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COMMUNICATION PLAN: ADDRESSING
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY'S INTERNSHIP
ISSUE

GIANNI FRANCIS

STC2CR: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND PLANNING

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Background

This communications plan aims to complement 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.

The proposed objectives and tactics aim improve La Trobe University's communications regarding internships towards Media and Communications students, to improve short and long-term relationships between the University and its students and contribute to the KPI's outlined in the 2020-30 strategic plan.

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 our curriculum in partnership with industry and alumni and include industry-based experiences across all our 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).

Statement of Problem

Issue identified: The pandemic has caused many media and communication organisations to shut down or postpone internships, and the remaining internships that have become remote are scarce.

Problem statement: Undergraduate students may graduate without completing an internship and be less employable; a negative outcome that is opposite to La Trobe's core objective of student employability, and a failure to achieve stated objectives and adhere to stated values. This could lead to the loss of trust in students, a key stakeholder group.

Research Undertaken and Main Findings

Research objective: To investigate existing communication and administrative barriers preventing undergraduate students being empowered with knowledge concerning the process of sourcing and authorising remote internships during pandemic restrictions.

Process: I undertook a focus group with six students, and an online survey with 26 respondents.

Focus group Key Findings

- PR Students are unlikely to read or make use of emails regarding internships, because opportunities are circulated by the journalism coordinator and are largely irrelevant to the PR major *“they have sent emails maybe, but I don’t really read them”*.
- Students find La Trobe’s website difficult to navigate to find specific information about sourcing internships, with many students unaware of opportunities and resources such as workshops.
- Students are uncertain about the need to complete an internship as a requirement of graduation. R3 *“Because I do PR as a major, I don’t think you have to do [an internship] to complete your degree”*. R1 *“you don’t?”* R2 *“I thought you do?”*
- Respondents were confused about co-ordinating self-sourced internships with the university to be credited as part of the degree and were unsure of where to seek further information. *“I don’t really know what the Uni offers to help you with internships.”*

Survey Key Findings

- 100% of respondents said that students should read emails sent by La Trobe faculty.
- 92.31% of respondents said discipline coordinators should circulate emails regarding discipline specific internship opportunities.
- 92.31% of respondents said internship opportunities should be discussed in relevant classes.
- 96.16% of respondents said information about who to contact about internships needs to be clearer.
- Two undergraduate journalism students highlighted the confusion and communication issues La Trobe is currently having around internships *“I feel that there has been no discussion whatsoever about internships this year despite many still being available remotely. I’ve sourced one myself and have informed the uni about it, however got no response about whether it’s a good internship to take up which defeats the purpose of informing the uni of any work placement you take for insurance purposes.”*

Please see *Appendix A* for research methodology.

Overarching Goal

To improve the perceptions of media and communications students towards La Trobe regarding internships and industry placement, with the goal of improving trust and long-term relationships with this key stakeholder group and avoiding any future crises resulting from negative perceptions or a breakdown of that relationship.

Target Audiences

- Media and communications students (current and future) who need clarification about internships.
- Media and Communications discipline coordinators (La Trobe, 2020).
 - Brigid McCarthy (journalism).
 - Ivo Burum (media industries).
 - Natalie McKenna (PR).
- Media and Communications degree coordinator, Merryn Sherwood (La Trobe, 2020).
- Head of Dept Politics, Media and Philosophy, James Leibold (La Trobe, 2020).
- Media and communications faculty (lecturers and tutors) (La Trobe, 2020).
- Relevant La Trobe University Council members (La Trobe, 2020, pp. 14-15).
 - John Brumby, Chancellor.
 - John Dewar, Vice-Chancellor.
 - Guinever Threlkeld (Acting) Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional).
 - Natalie MacDonald, Vice-President, Strategy and Development.
 - Mark Smith, Chief Financial and Operations Officer.
 - Jessica Vanderlelie (Acting) Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students).
 - Simon Evans, Provost College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce.

Implementation Plan

Objective 1

(Awareness): Achieve a 50 percent increase in traffic to, and engagement with online La Trobe resources available to students about internships by July 2021.

Key Messages

- “You need to complete 120 hours of industry placement as part of your degree. The LMS module and the emails from coordinators will provide you with more information.” (Students)
- “Here’s what you need to know about the changes to interning as part of your degree during the pandemic. Look out for emails from your coordinators to stay up to date and follow the links to find all the information you need to know.” (Students)

Tactics

- 1) Localise all resources about internships in an LMS ‘subject’ module and/or one La Trobe website location. *(Ready by November 2020).*
- 2) Merryn Sherwood directly emails students promoting La Trobe’s online resources, and the relevant faculty to contact. Emails should also include any updates or changes that concern students. *(Monthly from November 2020 onwards).*

Objective 2

(Acceptance): To increase media and communications students joining the ‘Journalism, Arts, Media, and Communications Society at LTU’ Facebook group by 20 percent by July 2021 (Before the semester 2 teaching period begins).

Key Messages

- “PR faculty must use their industry networks and contacts to provide PR students the same opportunities afforded media industries and journalism students.” (PR Faculty)
- “The JMAC LTU society Facebook group is a great place to find internship opportunities. Follow the links in the LMS to find out more.” (Students)
- “If you’re graduating this year, the JMAC LTU society Facebook group is a great place to network with alumni and get in early on graduate positions or job openings. Follow the links in the LMS to find out more.” (Students)

Tactics

- 1) PR faculty to engage in the JMAC Facebook group and post communications internship roles relevant to PR majors. *(At least bi-monthly, or whenever roles become available, from November 2020 onwards).*
- 2) Prominently feature a link to the JMAC LTU Facebook group in each media and communications core subject on the LMS. *(Ready by the beginning of semester 1 teaching period 2021).*
- 3) Subject coordinators should discuss the existence of the Facebook group, and encourage students to join, directing them to the link on the LMS, *(Start semester 1 teaching period 2021).*
- 4) Provide a link to the JMAC LTU society Facebook group in all correspondence from Merryn Sherwood and discipline coordinators regarding internships. *(Monthly from November 2020 onwards).*

Objective 3

(Action): Increase the number of internships aggregated by La Trobe in preparation for when organisations open internship roles as pandemic restrictions lift (30 percent by July 2021).

Key Messages

- “Investment into infrastructure that provides industry learning is essential to achieving La Trobe’s objectives of student employability.” (Council)
- “To maintain La Trobe’s status as one of the best universities in the world, it is crucial to educational environment that produces student outcomes congruent with expectations of employers.” (Council)
- “Media and communications faculty have access to networks, industry contacts and experience that students don’t, and it is the responsibility of faculty to aid students in their transition from University to professional career.” (Faculty)

Tactics

- 1) La Trobe Council create the ‘La Trobe Internship partners program (LTUIPP)’ within the ‘Career Ready’ initiative. LTUIPP will consist of five administrators responsible for developing partnerships with alliance media and comms organisations to aggregate

internship opportunities for the MAC3INT, ASC3WPP, and MSS3INT subjects. *(Effective from January 1, 2021).*

- 2) Direct emails and telephone calls from 'La Trobe Internship partners program (LTUIPP)' to potential employer organisations about developing alliance/partnerships to provide internships, cadetships, and graduate programs exclusively for La Trobe students. *(Initially 6 months – 1 January 2021 to 1 July 2021, onwards).*

Objective 4

(Action): See a 30 percent increase in the number of media and communications students enrolled in the MAC3INT subject with an appropriate internship by July 2021.

Key Messages

- “Rural and regional students cannot have access to industry experience denied to them because of their geographical or socio-economic situation.” (Council)
- “We want you to succeed, so if you have any questions about undertaking an internship please contact your discipline coordinator or Merryn Sherwood.” (Students)

Tactics

- 1) Discipline coordinators send emails about internship opportunities and encourage students to utilise. Emails should clearly state appropriate faculty to contact for further information. *(Monthly from February 1, 2021).*
- 2) Faculty should highlight for students how class content discussed will be used in the workplace, and emphasis skills that will be highly valued by employers when students apply for internships. *(1 March 2021 onwards).*
- 3) La Trobe provides scholarships, or equivalent financial support, for rural and regional students who've secured an internship in a metropolitan area more than two hours away from their homes and need to secure accommodation for the duration of their employment. *(Effective from 1 February 2021 onwards).*
- 4) La Trobe hosts internship events with different organisations. Students learn what skills and competencies are required, and what they can expect in their role at the organisation. And what students can do to increase the likelihood being considered for an internship. Students will have the opportunity to ask questions and network. *(Monthly beginning from 1 January onwards).*

Evaluation Plan

- **Outcome:** Number of internships aggregated by La Trobe with partner organisations for Media and Communications students or posted in JMAC Facebook group compared to previous year.
- **Outcome:** Increase in the number of students who enrolled and complete an internship approved by La Trobe for credit through the MAC3INT, ASC3WPP, or MSS3INT subjects in the 2020 semester 2 teaching *period (19 July – 15 October)* against enrolment and completion rate of students in the 2021 semester 2 teaching period (*19 July – 15 October*).
- **Outcome:** Key Performance Indicator: Top 12 nationally in the Student Experience Survey for Teaching Quality and Overall Experience (La Trobe, 2020, p. 10).
- **Outtake:** A focus group and survey will be conducted to gather qualitative and quantitative data (matrix rating scale) to determine the comprehension and perceptions of students. This data will be analysed and compare to the focus group data gathered during the research for this campaign. The focus being on long-term relationships; do students perceive that La Trobe is actively working to support them in undertaking industry placement as part of their degree?
- **Outtake:** Qualitative and quantitative data gathered from evaluation focus group and survey, and feedback given during PD and staff meeting to determine the attitudes of faculty towards implemented changes.
- **Outputs (Emails):** Will be measured and evaluated for efficacy through cyberspace analysis: click through rate, number of visitors, bounce rate, average page views per session, session duration, traffic sources, interactions per visit, and demographic information of visitors, etc.

Proposed Budget

- \$10,000 for internal IT infrastructure development across La Trobe's website and the LMS.
- \$358,215 for the salaries of five La Trobe administrators (Indeed, 2020) responsible for the development of the infrastructure network with partner organisations, and the aggregation of internships in the 'La Trobe Internship Partners Program' (LTUIPP).
- \$500 for 10 \$50 gift vouchers to incentivise students to engage in the evaluation research. The monetary reward is intended to attract a large enough pool to achieve a non-probability sampled population.

External Factors Potentially Influencing Success of Plan & Identified Areas of Risk/Debate

- Currently pandemic restrictions are on schedule to ease, and this plan has been developed with the intention of some students able to resume workplace learning in the second semester of 2021.
- Negotiations with external partner organizations about hosting La Trobe student interns may be difficult, especially during pandemic conditions.
- Student motivation: many driven and ambitious students will jump on these opportunities and take full advantage of them, however many will not.
- Faculty may contest the perceived increase in responsibility and argue 'it is up to students to source their own work placement'. This statement is true; however, this plan has argued it is also faculty's responsibility to aid students, therefore achieving La Trobe's objectives outlined in the 2020-30 Strategic Plan.

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Appendix A

Research Methodology

The focus group was an informal research method that was used as part of the survey planning process to inform the development of key messages within in the identified issue (Weintraub and Pinkelton p.150).

The analysis of focus group data was intuitive, and the results were interpreted in the context of the issue, immediately and verifiably (Weintraub and Pinkelton 2015 p. 145) and strove to provide enlightenment in development of key messages, using selected quotes (Krueger 2002 p.16).

Key messages were developed in accordance with Mendelsohn's three assumptions for success and McGuire's hierarchy of effects (as cited in Weintraub and Pinkelton 2015 pp. 263-266). The survey was a mixture of convenience and purposive non-probability sampling (Weintraub and Pinkelton 2015 pp. 91-92).

An internet survey provided a low cost and time effective data collection method designed to determine the most effective key messages for the communications campaign through a matrix rating scale (Weintraub and Pinkelton 2015).