

NEWS RELEASE

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LANCASHIRE



Preston pioneers new student experience

Public relations students from Preston are set to operate a PR agency as part of their undergraduate degrees, the first time that a project of its type has been attempted in the UK.

The agency, UK Progress, will be run by final year public relations students working from an office at the University of Central Lancashire. The student consultants will practice under supervision and will be assessed on the quality of their work as part of their degree.

'Our public relations graduates already have an enviable academic reputation, but this project will really demonstrate that they are capable of applying their knowledge at the very sharp end of consultancy practice, in projects deliberately chosen for the challenges they bring,' says Paul Elmer, Director of UK Progress and a senior lecturer in Applied Communication.

'By integrating a real agency into their final year we will effectively be preparing second-jobbers for the marketplace,' he says. 'The idea is simple enough: we are taking the principle of work experience, and adding to it the quality control and rigorous assessment that has won Preston its leading position in PR education. The end result is a work experience that delivers more learning to the students, more skill to the clients, and really shows some leadership in the north-west.'

Clients pay a fixed fee of £2k that helps offset the costs of enhanced IT, office space and expenses such as travel. UK Progress will operate as a full-time agency during the academic year, with student teams using mobile technology including a fully wireless computer network and university-provided mobile phones in order to maintain a constant service without the need for a full suite of offices - a move designed to cope with varying volumes of work, with the potential for more than 100 student consultants working at peak periods.

UK Progress will complete project-based consultancy across an initial client portfolio that spans major public sector accounts, manufacturers and legal and medical sectors. Student teams will specialise in soundly-researched strategic communication, and will develop tactical solutions that include publishing.

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Although the first clients are mainly large organisations, UK Progress aims to develop its work to help charities and new businesses across the NW region. 'We have set the cost low enough to encourage take-up in sectors where conventional consultancy is simply too expensive for most organisations,' says Elmer. 'But what we are finding this year is that big organisations which are used to engaging consultants are snapping up work - we may even have to run a waiting list, which is quite some going for a communications consultancy that is six weeks from launch.'

The main drive this year has been in specially targeted sectors, ones where we know that students will get a challenge,' says Elmer. 'But I want to see our client list grow to include the charity and SME areas, where we can help build a better society and help organisations to innovate, and we are already partnering a similar student consultancy that has been operating in Utrecht for some years, so we hope to offer some students experience in international consultancy, too.'

Lectures and seminars are replaced with team meetings where student teams draw on the support and knowledge of a senior consultant, able to guide their developing practice, supplementing their formal learning on subjects such as applied research and strategy. Senior consultants, who are specially selected from the lecturing staff for their consultancy experience and practice, add the experience of applying that knowledge at the sharp end, and of dealing with clients, in addition to more traditional teaching roles such as directing students towards books and other learning resources.

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7 August 2003

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Note: For more information about UK Progress call the agency director Paul Elmer on 07714 105095.