practice, by arguing that connective performances between instructors and professionals provides students with an increased ability to understand the changing context of practice in the real world of the professional community. For example:

‘The big thing is to be sure IPR education adequately addresses the sort of cutting-edge and up-to-date knowledge found in what the practitioners are saying, doing, and foreseeing...the curriculum design needs to be flexible and updated annually ...Adapting continuously some sorts of content like cases, examples, or others to mirror movements and advances of the profession is meaningful for learners...One way for teachers to know about these is that they need more conversations or contacts with the professionals’.

Although there is a common agreement among PR executives about how fruitful university-industry collaboration could be for IPR education, each of the executives had different perspectives on how the collaborative arrangements could or should be organized. Each of the PR executives offered a variety of suggestions about how such collaboration could be achieved. These suggestions included pedagogical approaches both inside the classroom and beyond ranging from using guest lecturers, undertaking practical projects, gaining industry mentorship, participating in teacher internships, and visiting international agencies as exemplified in the following executive quotes:

‘In each IPR class, bringing successful guest speakers, who are experts in the field of IPR, into the classroom to provide students with first-hand knowledge of all aspects of IPR is advantageous for both students and teachers. The potential speakers also bring experience and knowledge of what happens daily in professional practice as well as what the gaps and issues are to the IPR class’.

‘Students should do a project for a real client or organization that has an IPR function... This project allows students the occasion to practice on a real-world project that is useful to them professionally. It also gives the students the chance to experience the practical application of skills in critical and analytical thinking, in addition to networking with industry in the local community’.

‘If lecturers cannot find the potential speakers, they could consult us as a mentor, because we know many leaders in various industries and we can recommend the effective experts who should be invited to give class sessions...We also welcome lecturers who want to intern at our company or work sites to brush up new knowledge from experienced industry professionals and industry settings’.

‘Visiting the top IPR agencies in the country and looking at how they structure their departments, how they work, and seeking their advice will be good ways...When visiting, asking an agency representative for a brief presentation of international aspects of the PR area as well as examples of successful IPR or global cases is useful for professors and their students’.

## 5. Conclusion

The PR profession at the international level, which is influenced by globalization and powerful social media trends, imposes a demand on IPR education for educating students based on the needs and expectations of the workplace. This paper highlights a qualitative analysis of the visions of PR top management who engage in managing PR for national and international agencies. In the PR manager worldviews, the IPR curriculum needs to be offered for fulfillment of the requirements of the knowledge and skills necessary for the profession. The areas of content knowledge that the managers emphasized as important topics for incorporation into the IPR curriculum comprise strategic communication, PR globalization, and the introduction of material that allows students to work across knowledge boundaries with multidisciplinary concepts including current foreign issues; international organizations’ structures; different countries’ environments such as cultural, economic, political, and technological variables; and social networks. This includes the student ability of integrating those concepts and ideas based on the local and global frames. Multi-skills as online and social media skills associated with skills of analytical, creative, and strategic thinking; and problem-solving were considered necessary by the PR managers for teaching and learning in IPR. The skills of a minimum of one second language, particularly English, were

also the managers' expectation for inclusion in the IPR curriculum or as an essential requirement for future PR graduates.

In addition, the managers envisioned that the IPR curriculum should be developed and enhanced through the maintenance of close relations between instructors and professionals. They proposed that a close relationship between the profession and the academy would be made possible through a range of activities. The activities consist of engagement of guest instructors, participation in authentic projects, communicating with professionals as advisors, instructor internships, and company visits. These relationship activities were also considered by the managers as positive experiences for learners with regard to facilitating learner understanding of a coherent body of knowledge in the field of IPR in both the classroom and in the workplaces.

The findings of this study suggest that a success of developing the IPR curriculum needs to be hand-in-hand among universities and industries. IPR instructors and PR professionals should engage in two-way communication techniques. Preparing students to become competent professionals should also require instructors to commit themselves to an ongoing dialogue with agency leaders involving PR practices.

As a small scale investigation this paper is intended to be a guideline for further research. Although this paper including the in-depth viewpoints of PR leaders from both local and global agencies would be particularly beneficial regarding the agency demands and expectations, further research may be conducted to examine in-house PR of different groups of employers, such as public, private, or non profit organizations, expecting IPR teaching and learning at the undergraduate level. Further research should utilize different methodologies, such as del-phi, ethnographic, and nethnographic examinations to provide additional insights for education in the field of IPR.

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