

Institution: Queen Margaret University
Unit of Assessment: UoA 36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
a. Context

The main non-academic user groups, beneficiaries and audiences for research in the submitting unit are: Scottish Government (including communications and social marketing practitioners); individuals within the policy community; stakeholders, including individual teenagers, teachers, schools, parents, and local communities in relation to alcohol (Case Study 1); and public relations and communications practitioners and professional bodies (The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and The Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA)) who were involved in the development and implementation of Case Study 2.

b. Approach to impact

The unit's approach has been to link critical interests with a range of societal and professional stakeholders and practices. The approach to non-academic users and beneficiaries happened in different ways.

In Case Study 1 an action research approach was developed to make use of an existing relationship with Portobello High School (PHS) built by Emma Wood and QMU students on public relations degree courses over a number of years. Subsequently, the PHS Head Teacher enabled access to other Head Teachers in relation to the AlcoLoLs project. In addition, a network of professional contacts was garnered through attendance by academics at a number of public events and membership of the local Community Alcohol Partnership. Case Study 1 deployed public relations and communications scholarship in the applied context of teenage discussion about alcohol. Specifically, this has entailed institutional support, first of all £900 to establish the Centre for Dialogue (2011) under which umbrella Case Study 1 was conducted. Strategically, this marked a broadening of approach from an area that may be conceived more narrowly as public relations and communications techniques. A Research Assistant was employed 2008–2010 (Escobar), who worked closely with Pieczka and Wood. Buy-outs provided additional time to run the project but also to apply for further funding, which was achieved in October 2012 and widened impact within relevant policy and NGO circles. Funding was also achieved from Beltane Public Engagement Network to support the initial pilot study for Case Study 1. In this case institutional support was central to the project's development and also to the processes that allowed inter-relationships between theory and its critical applications to achieve societally-important interventions. The activities around Case Study 1 did not solely lead to scholarship outputs but to action research that enhanced teenagers' citizenship skills within the local community.

The approach to Case Study 2 could be characterised as multiple reflexive interventions with professional communicators whose sponsored information work is embedded in market transactions and social change. It sought the views of creative service providers within devolved Scotland with a view to understanding better their insights into their expertise, practice and societal impact with the objective of making positive interventions. At one level it was informed by long term and ongoing discussions with the University's externally-recruited Public Relations Advisory Committee, comprised of public and private sector practitioners who provide guidance about the institution's various academic programmes in public relations. It was evident that discussions with practitioners tended to centre on students and programme delivery rather than issues of concern to practitioners. Consequently, L'Etang set up ten one-to-one meetings with practitioners (including the Chairs of the two professional bodies) in February/March/April 2013 to explore the issue of their relationship with the academy, to delineate key areas of senior level expertise and to explore areas for potential collaboration and development. At the Advisory Committee on 30 April 2013, L'Etang drew on her informal interviews and meetings to initiate a further discussion about the central issues of concern to practitioners and highlighted the opportunities for a collaborative approach towards the exploration of public relations knowledge and expertise. Five committee members volunteered to participate in a pilot focus group and interviews and to identify those they regarded as leaders in their field to be involved in the KE research (funded by the institution £12,546) that formed the basis of the case study. A researcher was employed for six months and

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financial support was provided for five focus groups and 20 interviews, transcription and interventions. Committee members were responsible for the initial sample recruited through the professional bodies. Coincidentally, L'Etang had taught two participants in one focus group (Beaulby by Inverness) at MSc level and another interviewee, and was familiar with one of the Advisory Committee members having been invited by him to speak to the CIPR UK Special Interest Group of Local Government Public Relations Officers (Cardiff, 2007). The nature of the open-ended research gave practitioners the opportunity to reflect upon their practice and to articulate impact in the form of self-understanding. In Case Study 2 prior relationships greatly facilitated access and also contributed to the trust required for the reflexive nature of the research and to the necessary commitment required to take part in interventions and follow-up. Although the study had been designed as a small project local to the Central Belt and largely based at QMU, interest expressed in the project through networks meant that additional focus groups were set up in Glasgow and north of Inverness. Within weeks researchers were invited to discuss the project and findings at a select professional body dinner and to give an open forum presentation at another professional body.

Case Study 2 was specific in its critical focus upon a particular practitioner community (encompassing those who self-defined as public relations/communication management/corporate communications/public affairs). The importance of understanding the activities and approaches of public relations practitioners has clear societal relevance. The significance of this occupation societally has often been critiqued yet little empirical research has been conducted into the expertise and knowledge deployed in its practice. This project has practical application and implications and also further conceptual potential.

c. Strategy and plans

The approach and strategy have explored one particular area within the UoA and undertook projects of a very different nature and scale. In 2012, strategic plans for theme development (2012–15) made a commitment to a post-doctoral post to be appointed in 2014 to research knowledge exchange and engagement opportunities across the theme. Meantime, the experience acquired in the process of conducting and concluding the two impact cases has had the effect of bringing forward investments in relation to impact. A researcher was appointed to work with the Chair of the unit to collaborate with research/KE active staff to seek new opportunities for KE and impact work in cultural policy, cultural management, communication management/public relations and media/PR literacy. A working group of research-active staff has been established to identify future opportunities not only in public relations and applied communication but also cultural policy and management. The unit's approach will involve project development in liaison with professional organizations and potential partners. This process has already begun and the Research Fellow and Chair will coalesce ideas from colleagues in a benchmark report in January 2014 that will form the basis of future policy regarding impact over the next census period and will include the detailed remit and priorities of the post-doctoral student. As part of the management of research in the unit there will be a separate written strategy for impact that will be implemented collectively. The UoA will seek a combination of external and internal funding (research and KE) to support four key projects over the 2014–19 period linked to existing conceptual interests and to the needs of relevant stakeholders.

d. Relationship to case studies

The case studies have informed research developments within one of the UoA's themes and, in particular, approaches towards impact and ways of developing relationships and future opportunities with non-academic users and beneficiaries in a wide range of societal contexts. It is anticipated that this test-bed approach will extend impact-orientated research throughout the UoA.