

Professionalising public relations:

A history of Australian public relations education, 1985–1999

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University in

2014.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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Catherine Fitch

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with public relations education in Australia. It focuses on 1985–1999, as in these years there was significant growth in education and the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) sought greater regulation and jurisdiction over public relations activity. Existing historical scholarship focuses on the evolution of the Australian public relations industry towards professional status, and tertiary education is perceived to confirm the field's professional standing. In contrast, I consider the development of public relations education in a broader social context and the involvement of the PRIA in tertiary education.

This thesis aims to investigate the role of public relations education in the professionalisation of public relations in Australia. It uses a qualitative approach, combining archival research, focusing on the previously unstudied archives of the PRIA's National Education Committee, and interviews with practitioners and educators. This thesis provides an analysis of how, and why, the PRIA sought to regulate public relations education. The use of historical sociology allows the findings to be interpreted in relation to broader societal structures and institutional processes, such as the expansion of the Australian higher education sector, the PRIA's preoccupation with professional status, and the increase in female practitioners.

In developing a critical account of Australian public relations education, this thesis argues that higher education was pivotal to the PRIA's professional project. The findings confirm the constitution of public relations knowledge and its institutionalisation in the Australian academy were dynamic and contested, and that the PRIA's professional drive informed its attempts to regulate the transmission of that knowledge. A significant finding

is the ambivalent attitudes towards gender and education, given the increasing number of female graduates. These findings contribute a unique Australian perspective to the global public relations scholarship on history and professionalisation and allow a reconceptualisation of the development of public relations in Australia.

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the interviews, originally conducted to investigate gender and public relations, in order to examine more fully the development of public relations education in Australia.

A final note on the referencing style in this thesis: I have chosen to use the APA (6th ed.) style as it is common in my discipline. Given the historical nature of the research reported in this thesis, I use footnotes for content and archival source material.

I also thank my family: Damian, Hannah, and Tobyn for their unstinting support and indeed interest in this project.

Publications and Presentations Resulting from this Research

I developed the ideas in this thesis through publications and conference presentations during my candidature. To date, I have published four journal articles based on thesis chapters and emerging findings and, in addition, co-authored a journal article and a book chapter that informed the research reported in this thesis. The Murdoch University policy allows for co-authored work (see *Graduate Research Degree Regulations*, Clause 81.3) to contribute to dissertations. I have also presented conference papers based on various chapters and emerging findings during the course of my candidature, and note below where these presentations have undergone peer review.

Refereed journal articles

- Fitch, K. (in press). Perceptions of public relations education, 1985–1999. *Public Relations Inquiry*. doi:10.1177/2046147X14535398 This article draws on the findings reported in Chapter 6.
- Fitch, K. (2014). Professionalisation and public relations education: Industry accreditation of Australian university courses in the early 1990s. *Public Relations Review* [Special issue: Public relations history 2014]. Advance online publication. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.02.015 This article draws on the findings reported in Chapter 4.
- Fitch, K. (2013a). A disciplinary perspective: The internationalization of Australian public relations education. *Journal of Studies in International Education* [Special Issue: Internationalization of the curriculum in context—Disciplinary perspectives and possibilities], 17(2), 136–147. doi:10.1177/1028315312474898 This article draws

on parts of Chapter 2 and the findings relating to international public relations education in Asia reported in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Fitch, K. (2011). Developing professionals: Student experiences of a real-client project.

Higher Education Research and Development, 30(4), 491–503.

doi:10.1080/07294360.2010.527930 This article investigates professionalism in relation to public relations education and informed Chapter 2.

Fitch, K., & Third, A. (2010). Working girls: Revisiting the gendering of public relations.

Prism, 7(4). Retrieved from

http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/Praxis/Files/Gender/Fitch_Third.pdf This article investigated the impact of gender in the Australian public relations industry, and informed sections of Chapters 1, 2, and 6.

Refereed book chapter

Fitch, K., & Third, A. (2014). Feminization and professionalization in the Australian public relations industry. In C. Daymon & K. Demetrious (Eds.), *Gender and public relations: Critical perspectives on voice, image and identity* (pp. 247–268).

Abingdon, England: Routledge. This book chapter draws on interviews with six participants regarding their experiences in, and perceptions of, the public relations industry. In Chapter 6, I analyse these interviews, in conjunction with interviews with eight other participants, to investigate public relations education.

Refereed conference presentations

Fitch, K. (2013, June). “But Pottsie is a God”: Researching Australian public relations history using interviews. Paper presented at the meeting of International

Communication Association, London, England. This paper reflects on the limitations of interview research methodology, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Non-refereed conference presentations (abstract peer review)

Fitch, K. (2013, June). Perceptions of Australian public relations education in the 1990s.

Paper presented at the meeting of International Association for Media and Communication Research, Dublin, Eire. This paper draws on the findings reported in Chapter 6.

Fitch, K. (2013, June). Professionalisation and public relations education: Investigating the national industry accreditation of university courses in Australia. In T. Watson & T. Theofilou (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International History of Public Relations Conference 2013* (pp. 102–113). Bournemouth, England: Bournemouth University.

Retrieved from

<http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/files/2010/11/IHPRC-2013->

[Proceedings-Revised.pdf](http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/files/2010/11/IHPRC-2013-Proceedings-Revised.pdf) This paper draws on the findings reported in Chapter 4.

Fitch, K. (2013, June). An Asian history of Australian public relations: Exploring the impact of globalisation. In D. Verčič, A. T. Verčič, K. Sriramesh, & J. White (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 20th International Public Relations Symposium Bledcom*

(pp. 141–146). Ljubljana, Slovenia: Pristop. Retrieved from <http://www.pdf-archive.com/2014/04/25/bledcom-zbornik2013-v7/bledcom-zbornik2013-v7.pdf>

This paper investigates a sub-theme, Australian public relations activity in Asia, which emerged in my analysis of PRIA archives and participant interviews.

Fitch, K. (2012, November). An investigation of the Public Relations Institute of

Australia's accreditation of university courses in the 1990s. In R. Crawford (Chair),

PR and the past in local and international contexts: A roundtable symposium.

Symposium conducted at University Technology Sydney (UTS), Sydney, Australia.

This paper draws on the findings reported in Chapter 4.

List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACA	Australian Communication Association (from 1994, ANZCA)
AJA	Australian Journalists Association (from 1992, MEAA)
APBC	Australian Progressive Business College
ANZCA	Australia and New Zealand Communication Association
CAE	College of Advanced Education
CAMSA	Council of Australian Marketing Service Associations
CPE	Continuing professional education
CSU	Charles Sturt University (established in 1989, out of merger of Mitchell College of Advanced Education and other institutes of higher education)
ECU	Edith Cowan University
FPRIA	Fellow of the Public Relations Institute of Australia
IABC	International Association of Business Communicators
IAP2	International Association of Public Participation
IHPRC	International History of Public Relations Conference
IPR	Institute of Public Relations
IPRA	International Public Relations Association
MEAA	Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance
MPRIA	Member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia
NEC	National Education Committee
NSW	State of New South Wales
PRIA	Public Relations Institute of Australia
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America

QIT	Queensland Institute of Technology (from 1989, Queensland University of Technology; from 1990, QUT)
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (granted university status in 1992)
QLD	State of Queensland
QUT	Queensland University of Technology (established 1989 out of the merger of QIT and various colleges of advanced education; from 1990 known as QUT)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education Institute
UK	United Kingdom
UNSW	University of New South Wales
US	United States
UTS	University of Technology Sydney (since 1988; formerly New South Wales Institute of Technology)
UWA	University of Western Australia
VIC	State of Victoria
WA	State of Western Australia
WACAE	Western Australian College of Advanced Education (from 1991, Edith Cowan University)
WAIT	Western Australian Institute of Technology (from 1987, Curtin University of Technology)

Introduction

One of my students on placement in a public relations consultancy was sent “undercover” to participate in a community activist meeting. The student was expected to report back to the consultancy whose client was the subject of the meeting. This act troubled me, as it placed the student in a vulnerable situation, was deceptive, and was possibly in breach of the Public Relations Institute of Australia’s (PRIA) Code of Ethics. As I pondered possible responses, I realised this incident reveals the complexity of the relationship between the public relations industry and the university sector. Internships and work experience opportunities are essential for industry accreditation. It had taken years to negotiate placements for students from my university in this particular consultancy and some graduates had been offered employment as a result. In a subsequent conversation, the student told me they felt unable to refuse the request to attend the meeting, as they too hoped to be offered employment. This incident helped crystallise some ideas around the different priorities of public relations practitioners and educators and the gap between the professional rhetoric of the PRIA, the activities of some of its members and other public relations practitioners, and the public relations curriculum. In turn, these thoughts led me to question the relationship between the public relations industry and the higher education sector. These concerns led to the research reported in this thesis.

I have taught public relations in the university sector since 2001. I started as a part-time tutor and associate lecturer, while working as a public relations consultant in arts and government sectors, before I gained fulltime employment in 2003 as a lecturer in Murdoch University’s mass communication program. In 2006, I developed a public relations major as part of a new Bachelor of Communication, which subsequently gained PRIA

accreditation. I received university and national teaching awards for my focus on work-integrated learning in the public relations curriculum. This degree is now taught in four countries: Australia, Dubai, Malaysia, and Singapore. I have researched and published on various topics related to public relations education: work-integrated learning (Fitch, 2011); transnational and international education (Fitch, 2013a; Fitch & Desai, 2012; Fitch & Surma, 2006); and teaching ethics (Fitch, 2012, 2013b). The significance for the research reported in this thesis is that I have worked as a public relations educator for more than a decade and reflected on the challenges of teaching public relations in a dynamic higher education environment. I bring this experience to the research reported in this thesis.

Although it is not the focus of this research, I am interested in a critical pedagogy for public relations that identifies links between teaching and practice, challenges hegemonic thinking, and connects knowledge to power. Critical public relations scholars have identified that public relations pedagogy is underpinned by a conduit model around the transmission of knowledge (Willis & McKie, 2011), adopts an instrumentalist view of knowledge resulting in technocratic and managerial approaches (Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison, 2011), and lacks conceptual frameworks for challenging disciplinary frameworks (Motion & Burgess, 2014). Motion and Burgess, for example, seek ways to teach public relations that “challenge and critique understandings of public relations as a media-oriented discipline in which spin and persuasion are deployed to benefit the dominant coalition” (2014, p. 1). Somerville, Purcell, and Morrison (2011) identify that a preoccupation with industry relevance informs public relations textbooks and education; while they recognise the need for vocational content, they also call for greater emphasis on social, political, cultural, and ethical contexts.

The PRIA (2012d, 2013b) accredits 27 undergraduate and 25 postgraduate public relations courses at 18 universities in Australia. Education is integral to the professional project, defining the domain and body of knowledge and regulating the membership of the professional association (L'Etang, 2008a). I am interested in exploring the links between education and practice. This thesis therefore offers an historical perspective on the development of public relations, focusing on the institutionalisation of Australian public relations education in universities and the introduction of a standardised, national accreditation program by the PRIA in 1991. This historical research is significant because it seeks to understand how certain discourses around public relations education became dominant and how particular social and historical contexts contributed to the constitution of a public relations body of knowledge in Australia. Such understandings are necessary in order to develop a critical pedagogy for public relations.

The aim of this thesis is thus to investigate the role of public relations education in the professionalisation of public relations in Australia. In particular, this thesis considers the role of the professional association, the PRIA, through the formal accreditation of university courses in the 1990s, in defining industry expectations of education. It is worth noting that until now, the PRIA's accreditation criteria for university courses have had only minor modifications since the introduction of national accreditation in 1991. Using an historical sociological approach foregrounding professionalisation, knowledge and, to a lesser extent, gender, I consider in this thesis the PRIA's role in public relations education in Australia in the late 1980s and 1990s, when student and course numbers increased significantly. From the perspective of the PRIA, education was a key professionalisation strategy for the public relations industry. However, as I demonstrate in this thesis, public

relations education is underpinned by a contested body of knowledge variously drawn from practitioner and industry understandings, which tend to be functionalist and framed within a professional discourse, and from diverse academic perspectives, which may adopt, or (less commonly) contest, understandings drawn from practitioner perspectives. For example, understandings of ethical practice in industry are orientated towards the client, profit, and competitive advantage yet public relations educators may choose to highlight the broader social role of public relations (Breit & Demetrious, 2010; Fitch, 2011, 2013a). Examining this “contest” over the role of public relations education and the public relations body of knowledge offers a nuanced and dynamic account of the development of public relations and public relations education in Australia. An historical perspective allows insights into how particular discourses of Australian public relations emerged and became prominent. It reveals the significance of contemporary perspectives and discussions around public relations education.

I argue in this thesis public relations remains dominated by a paradigm that is functionalist and normative and this paradigm continues to frame expectations of public relations education. As my interest is more broadly public relations in society, I adopt a critical approach to challenge existing assumptions and mainstream understandings by exploring the tensions between education, practice, and society. Drawing on PRIA archives, including previously unstudied archives of the PRIA’s National Education Committee (NEC), and interviews with practitioners and educators, many of whom were involved in establishing and developing public relations as a course of study in Australian higher education in the 1980s and 1990s, I present an historical account of the development of Australian public relations education. I develop a critical history by analysing the

contexts in which particular discourses of public relations emerged to understand how certain paradigms and discourses, particularly in relation to education, remain prominent. The dominant paradigm for public relations, which emerged out of large-scale industry funded studies in the US and later Anglo-American countries, has had a significant impact on public relations scholarship and teaching across the globe. I argue that standard historical narratives, shaped by this paradigm, have led to an uncritical and somewhat unproblematic understanding of public relations, presenting its steady progress towards professional status and ignoring historical contexts.

This thesis offers an alternative to these narratives by considering the impact of societal and structural factors on the institutionalisation of public relations in the academy. I thus investigate public relations education in Australia in the late 1980s and 1990s and its role as a professionalisation strategy for the professional association, that is, as “an instrument for the public relations occupation to achieve [professional] status” (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2006, p. 276). I explore the contests around the constitution of public relations knowledge in the Australian context and consider unique political and social factors that influenced public relations education and defined the public relations curriculum. These factors include the massification and increasing vocationalisation and marketisation of Australian higher education, rivalry with co-emerging fields of study and practice, and the professionalisation drive of the professional association. Emerging from this thesis is evidence that the growth in public relations education in Australia served both the industry’s professionalisation drive and the needs of a rapidly expanding higher education sector. That is, I argue the growth of public relations education in the Australian higher education sector in the late 1980s and 1990s must be understood in terms of its historical

context. As my research is embedded in the archives of the professional association and reconstructed and retrospective memories of educators and practitioners, many of whom were active in the professional association, a critical approach is required to avoid adopting the ideals of the professional project. In addition, the findings reported in this thesis raise broader questions around the constitution of public relations knowledge and the impact of particular paradigms and research methodologies on the theoretical development of public relations.

Thesis Structure

The first two chapters examine public relations through analysis of professional narratives found in PRIA and Australian newspaper archives and through recent public relations scholarship. Chapter 1 considers the rise of public relations and its preoccupation with professionalism. It draws on recent scholarship of public relations historiography to understand how professional discourses position public relations, and indeed, traditional public relations scholarship, somewhat uncritically as a corporate function, framing the field as progressive and linear while failing to embed these understandings of public relations in particular social and political contexts.

Chapter 2 focuses on public relations education. It develops the themes identified in Chapter 1, including the tension between industry and the academy around the role and functions of public relations education, and documents the emergence of public relations as a course of study in Australian higher education. It identifies a number of local, national, and global factors, which have influenced its development. These include competition and rivalry with other emerging fields of study, the influence of industry, through formal processes such as the introduction of accreditation and less formally through the

involvement of practitioners and former practitioners in the development and teaching of public relations courses. Significant changes in Australian higher education in recent decades have resulted in an increased focus on vocational courses, offering opportunities for the growth of public relations education and changing the relationship between industry and the academy. This chapter establishes the need to explore the involvement of the professional association in public relations education in the higher education sector.

Chapter 3 outlines the design of the research reported in this thesis. In order to investigate the ways in which the PRIA understood the role of, and attempted to regulate, public relations education in Australia, I conducted research in PRIA archives, focusing on the PRIA's introduction of a national accreditation program for university courses. I also interviewed 14 practitioners and educators regarding their experiences of the public relations industry and public relations education, with a particular focus on the 1980s and 1990s. I combine analysis of interviews with archival research, offering an in-depth, thematic analysis within an historical narrative in order to convey the complex shifts and challenges to the emergence and subsequent development of public relations as a course of study in higher education, and, in tandem, the constitution of public relations knowledge. I draw on themes and sub-themes, which emerge from my analysis, to determine the various priorities for, and expectations of, public relations education. These themes broadly relate to the relationship between education and professionalisation and the constitution of public relations knowledge. I identify limitations of archival and interview research and discuss how I address reliability and validity in this qualitative study.

Having established the context for the introduction and growth of public relations as a university course in Chapters 1 and 2, and the design of the research reported in this

thesis in Chapter 3, the next three chapters draw on primary research to investigate the experiences, concerns, and priorities of educators, practitioners, and the professional association. Chapters 4 and 5 analyse the personal archives of the NEC chair of the 1990s, Marjorie Anderson, in order to understand the interaction between the professional association and universities in relation to the industry accreditation of university courses. Analysis of this interaction reveals diverse understandings of the role of public relations education and the public relations curriculum. The NEC, established in 1990, was responsible for the inaugural national accreditation of university courses. Anderson chaired the committee for a decade and oversaw two five-year accreditation rounds in that time. Although endorsement and even accreditation of public relations courses had occurred prior to 1990, this “accreditation” varied from state to state and had not been standardised throughout Australia, despite PRIA national council endorsement of state decisions. Analysis of the correspondence between the chair, NEC members, state council members, and universities, file notes, and subcommittee reports reveals the priorities and concerns of the professional association, and, in particular, their expectations of public relations education. Given the unique access to these previously unstudied archives, this in-depth analysis is covered in two chapters. Chapter 4 examines the correspondence in relation to the introduction of the PRIA’s first national accreditation program in 1991 and the first accreditation round (1992–1996). The initial responsibility for assessing accreditation applications in the second round (1997–2001) was devolved to state-based committees, resulting in a shift in PRIA’s priorities for public relations education. Chapter 5 reports the findings in relation to the analysis of archives relating to the second round.

Chapter 6 draws on 14 in-depth interviews conducted in 2010–2012 with educators and practitioners. Interview participants include members of the PRIA’s NEC in the 1990s, members of state councils who worked closely with individual universities in developing public relations courses, practitioners who taught part-time in universities, and educators, course directors, and school deans who established and developed public relations as a course of study in their institutions. Analysis of these interviews offers diverse insights into the priorities and concerns that informed the development of public relations education in Australia.

The final chapter discusses the implications of these findings for understanding both public relations and public relations education. I explore the implications of the preoccupation with professional status for public relations education and how practitioners’ expectations and understandings of the constitution of public relations expertise and knowledge have played out in the interaction between industry and the academy. Throughout this study, I have endeavoured to ensure that my findings promote a stronger understanding of public relations and the role of education. In offering new perspectives on the development of public relations, I challenge mainstream understandings and encourage educators to redefine the scope and aims of tertiary public relations education beyond meeting industry needs. I also reflect on the significance of my findings, the research design, and the implications for future research.