ABSTRACT

This paper offers a historical perspective of public relations education, focusing on its role as a professionalisation strategy for a professional association. I consider the ways in which the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) attempted to regulate public relations education in the context of the massification and marketisation of higher education (Maras, 2006) and expansion and feminisation of the industry (Fitch & Third, 2010) through the introduction of national accreditation program (1991—6). According to the criteria: ‘Accreditation…is an important milestone in the development of a vocation into a profession’, justifying the need for ‘a properly constituted, controlled and industry-supported education system’ (PRIA, 1991, p. 2).

In addition to PRIA national and state archives, this study draws on the personal archives of the PRIA’s National Education Committee’s (NEC) chair. The NEC archives have not previously been studied, and Australian public relations in the 1970s—90s is poorly documented (Turner, 2002). I adopt a critical approach, recognising the limits of archival research and avoiding a linear, progressive narrative, and attempt to ground my analysis in its historical context (L’Etang, 2008). Prior to national accreditation in 1991, accreditation consisted of PRIA state council endorsement of courses, with little consistency. The NEC adapted the Public Relations Society of America accreditation guidelines and assessed applications. By January 1992, five undergraduate and three postgraduate courses were accredited and five submissions were rejected or universities were asked for additional information.

I identify four themes in the analysis of correspondence between universities, state councils and the NEC. The first theme is a contest over the constitution of public relations knowledge. For practitioners, ‘expertise is…constituted and transmitted through practice’ (Pieczka, 2002, p. 321) and the institutionalisation of public relations in the academy is problematic. One course developed by PRIA members was rejected because it lacked communication theory and a broad ‘intellectual base’; however, the state council argued it was ‘a fine example of an educational institution meeting the requirements of a growing profession’. The second theme is a resistance to what was perceived as a national or academic agenda. A council accused the NEC of ‘pirating’ public relations education, blaming ‘the academics’. The third theme is a resistance to what was perceived as an industry-focused, anti-academic agenda, with a university complaining the NEC was condemning public relations: ‘to remain technically based and…never achieve
true...professional status.' The fourth theme is the emergent disciplinary status of public relations; most courses were offered in arts or communication faculties in vocationally-oriented, second-tier institutions. In the early 1990s, the NEC lobbied for public relations to be included in academic conferences, supported scholarly research and demanded senior lecturers oversee public relations courses; they rejected journalism, marketing and advertising as suitable course content, seeking to confirm public relations’ disciplinary status.

University education was integral to the field’s professional legitimacy, and the NEC mandated ongoing industry engagement and significant practitioner involvement. Ironically, the close industry links undermined public relations’ academic legitimacy (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). Tensions between universities, PRIA state councils, the PRIA’s College of Fellows and the NEC emerged, along with contested and diverging understandings of public relations education, as either suitable training to meet industry requirements or as a theoretically informed academic discipline offering a broad generalist education. It is significant the following accreditation round (1997—2001) saw the national accreditation process partially devolved back to state-based practitioner committees, which emphasised the need for business and management training, in contrast to demands for communication and public relations theory and a broad, liberal education in the first round (1991—6).

This study has presented public relations education as a contested field for an industry seeking to regulate education to address concerns over its professional legitimacy. The industry’s anxiety around its professional standing led to its significant involvement in public relations education. The study suggests ‘the institutional structures and intellectual flows’ (Flew, 2010, p. 6) in 1991—that is, between the internal PRIA structures, which exacerbated state-national tensions, and the significant growth in vocational courses in higher education, which changed the relationship between the industry and the academy and led to a stratification in the academic standing of education institutions and courses—inform contemporary public relations education discourse in Australia. More research in specific historical contexts is needed to understand how structural developments contributed to the growth of public relations education and the significance for the field’s professional and academic legitimacy.

References


Note: These archives are two files of correspondence regarding PRIA accreditation rounds (1991—6 and 1997—2001). They belong to Marjorie Anderson, NEC chair throughout the 1990s, and are on loan to the author.