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DESK RESEARCH: ADDRESSING LA TROBE UNIVERSITY'S INTERNSHIP ISSUE

GIANNI FRANCIS

STC2SCR: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND PLANNING

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Background

This desk research aims to inform the primary research that will be undertaken for this communications plan, with the goal of complementing the La Trobe University 2020-30 Strategic Plan, outlining La Trobe’s response to the impact of COVID-19 and proposes changes to meet core objectives identified in the La Trobe Strategic Plan 2018-22.

Organizational analysis

Mission: “Advancing knowledge and learning to shape the future of our students and communities” (La Trobe, 2020, p. 4).	Vision: “To promote positive change and address the major issues of our time through being connected, inclusive and excellent” (La Trobe, 2020, p. 4).
Objectives: Employability Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Design out curriculum in partnership with industry and alumni and include industry-based experiences across all out courses” (La Trobe, 2020, p. 10).• “Increase support for student retention, progression and completion” (La Trobe, 2020).• “Improve the employability of our graduates” (La Trobe, 2020).	Values: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Pursuing excellence and sustainability” (La Trobe, 2020, p. 4).• “Being willing to innovate and disrupt the traditional way of doing things” (La Trobe, 2020, p. 4).

- The *La Trobe University Act* (2009, s.5.) objective (d) states La Trobe has the duty “to equip graduates of the University to excel in their chosen careers” (La Trobe, 2019, p. 16).

Resources

- Time: 2018 -2022 (less than two years left for implementation).
- Internal expertise regarding research question:
 - ASSC internship team.
 - Virtual internship workshop.
 - Careers Hub (Resume & CV workshops, etc.).
 - Subject Co-ordinators send intermittent emails with a few opportunities.
 - Employer Connect.
 - Work Integrated Learning Placements webpage.

SWOT Analysis

Internal	STRENGTHS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - La Trobe’s commitment to cultural and social justice initiatives, perceived equality may attract a more diverse range of students, faculty, and employees. - Ask La Trobe 24 reply guarantee highly effective at bypassing university bureaucracy. - Distinguished perception within publics from competitors. - Campus culture, strong student participation in the university (clubs, volunteering, student union etc.). - Generally positive reputation and perception among community and key publics. - Vast range of partnerships with other universities and organisations. - Past performance (alumni, graduation outcomes, revenue growth, etc.). - Faculty and staff support La Trobe’s mission. - Strong social media presence used to effectively communicate with key publics. - Effective adaptation to remote learning through zoom. - Highly efficacious student support services and communication of those services to students. - Positive campus perceptions among publics. - Highly expert faculty and researchers. 	WEAKNESSES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operational structure/bureaucracy. - Many courses are unable to be completed fully due to COVID restrictions (practical, hands on learning and assessment). - Negative connotation in publics for university administration culture focusing on international students as a revenue source, potentially to the detriment of domestic students (Onselen, 2019). - Competitive market for diverse and skilled faculty and staff. - Potentially the governance of the university policy – could be perceived as out of touch of key stakeholder publics.
External	OPPORTUNITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publics perceive student pathways to employment in emerging/high demand/prestigious industries - Revenue growth (growth in all meaningful measures too). - Campus development – construction. Shows publics plenty of facilities to teach and utilise in their education. - Social trends; Increased demand for higher education in the job market and growing demand for graduates in industry. - Increase in key publics’ interest in La Trobe’s academic programs. 	THREATS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government attempting to defund universities (Hunter, 2020). - Key publics developing a negative perception of La Trobe. - Not seen as prestigious as competing universities like Monash and Melbourne. - “significant financial challenges” due to COVID from loss of international student fees (ABC News, 2020). - Graduates and academics in certain fields moving overseas to work or research due to lack of employment opportunities. - Research and admin jobs at risk due to loss of international student fees (Mannix & Hunter 2020). - Unable to maintain parity with competing universities in attracting new students (Guiliani 2020).
	Positive	Negative

Figure references: (California State University, 2004), (La Trobe, 2018).

Situational Analysis

Factiva found 145 articles in the last three months (viewed at 2020, August 18) with the key words “remote learning” and “university” that demonstrate the issues and accomplishments faced by all universities in adapting to pandemic restrictions.

La Trobe faces issues in delivering the expected quality of learning outcomes due to pandemic restrictions. With Australian universities providing amnesty to struggling students who fail subjects during the pandemic (Chrysanthos, 2020). The pandemic restrictions have rendered the university unable to provide the practical experience to students it previously had (Cosoletto, 2020). Other universities like Swinburne have overcome this issue for STEM fields through online learning and altering the course assessment structure (Seedy, 2010).

Norton (2020) wrote that in 2018, 17 percent of subjects taken by Commonwealth supported students either failed or withdrew after the census date when they incur a HELP debt. The fail-or-withdraw rate translates into nearly A\$800 million in HELP debt and almost A\$1.2 billion in subsidies to universities. Now in 2020, the Federal Government is drafting legislation to address issues within universities that will result in reducing overall government funding across all subjects (Papanicolaou & Ray, 2020).

La Trobe has prioritised potential future students (Baldwin 2002, as cited in Šereš. L. et al., 2019) currently. To communicate to potential new students La Trobe puts out [targeted material](#) to (La Trobe, 2020) this public through Facebook to let them know [remote open days](#) (La Trobe, 2020) are going ahead and to avoid them deferring or waiting a year before enrolling at La Trobe. Consequently, negatively effecting revenue and growth, a core objective in La Trobe’s strategic plan.

La Trobe has also put up short and easily digestible video tours of the various disciplines facilities for students to familiarise themselves with. These communications targeted at future students identifies their wants to learn about the university and what they can expect, their concerns and anxieties surrounding remote learning and the pandemic and attempts to empower students with the confidants to make decisions for their career futures in this uncertain time (La Trobe, 2020).

The university has also created content ([HERE](#) and [HERE](#)) that communicates perspectives it deems are appropriate for its publics and stakeholders to hold, especially potential future undergraduate students (La Trobe, 2020).

It is this prioritisation of new students (growth objective) before existing issues – identified above – have been resolved that may impact the “outstanding student experience” objective.

Appendix briefly evaluates La Trobe’s social media presence.

Stakeholder Map

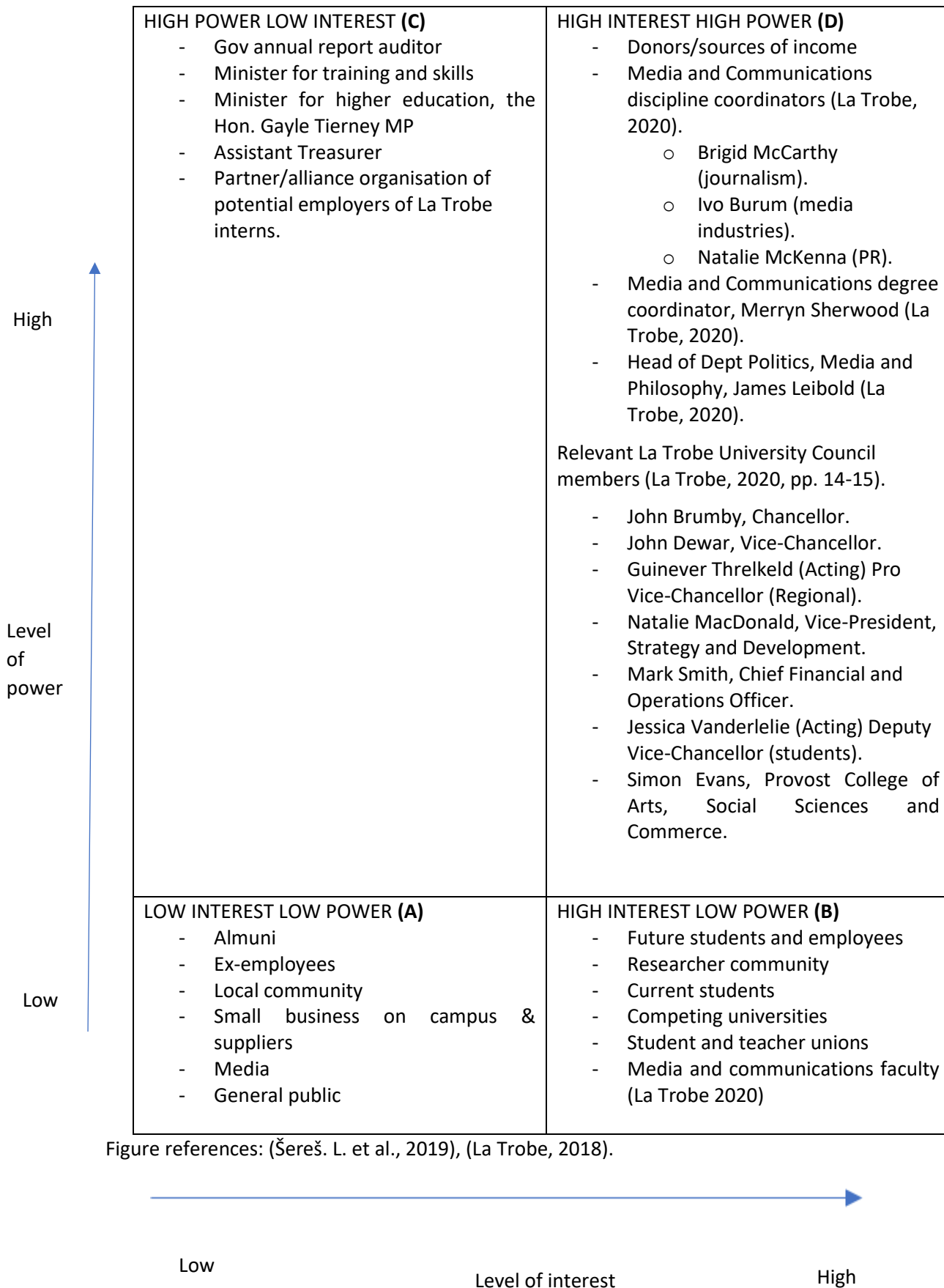


Figure references: (Šereš. L. et al., 2019), (La Trobe, 2018).

Key Stakeholders – current undergraduate students:

Wants/Needs

- Want graduate outcomes – employability
- Want support from administration and faculty
- Want high quality learning experience
- Want social opportunities – networking and meeting friends.
- Industry placements – work-based learning

Emotional triggers

- Anxiety over over-whelming workloads
- Loneliness – miss opportunities to meet fellow students.
- Fear of failure/inadequacy, not able to reach their goals.

Against

- The onus is on students to achieve graduate outcomes and source internships.
- If a student does not know how to source internships or overcome other employability issues, it is their responsibility to overcome that problem.
- Students are expected to organise their time and commitments to accommodate an undergraduate workload.
- If students want social opportunities and networking, it is their responsibility to seek those opportunities out.

Facebook post engagement analysis on communication that may result in an issue or negative perception in key publics and stakeholder groups (current undergraduate students).

Post: [Lab experiments moved online or mailed](#) (La Trobe, 2020)

Date of post: Tuesday June 2, 2020 at 8:30pm

Date viewed: Friday August 7, 2020 at 12:00am

Platform: La Trobe’s official Facebook page

Reach/analytics data: 3 shares, 26 likes, 4 angry reactions, 3 sad reactions.

Comments: These outtakes demonstrate; Tone is disapproving and dissatisfied with university response, negative personal connection between stakeholders and the organisation.

Student Sentiment is angry, disgusted, disdainful of university response – they feel betrayed or let down by the handling of practical classes during COVID; opposite of appreciating produces and services and may be deemed undependable or unethical- low favourability. Post and issue have low engagement with stakeholders because publics are not feeling affective commitment, positive affectivity, or empowerment. (Ponzi 2016 as cited in Macnamara 2018, pp. 169-171)

	+ve	-ve	Neutral/Not relevant
Number	0	7	4
Themes (summarised)	No positive comments visible in response to this communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dissatisfaction with mailing lab tests. - Dissatisfaction at losing practical experience from placement - Publics do not want to conduct microbiology/biochemistry in their homes, do not believe it is a lab substitute - Angered at the prospect of having to pay high tuition fees for experimenting with “things around the house”. - Pointing out that La Trobe cannot mail expensive equipment like “mass spectrometer” (half measures). - Questions of the health, safety, and hygiene without proper lab conditions. - Publics consider this to be potentially dangerous, “live arthropods in my dorm room? I think not”. 	Tagging friends in post

Future problem identified in La Trobe's communication plan

Issue identified: Prioritisation of future students neglects graduating students needs and wants. The stated core objective "student employability" may be problematic for graduating undergraduates due to already poor communication on sourcing and completing an internship, now with the impacts of COVID, this has gotten even worse for undergraduate students who need to do placement remotely with no clear pathway or instruction to follow.

- Undergrad students only have one way of communicating on the issue (ASSC Internships).
- Pandemic induced recession has reduced internship opportunities and made it harder for organisations to offer remote placement opportunities.

Hypothesis: Undergraduate students lack a comprehensive understanding of how the process of organising an internship/industry placement for their career development works. The advent of COVID-19 will create further difficulties for students in sourcing, securing, and completing internships and how will the online nature of these remote internships impact the efficacy of their industry-based learning.

Against: Undergraduate students are expected to access resources available to them on La Trobe's website to aid them in self-sourcing internships. The advent of COVID-19 provides students with an opportunity to overcome adversity in their search for work placements essential for graduate employability.

Problem statement: Undergraduate students may graduate without completing an internship and be less employable, a negative outcome that is opposite of La Trobe's core objective "student employability".

Research question: To investigative communication and administrative barriers to empowering undergraduate students with knowledge concerning the process of sourcing and authorising remote internships during pandemic restrictions?

- What do you know about La Trobe's interning opportunities?
- Where would you look to find more information about interning?
- What concerns do you have about sourcing an internship, or an industry placement, during the pandemic?
- What do you think about La Trobe's communication on the changes to remote interning due to the pandemic?
- How do you feel about finding information on La Trobe's website about sourcing remote internships?
- What needs improvement?
- What concerns do you have about sourcing an internship, or an industry placement, during the pandemic?
- Who, if anyone, at university has encouraged you to start learning about sourcing and completing internships as part of your undergraduate degree?

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Appendix

Social media overview

YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/c/latrobeuniversity/videos>): 10k subscribers – low engagement, nearly all videos for the last 3 months have less than 100 views. Inconsistent posting schedule (mass content drops every week or two). Low reach/impressions indicate low confidence that core message is reaching target publics.

Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/latrobeuni/?hl=en>): 26.1k followers – likes in the hundreds, quite strong, but has relatively low engagement in comments in comparison. What engagement is present is overwhelmingly positive. Consistent daily posting. The difference in likes across photos indicates a high reach, with varying efficacy of communications reaching target publics (better vanity metric performance on some posts than others).

Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/latrobe/>): 282,715-page likes – Relatively low engagement with publics, (likes, comments, shares) compared to Instagram. “Very responsive” to messages. Inconsistent posting schedule, multiple posts every few days. The reach and actual engagement of publics on this platform seem to indicate effective communication with publics – publics (students) seem to see La Trobe’s Facebook page as a place to find information and engage in communication with the organisation.

Twitter (<https://twitter.com/latrobe?lang=en>): 37.6k followers – Very active posting schedule, but inconsistent. Low engagement across posts. La Trobe’s twitter vanity metrics seem to indicate reach and impressions ineffective at conveying key messages to publics, but observance of retweeting over time suggests that prominent stakeholder groups (alumni, experts, etc.) do see the content and retweet it, resulting in a larger reach, with a multiplier effect of good will towards the communication content through the advocacy of the stakeholder that shared it (benefit from their reputation and endorsement). Engagement with publics indicates that target publics and stakeholders (mainly professionals) actively engage with content in a meaningful way.