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Professionalisation and public relations education: Industry accreditation of Australian university courses in the early 1990s



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the Public Relations Institute of Australia's introduction in 1991 of a national accreditation programme for university courses. Drawing on an analysis of previously unstudied industry archives, it identifies four themes significant for industry perspectives of education: public relations knowledge; industry expectations and experience; public relations curricula; and academic legitimacy. While university education was perceived by institute members to demonstrate the professional standing of public relations, the findings reveal divergent understandings of its role and content and identify considerable resistance to the institutionalisation of public relations knowledge. At the same time, the expansion and marketisation of higher education led to the introduction of new, vocational courses such as public relations. The significance of this study is it offers new insights into the development of Australian public relations education and the role of the professional association.

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a historical perspective on Australian public relations education, focusing on the introduction in 1991 of a national accreditation programme for university courses. The expansion and increasing marketisation of the Australian higher education sector in the previous two decades allowed the introduction of courses with a strong vocational focus. Public relations courses in the late 1980s attracted increasing numbers of students. The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) sought a key role in the regulation of education of future practitioners, as part of a broader strategy dating back to the mid-1980s to improve the reputation and professional standing of public relations. Until the national programme, individual PRIA state councils were primarily responsible for endorsing or accrediting courses. The shift to a national programme led to tension and analysis of industry archives reveals divergent understandings of the role and content of public relations education. The contest over public relations education can be understood as a contest over the constitution and transmission of public relations knowledge. I argue that the industry accreditation of Australian public relations education needs to be considered in the context of both the industry's professionalisation drive and the marketisation of higher education.

There have been few investigations into the development of Australian public relations education and limited research into PRIA's role. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the professional association attempted to regulate the transmission of public relations knowledge, through the formal accreditation of university courses. I draw on industry archives, including

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the personal archives of PRIA's National Education Committee's (NEC) chair, hereafter referred to as the Anderson archives, for the research reported in this paper.¹ In my analysis, I consider changes in Australian higher education and the public relations industry and situate this study within the literature on professionalisation. This paper is structured in four sections. In the first, I consider the historical context of higher education in Australia. I also review PRIA's introduction of greater regulatory structures in 1985 and the NEC accreditation programme for university courses in 1991. Second, I outline the design of the research reported in this paper. I then discuss the findings, in relation to four themes that emerged from my analysis of industry archives: public relations knowledge; industry expectations; public relations curricula; and the disciplinary status of public relations. In the final section, I consider the significance of these findings for public relations education in Australia.

2. Background

2.1. *Public relations in Australian higher education*

Increased employment opportunities in the expanding communication sector fuelled the growth in communication and media studies courses in the 1980s and early 1990s (Putnis, 1993). At the same time, and in response to changes in Australian government policy in 1987, the higher education sector restructured as colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology merged to form new universities (Fitch, 2013). These new universities had a strong vocational focus and introduced public relations, along with other professional majors taught within communication studies, in response to both market demand and the need to find alternative revenue sources. David Potts, a senior PRIA member with significant experience as an educator, perceived the transition to university status had implications for industry involvement in public relations education, noting: '*a lessening of the value of the old [industry] advisory council. . . . They say that when they (the CAEs [Colleges of Advanced Education]) became universities, the academic side got out of hand* (Potts, as cited in Starck, 1999, p. 39 [italics in original]). Communication and media studies courses flourished and public relations education appears to follow a similar trajectory to other professional fields such as journalism and advertising (Burns, 2003; Kerr, Waller, & Patti, 2009).

Universities reported substantial growth in public relations student numbers from 1987, confirming Gleeson's identification of 1985–1999 as a significant 'growth phase' for Australian public relations education (2013, p. 2). Deakin University, for instance, doubled enrolment in its management communication course in the period 1987–1989 (Quarles & Potts, 1990; Quarles & Rowlings, 1993) and another university increased enrolments from 52 in 1987 to 103 in 1993.² In the 1990s, communication studies became the largest field of study in the humanities in Australia (Putnis & Axford, 2002); the most common communication studies majors in 1990 were television production; journalism; and public relations (Molloy & Lennie, 1990). The increase in public relations courses mirrors communication studies; as Borland noted, there was 'a massive proliferation of coursework Master's programs' as well as double degrees in communication studies in the years 1987–1995 (1995, p. 23). The number of tertiary public relations courses increased from three in 1980, to ten courses in 1990, to 18 undergraduate and 11 postgraduate courses at the end of the 1990s [Anderson archives].

There is limited research on the history of Australian public relations education, although recent scholarship suggests a growing interest in its development. Gleeson (2012) investigated early public relations education in the university sector, focusing on the years 1950–1975. In their review of Australian public relations scholarship, Johnston and Macnamara (2013) refer to industry accreditation of university courses as early as 1985 but note accreditation gained momentum at the end of the decade. Few public relations scholars acknowledge, however, the historical context and the significance of communication studies' growth in Australia. Hatherell and Bartlett (2006) discuss public relations' struggle for academic legitimacy, but refer to public relations as a business discipline. Yet, in 1990, 12 of the 14 Australian university courses with a public relations component were taught in humanities, social science or communication schools and only two courses were offered in business schools (Quarles & Potts, 1990).

2.2. *Professionalisation and education*

The public relations industry grew significantly between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, with a four-fold increase in the number of consultancies (Turnbull, 2010; Turner, Bonner, & Marshall, 2000) and the increasing institutionalisation of public relations within government (Ward, 2003). A PRIA-commissioned report concluded in 1985 that the Australian industry was at a critical point, noting the industry's rapid growth, increase in tertiary qualifications, and low salary levels in comparison with other business functions ('PR industry at the crossroads', 1985). In the same year, the PRIA introduced a number of strategies to establish the professional standing of the public relations industry; the regulation of education and training, along with more rigorous membership requirements, which mandated tertiary qualifications for professional-grade membership, were designed to address concerns about the field's poor reputation. Education plays a significant role in processes of professionalisation 'by contributing to the legitimising process of social acceptance and by helping to define public relations expertise and the scope of its operation' (Pieccka & L'Etang, 2006, p. 276).

¹ These archives are two files relating to PRIA accreditation rounds (1992–1996 [File 1] and 1997–2001 [File 2]). They belong to Marjorie Anderson, NEC chair throughout the 1990s, and are on loan to the author.

² University. (1993, April 26). 'Application for chair in public relations' [Letter to UK university, copied to Anderson]. Anderson archives (File 1).

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