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

Abstract

This paper investigates the Public Relations Institute of Australia’s introduction in 1991 of a national accreditation program 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.

Keywords

Public relations; education; history; accreditation; curriculum; Australia
Professionalisation and public relations education: Industry accreditation of Australian university courses in the early 1990s

Introduction

This paper offers a historical perspective on Australian public relations education, focusing on the introduction in 1991 of a national accreditation program 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 program, individual PRIA state councils were primarily responsible for endorsing or accrediting courses. The shift to a national program 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 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. 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 program 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.

**Background**

*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

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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.
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

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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).

**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 legitimizing process of social acceptance and by helping to define public relations expertise and the scope of its operation’ (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2006, p. 276).
Until 1991, PRIA did not adopt a systematic approach to the regulation of public relations education. Prior to the introduction of a national program, PRIA state councils had considerable control over the endorsement or ‘accreditation’ of university courses, but the criteria varied between states. One state council announced a course, developed in conjunction with PRIA state council members, was approved by the state council and subsequently received national council endorsement (‘W.A.I.T. course ready to run from 1985’, 1984; ‘W.A.I.T. degree a step closer’, 1985). Another state council ‘signed a legal agreement with [university] providing them with exclusive endorsement [to offer short courses] for two years’. In response, David Russell, the inaugural NEC chair, wrote to the state council president highlighting the need for ‘uniform national standards’ in public relations education and in ‘virtually every field of PRIA activity’; expressing concern over the lack of consultation with the NEC; and pointing out that another institution in the same state already offered an accredited course and was keen to introduce short courses. In 1989, the PRIA National Council commissioned David Potts, who was then working as a consultant in Sydney, and Jan Quarles, an American academic who was teaching at RMIT in Melbourne, to conduct a benchmark investigation into public relations education in Australia. The report, *Public relations education in Australia* (Quarles & Potts, 1990), investigated fourteen university courses with a public relations component and developed accreditation criteria adapted from the Public Relations Society of America guidelines. In introducing national accreditation in 1991, the PRIA aimed to standardise industry accreditation of university courses as part of a broader professionalisation drive, noting ‘[a]ccreditation … is an important milestone

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in the development of a vocation into a profession’ and justifying the need for ‘a properly constituted, controlled and industry-supported education system’ (PRIA, 1991, p. 2).

The NEC was created by the PRIA national council in 1990 to establish PRIA’s jurisdiction over public relations education, training and professional development activities in Australia.5 The NEC tasks were: developing university course accreditation guidelines; updating reading lists for practitioner examinations; establishing guidelines for both student internships and continuing professional education requirements; and determining criteria for educator qualifications.6 However, university accreditation was the NEC’s primary focus in 1991 and 1992. Inaugural NEC members included Potts; Quarles; educators: Lyn Maciver and Gael Walker at University of Technology, Sydney; and practitioners: Susan Grigson; the inaugural chair, David Russell; and Greg Ray, the then-PRIA national president in an ex-officio role. By June 1991, Russell, Ray and Grigson were no longer on the NEC and Anderson, a consultant with Sydney-based Anderson Knight and the PRIA (NSW) state president, had replaced Russell as chair.7 Therefore, at the beginning of the first national accreditation round in July 1991, the NEC consisted of two practitioners (Anderson and Potts) and three educators (Quarles, Maciver and Walker). Another consultant, Sheila O’Sullivan, who worked at Turnbull Fox Phillips in Melbourne, was invited to join the committee on 6 September 1991, making the members evenly split between practitioners and educators. It is perhaps surprising that all members of a national committee lived and worked in only two cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Adelaide-based practitioner, Jennifer

5 There is a reference to Potts’ membership of an earlier PRIA national education committee (1985–1991) (see PRIA, 2012) but the evidence in the Anderson archives confirms the NEC was a newly formed committee in 1990.
Richardson, joined the committee the following year and participated in the assessment of some late accreditation applications.8

PRIA course accreditation

The NEC introduced standardised criteria, ‘Guidelines for the accreditation of courses in public relations at Australian tertiary institutions’ (PRIA, 1991), based on recommendations in the PRIA-commissioned report into Australian public relations education (Quarles & Potts, 1990). These criteria acknowledged the previously inconsistent accreditation of public relations courses and were explicit about the role of education as ‘the means to pass [the public relations body of knowledge] on to future generations of practitioners (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 46; PRIA, 1991, p. 2). Anderson noted the PRIA must regulate public relations education and training ‘because of the shysters that “float” through with their one day PR certificates!’9

Accreditation was designed for university courses that offered a major in either public relations or organisational communication.

The accreditation guidelines stated ‘no more than 25 per cent of a total course at undergraduate level should be in professional communication/public relations subjects’, with the remainder of the course made up of ‘areas which support the professional core’ (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 48; PRIA, 1991, p. 4). These supporting areas could include a range of established disciplines, in order to provide a broad education: ‘aimed at developing the intellectual and problem-solving capacities of students as well as giving a sound understanding of the theory and practice of communication and public relations’ (PRIA, 1991, p. 3). The criteria acknowledged that ‘arts and sciences remain a strong basis for helping practitioners to understand an

8 Richardson, J. (1991, December 17). [Letter to Anderson, no subject]. Anderson archives (File 1). A similar letter was received from Gae Synnott, an educator based in Western Australia, accepting an invitation to be the NEC state representative. However, Synnott does not appear to have participated in assessing applications in the first accreditation round.

increasingly complex world and their role as communicators, and for developing critical faculties’ (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 48; PRIA, 1991, p. 3). However, the criteria also noted practitioner support for ‘business subjects’ and for ‘English literature, including writing skills’ (PRIA, 1991, pp. 3, 4). Indeed, Quarles and Potts recommended diverse support studies so that ‘students have the freedom to choose that course which most matches their career goals’ (1990, p. 47). In this first accreditation round, therefore, the guidelines appear to emphasise the value of a generalist university-level education in any discipline, alongside public relations units. The NEC assessed applications based primarily on the content in the ‘professional core’ of public relations units that made up only a quarter of the degree. In addition to a focus on communication theory, the professional units were expected to cover public relations history; public relations theory and its relationship to communication theories; theories of organisational communication (including management theory); functional elements (goal-setting, research, program planning, message preparation, budgeting, evaluation); and management activities (Quarles & Potts, 1990; PRIA, 1991). A practical component, such as an internship or work experience, was mandatory ‘late in the course when students can take most advantage of their professional studies’ (PRIA, 1991, p. 4).

As NEC chair, Anderson wrote to universities teaching public relations on 24 July 1991 inviting them to apply for accreditation by 15 September. The NEC members met on 2 November 1991, the day after the PRIA Annual General Meeting, in Sydney to discuss the applications. The chair wrote to universities that submitted by the September deadline on 6

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10 I note a small difference in the Quarles and Potts report, which stated ‘practitioners generally view English, including writing skills, to be central to support studies’ (1990, p. 48) whereas the PRIA (1991) criteria referred specifically to English literature. However, the comments regarding practitioner support for business subjects as suitable support studies are identical.

December 1991 to advise whether their application for PRIA accreditation had been successful; to request further information or clarification; or to reject their application. A second deadline of 16 December was offered to universities that could not meet the first, but universities could submit at any point and some submitted courses for accreditation as late as 1995. However, regardless of the timing of the submission, all courses – if successful – were accredited until the end of December 1996. In January 1992, there were eight accredited degrees at five institutions in four states. These degrees included five undergraduate courses (mostly Bachelor of Arts with majors in public relations, communication or applied communication) and three postgraduate courses (two graduate diplomas in communication and communication management and a Master in Applied Science [Communication Management]). Five courses were rejected or the university was asked to provide additional information. In May 1992, the chair sought greater involvement of state-based representatives in public relations education, as the NEC shifted its focus to professional development. The onus for ongoing industry liaison with universities offering accredited courses therefore became the remit of the local NEC representative along with the PRIA state council. By November 1992, 16 public relations courses were accredited.

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Research design

The introduction of a national accreditation program by the industry body in 1991 was an attempt to standardise industry expectations across Australia of what a university public relations course should offer. Analysis of the Anderson archives therefore offers insights into how PRIA constituted public relations knowledge and attempted to regulate the transmission of that knowledge. The Anderson archives contain evidence of the deliberations and concerns of various committees within the professional association and between universities and PRIA in relation to the emergence and establishment of national standards for public relations education in Australia in the 1990s. However, I acknowledge the significant scholarship around the instability of archives and archival research (see, for instance, Cook, 2001; Ketelaar, 2001; King, 2012; and Steedman, 2000), and that public relations ‘history is, to some extent, written around available data, and the reader is thus reliant upon the historian to be open about the limitations of sources and access’ (L’Etang, 2008, p. 326). The archives consist of two files labelled 2007–8, despite their contents dating from approximately 1990–1996 (File 1) and 1997–2001 (File 2). These two files record – albeit with gaps – the first decade of the NEC; they are not a complete record of the NEC’s deliberations in the 1990s, but contain correspondence to and from the chair of that committee. I report in this paper my findings in relation to File 1, which contains letters, facsimiles, meeting minutes, file notes, memoranda, speech notes, draft media releases, promotional copy, and handwritten notes. The documents are unnumbered and not in date order, although some are filed in sections by university name. The narrative I construct incorporates secondary sources and research into PRIA state and national archives to validate findings that emerged from my analysis.
Scope and limitations

This paper does not offer an analysis of the Australian public relations curriculum; its focus is industry expectations of public relations education. The findings reported in this paper emerge from a larger research project investigating the development of Australian public relations education. I am familiar with contemporary accreditation processes from educator and professional association perspectives as a former member of a PRIA state council (2005–8) and the NEC (2008–11).

As my focus is PRIA processes and the interaction between PRIA and universities, I chose not to identify individual academics or universities in my analysis; permission to use the Anderson archives was granted on this basis. One limitation is that I cannot compare the reactions of individual state councils and universities to the introduction of a national accreditation program. I identify national presidents and NEC members as this information is readily available.

Findings

Public relations knowledge

Analysis of the Anderson archives offers unique insights into the interactions between the PRIA’s various state and national committees and councils and the university sector over the constitution of public relations knowledge. The shift in responsibility for the accreditation of university courses from PRIA state councils to a national committee inevitably led to tension, as state councils and the NEC had different expectations of the role of education. This finding confirms other studies identifying divergent understandings of professionalism are held by educators, scholars, practitioners and professional associations (van Ruler, 2005) and for practitioners, public relations ‘expertise is … constituted and transmitted in practice’ (Pieczka,
According to the accreditation guidelines, the ideal curriculum offered both a broad education as well as expertise in public relations, suggesting university-level public relations education served to not only introduce students to the ‘theory and practice’ of public relations, but also to develop their ‘intellectual and problem-solving’ skills through a well-rounded, general education.

Despite strong links with its state council and practitioner involvement in the course, one university’s business course was rejected on the grounds the course did not teach communication theory.\(^{16}\) The university had existing state council accreditation and enlisted the council’s support to lobby the NEC. The state president wrote to the NEC chair ‘to voice our wholehearted support for the continued accreditation of the [university] undergraduate public relations course’:

> I believe that [university] has provided a fine example of an educational institution meeting the requirements of a growing profession by becoming involved in the profession at the practitioner level. Senior practitioners have been closely associated with the development of the course over the years and have remained in touch both on an Institute consultancy basis and as lecturers since it started.

> The original course was written by Fellows and Members of the Institute and over the years the course has continued to be developed by Fellows and Members of the Institute.\(^{17}\)

In later correspondence, the state president wrote: ‘members of the State Council were incredulous that accreditation had still not been granted after this length of time’ and ‘this is the very type of issue which will undermine public relations in [state] if all official affairs are handed over to National Council under a proposed rationalisation program.’\(^{18}\) In a facsimile cover sheet sent with the letter, the state president wrote an informal but revealing note

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\(^{17}\) PRIA state president. (1992, August 17). ‘[University name] accreditation’ [Letter with facsimile coversheet to Anderson]. Anderson archives (File 1).

confirming some state council members perceived: ‘the academics responsible for accreditation have pirated the issue and are setting it up based upon their own opinions and attitudes’ and threatening the end of state council support for ‘nationalisation.’ The state council perceived a clear distinction between practitioner-driven state councils and the ‘academic’ concerns of the NEC. The issue was resolved, following a telephone discussion between Quarles, as an NEC representative, and the university course coordinator confirming ‘the extent to which communication theory is taught’, and that ‘it is dispersed across subjects’.19 The course was subsequently accredited.20 However, the correspondence between the state council and the NEC reveals considerable tensions between their respective roles and involvement in public relations education and their understandings of the public relations curriculum.

*Industry expectations and experience*

The Anderson archives offer evidence of collaborative partnerships between various universities and the NEC. Universities with accredited courses were expected to liaise regularly with their course advisory committees, which included senior PRIA members, as well as their state councils. However, universities and industry representatives sometimes differed in their understanding of the role of education. The NEC chair requested further information about one university submission from a practitioner, who was a member of the course advisory committee and state council, which had accredited the course in 1989. The practitioner provided an account of their ‘frustrating’ interaction with the university, noting: ‘a lack of liaison’ with industry and course ‘changes take place according to University/campus resources, rather than

industry/profession needs.21 The NEC chair rejected the submission, stating the course ‘needs to be strengthened’ by the addition of further professional and public relations-specific units, and referred the university to the Quarles and Potts (1990) report.22

Another concern for the NEC was the industry experience of academic staff running public relations courses. According to the accreditation criteria, the course coordinator should be ‘a fulltime academic’ with ‘experience in public relations practice as well as an appropriate degree’ (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 50; PRIA, 1991, p. 6). An emphasis on practical skills and industry-related activity was prominent as academic staff were encouraged to ‘continue their professional development – by work in practice, by consulting’; in addition, ‘engagement of part time teaching staff from among practitioners … [is] encouraged’ (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 50; PRIA, 1991, p. 6). In 1990, the typical educator had ‘experience as a practitioner and a B.A. in communications or a related discipline’ (Quarles & Potts, 1990, p. 32).

The NEC’s education agenda did not have universal industry support. The general manager of Turnbull Fox Phillips, a public relations consultancy, wrote to Anderson in July 1991 following a presentation on PRIA’s plans for accrediting university courses to complain on behalf of several industry representatives:

We had all attended in the hope of offering our experience and time to prepare case studies, present lectures and discuss how work experience and intern programs might be successfully incorporated into learning programs.

We all felt though, that there was another agenda being driven by academic members of the group … we didn’t raise our issues.23

The general manager offered assistance to develop public relations education. There is no record of Anderson’s response, but O’Sullivan, a Turnbull Fox Phillips consultant, was appointed to the NEC in September 1991. However, the NEC’s course accreditation continued to concern senior practitioners. For example, in 1994 the PRIA College of Fellows expressed concern at national board meetings about the ‘quality and suitability for industry of graduates of accredited university courses’, noting technical institute ‘courses should be considered for accreditation as many graduates of those courses have proved themselves suitable for employment in the industry.’

It appears the Fellows preferred courses to have a stronger training or vocational focus.

Public relations curriculum

Understandings of the content of a ‘suitable’ public relations course varied between the NEC, some PRIA state councils and universities. In the example discussed earlier, the PRIA state council and the university business school disputed the need for communication theory although it was prescribed in the criteria. The NEC rejected courses, or particular units within the professional core, if they perceived they were too focused on media, marketing, journalism or advertising rather than specifically public relations or organisational communication. In another example, the NEC rejected a regional university’s course on the grounds it did ‘not cover sufficient areas of public relations to warrant accreditation’. In response, the course coordinator, a state council member, complained about the NEC’s metropolitan bias and

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requested the NEC ‘provide a definitive ruling on what constitutes a public relations subject.’

The course coordinator added:

> Your decision not to provide accreditation suggests that the future for public relations is for it to remain technically based rather than seeking new ways to heighten professional standing and knowledge. Until this occurs practitioners will continue to be seen as skills based para-professionals and who will never achieve true communications management and professional status. Communication policy, cross cultural communications and environmental communicative issues are just part of the wider picture for the public relations professional. Until PRIA can look beyond itself, shed its traditional ties and address issues of international importance, graduates and practitioners will have short-sighted and fatalistic career aspirations.

In 1993, the university submitted a revised Bachelor of Arts (Communication) for accreditation, following extensive industry liaison and the formation of a new university faculty, the Department of Communication; the new course was accredited as in the opinion of one NEC member, it offered a ‘sufficiently well balanced program on both communications and public relations theory and practice as well as extending the students into a range of other academic studies.’

The NEC requested universities increase their public relations library holdings or update textbooks and course reading lists with more contemporary examples, and often recommended specific books. However, Quarles and Potts (1990) noted a dearth of Australian textbooks and the market was dominated by US textbooks. Indeed, the few Australian textbooks were mostly written by practitioners and senior PRIA members (see, for instance, Potts [1976]; Quarles and Rowlings [1993]); and Tymson and Sherman [1986], and Walker catalogued the PRIA’s Golden Target Awards, making these available for educators to use as local case studies (‘PRIA’s

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commitment to excellence’, 1992; Walker, 1991). NEC members therefore played an active role in recommending and developing Australian teaching resources.

Academic legitimacy

A significant theme is the status of public relations within the academy. Other scholars have noted public relations struggled to be recognised as a discipline in the Australian academy, partly due to its strong industry links and vocational focus (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006) or encroachment from other fields (McKie & Hunt, 1999). In rejecting courses they perceived too marketing or media-focussed, the NEC sought to establish the disciplinary boundaries of public relations. The NEC accreditation processes in relation to the first accreditation round point to an understanding of public relations education as more than simply vocational training or the replication of existing industry practices. For example, Quarles outlined her response to three course submissions to the NEC chair, foregrounding the need for ‘a critical approach’, an ‘emphasis on critique of practice,’ and rejecting one course as it lacked ‘public relations theory and critical views of practice and management information.’

The archives contain some evidence of the NEC’s attempts to promote public relations within the academy, lobbying for dedicated public relations sessions at Australian Communication Association (ACA) academic conferences; identifying the need for a scholarly journal; and re-establishing a network for public relations educators. The NEC sought funding to support more research into education and an academic journal, but was not successful. However, the PRIA national council funded the inaugural newsletter for public relations educators (edited by Walker) and hosted an educators’ breakfast forum at their annual conference in 1991. NEC members were prominent at the ACA conference in 1991; Anderson presented a session on the

29Quarles, J. (1992, August 26). ‘Communication studies’ [Facsimile to Anderson]. Anderson archives (File 1).
strategic direction for public relations education, the new accreditation program and the Quarles and Potts (1990) report recommendations.

The NEC expected the course coordinator to hold a senior position within the academic institution, although this requirement was not stated explicitly in the PRIA (1991) accreditation guidelines. One university submission was rejected pending a senior appointment. A state council member sat on the selection panel and confirmed to the NEC chair the successful candidate had both ‘excellent academic qualifications’ and ‘practical experience in a range of public relations areas including community relations, media relations and government relations.’ The next day, the course was accredited.

Implications for Australian public relations education

Emerging from this analysis is an understanding of NEC expectations of the ideal public relations curriculum in the early 1990s. Submissions were not successful if the NEC perceived the courses to lack communication theory, senior staff with public relations expertise, or sufficient focus on public relations. In rejecting certain content – for example, advertising and journalism units – NEC members confirmed their understanding of public relations as distinct from other communication studies courses. These decisions can be understood as an attempt to define, or at least, establish the disciplinary boundaries of public relations. For the NEC, a suitable public relations course was underpinned by communication theory, offered breadth and an interdisciplinary approach to study, and a professional core of public relations units. The professional core included ‘functional’ units drawn from industry practice, such as message

preparation, goal setting and evaluation. The NEC’s demand for public relations-specific subjects rather than general media or other communication subjects suggests a disciplinary struggle over what constitutes public relations knowledge.

However, my analysis reveals considerable resistance to both the institutionalisation of public relations knowledge and the involvement of the PRIA’s national, rather than state-based, education committee, in public relations education. For instance, the rejection by the NEC of an accreditation submission for a course developed and supported by senior practitioners astounded one state council, whose members subsequently accused the NEC of ‘pirating’ education. From the perspective of one university, the NEC was failing to develop public relations into anything more than a technical field or para-profession due to their focus on functional aspects. The contest over education points to the difficulty in combining professional practice and academic legitimacy in a relatively new field of study.

At the same time, industry experience was perceived as integral to public relations education and the transmission of public relations knowledge. Expectations that public relations educators would have industry experience and universities would continue to liaise closely with practitioners and PRIA members as a condition of accreditation suggest that, from the point of view of the industry, practice significantly informed and underpinned public relations knowledge. Universities were required to demonstrate industry involvement in the development of courses and ongoing industry engagement. Mandatory work experience and internships served to socialise students into industry practice and graduates of accredited courses were not immediately eligible for professional-grade PRIA membership, suggesting that from the PRIA perspective university education on its own was insufficient preparation for professional practice.
Conclusion

Through its establishment of the NEC and the introduction of a national accreditation program, PRIA sought a significant role in the development and regulation of public relations education. Although university-level education was recognised as necessary for professional status, for some practitioners the institutionalisation of public relations knowledge in the academy was problematic. Tensions between some universities, PRIA state councils, the PRIA College of Fellows and the NEC emerged, along with contested understandings of the role of public relations education, as either suitable training to meet industry requirements or as an academic discipline offering a broad generalist education and the development of analytical skills. In particular, the emphasis on communication and public relations theory rather than functional skills appeared to concern some senior PRIA members, perhaps, as Pieczka (2002) concluded, because they understood public relations expertise as constituted in practice. In addition, both Quarles and Potts (1990) and PRIA (1991) acknowledged that practitioners preferred business subjects to other disciplines. However, public relations courses were mostly located within humanities or communication rather than business schools.

This paper offers new insights into the development of Australian public relations education. The first insight relates to expectations regarding the role of public relations education in the early 1990s. The NEC perceived the value of university education in broader terms than simply the transmission of public relations knowledge, derived from and constituted in public relations practice. The second insight acknowledges resistance from some practitioners to the shift from non-standardised, state-based endorsement of university courses to a national accreditation program. The resistance can be understood as a contest over the constitution of public relations knowledge. The third insight suggests the significance of the growth of communication studies in Australia for public relations. Public relations was one of a number of
professional majors offered in communication studies, and the 1991 accreditation guidelines required the inclusion of communication theory in accredited courses. The final insight concerns the disciplinary status of public relations. The analysis revealed emerging disciplinary boundaries as the NEC sought to determine suitable content for industry-accredited courses. However, some PRIA members perceived their public relations knowledge and expertise was marginalised by the success of public relations in the academy. It is precisely this ‘contest’, which offers rich insights into the interaction between industry and the academy, and the constitution of public relations knowledge.

This paper has presented public relations education as a contested field for an industry seeking to regulate education to address concerns over its professional legitimacy. These findings offer important insights into the interaction between the public relations industry and higher education and the constitution of ‘professional knowledge’ in the early 1990s in an understudied but significant period in public relations education. Many of the themes identified in this study continue to 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 constitution of public relations knowledge.

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