

## **Reflections of the Founding Chair**

**Peter Reader**

My closing plenary at the most recent Melbourne Network conference also marked the end of my term as Chair of ACU's PR, Marketing and Communication Network. It was an opportunity not only to reflect on the way the Network had developed since 2003, but also to reflect on changes taking place in the public relations, marketing and communications world.

I still recall how the Network was set up. In 2002, the UK's Association of University Administrators (AUA) was holding its annual conference. Around 1,200 delegates expected at the University of Southampton where I was Director of External Relations. I was chairing the conference committee – a daunting enough role – when just a few weeks before the conference, I had a call from the ACU saying that as a small number of vice-chancellors were to attend the AUA conference, the ACU would like to run a pre-conference seminar on PR, and would I give the opening keynote, please? I admit I took some persuading, but I did agree and I duly made my presentation. Job done, add it to the CV, I thought.

The following year, AUA was holding its conference in Derby, and again the ACU phoned. The gist of the early part of the conversation was ACU would like to follow up the Southampton seminar – Derby, I said, oh well, okay. Not exactly, was the reply. We want to set up a network for PR, marketing and communications people, and would you chair a meeting at another university administrators' conference? Oh, and it's at the Association of Caribbean Higher Education Administrators' meeting in Barbados. You can guess my reaction; the rest, as they say, is history.

So what has the Network achieved? In simple terms, we have held three conferences (in Toronto, Durban and Melbourne); published a regular newsletter; and held an annual awards competition. But it is much more than that. More importantly, we have provided a network in which we can all learn from each other, in which we all have a contribution to make. We may compete but we are also collegial. Sometimes a comment pulls us up with a jolt and reminds us that the situation in one country is very different to that in another. I well remember a contribution at a conference session given on viral marketing by an Australian colleague, when a delegate from Uganda reminded us very simply "Remember, we only have electricity every other day".

Enough of the history of the Network – what about universities? The first thing to remember is all universities are different. I have worked in six, and even though they are all in one country, their culture – as well as the markets in which they operate – all differ. Some talk about education, some teaching and learning. Some have a greater emphasis on research, whereas some focus more on outreach and community engagement. Some are focused globally, some are fundamentally local. But they all have a common thread of the advancement, communication and application of

knowledge. Cynics would say they have another similarity – defining a university as a community of scholars with a common grievance about car parking.

And what about our students? Just like the institutions of which they are part, students differ vastly. For example, are they studying full-time or part-time, living at home or in other accommodation? In the UK, the 1994 Group of smaller research-focused universities has a policy group which focuses on the student experience. When tasked with considering the role of students, the group concluded that students have a number of roles, as learners, citizens, colleagues, consumers, scholars, ambassadors and partners.

But with the growing marketisation of higher education in today's fees-driven universities, students have a new role too: as investors, investors in their own futures. Of course, the cynics also have a view, pointing out that whilst today's students are much more environmentally aware – wanting recycling bins and their coffee sourced from growers who are paid a fair price for their beans – they also want cheap flights and, of course, a car parking space.

But students are not the only stakeholders with whom we work, to whom we need to communicate and to market. Our staff are also stakeholders, as are our alumni. And there are our neighbours – our local communities, with their concerns, and with their politicians too. Then there are funders, government and private; business, commerce and industry; and philanthropists and charities. And in communication, we have also seen the emergence of the citizen journalist who can be any member of the public – including, of course, our students.

Just as stakeholders are changing, the ways we communicate are changing too – and will continue to do so at an ever fastening rate. Remember, almost unbelievably, the ACU Network pre-dates Facebook; Twitter is even newer. What comes next? Obviously, Facebook and Twitter are word-based media; what happens if Skype and web streaming combine in some way and really take off and we move to instant messaging in images? Consider this situation: a visitor – maybe a new student – arrives on your campus, camera in hand, streaming direct to the web, speaking in a language you do not understand. How do you react?

And consider too changes in how we deliver higher education. In an article in the UK newspaper *The Independent* entitled 'Full-time students will become a rare breed', Helena Pozniak wrote 'Distance-learning via video conferencing has been described as about as inspiring as watching bad TV. So when universities and colleges vie to promote their use of technology in teaching, you might be forgiven a sceptical sneer.' But this is in the past tense. As Pozniak points out, 'Now several UK universities are investing in the latest collaboration technology, and entire new campuses are being built around a remote learning module.' And that means for us a completely different message to deliver. A message built around personalisation, not built about the corporate. Put another way, it is marketing to the student, for the student, not marketing of the university.

And staying with the media, for our media customers, there are new ways of working too. Take science news. No longer is it a case of sending out a news release; we now use news aggregators. AlphaGalileo, for example, the world's only independent

source of research news, which send out alerts to journalists targeted in a way which is well beyond our own institution's resources. The AlphaGalileo Foundation believes its open access approach to partners and working in national collaborations is the best way for research news to gain international distribution, whilst still being highly visible locally. The good news is that since the Melbourne conference, AlphaGalileo is now working with ACU.

These are just a few examples of change. There are a multitude of other changes – in our institutions, in the markets in which we operate and in how we market and communicate. The simple fact is dealing with change is now the norm in everything we do, and with change comes fresh challenges.

For me, chairing the ACU's PR, Marketing and Communications Network was a challenge. It was also a privilege.