

**“I THOUGHT IT WAS ALL ABOUT WINING AND DINING,
PARTIES AND CELEBRITIES” – AN INSIGHT INTO FINAL
YEAR PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS’ PERCEPTION
OF THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY**

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ABSTRACT

Are students prepared for the day to day challenges of the communications industry by the time they are completing their final year? This research addresses students pre-and frequently misconceptions as they embark on their studies, contrasted to their understanding of the discipline after having completed all core units of the public relations stream. By focusing on students enrolled in a final year, compulsory placement unit, this study investigates the role industry placements play in providing students with a realistic understanding of their chosen discipline before entering the employment market. This in turn re-opens the debate about the importance of work integrated learning opportunities and particularly placement units as an integral element of a communications degree.

Keywords: work integrated learning, work placement, public relations, cross campus, graduate attributes, offshore programs

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies (Xavier et al., 2006b, Bowen, 2003) have confirmed what most academics have been long aware of: a proportion of students enrol in a public relations degree with a limited understanding of what the industry actually entails, as well as with a strong focus on promotion and event management. These misconception, or limited understanding, are not unique to the public relations industry. However, they are representing a serious challenge for academics and the industry as the discipline is maturing and actively working towards a move away from the distorted, glamour-focused representation and negative connotation in the mainstream media.

The research dilemma

This study was triggered by two recent key developments: First, in 2008 the closely aligned marketing stream of the Bachelor of Commerce degree at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, dropped its marketing placement unit in favour of an in class campaign unit. The Unit Coordinator reported ongoing challenges, a high work load and logistical issues as the key reasons. As Unit Coordinator of the compulsory PR placement unit I can wholeheartedly agree that the coordination of the unit and constant support for students is very resource intensive. However, observing the transformation some students undergo as the result of an industry placement may arguably be worth the *investment*. Secondly, in late 2009 the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) published a much anticipated revision of its Course Accreditation Guidelines (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2009), which strongly emphasise the need for work integrated learning (WIL). However, the previous placement requirement for accredited universities had been removed and replaced with a *recommended* internship. As a result the only other PRIA accredited degree in Western Australia immediately removed their placement unit and replaced it with a *masterclass* model, making the internship component only available to a handful of high achievers. This move was modelled on an approach by non accredited degrees, which has been very successful and appears to represent a much *safer* and less resource intensive option. With a course accreditation review due in September 2009 the PR teaching team saw the need to review the effectiveness and central role of the placement unit. Consequently, this research had two aims:

- a) To investigate the effectiveness of the PR Major at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, in providing students with a realistic understanding of the public relations industry – and how this perception might have changed since they first embarked on their studies.
- b) To particularly investigate the role and benefit of the final year, compulsory PR placement unit in providing student with realistic expectations for a graduate position.

LITERATURE SUMMARY AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Higher Education institutions are under pressure to provide the industry with *job ready* graduates, which require minimum training and fully understand what is required of them in the so-called *real world*. Institutions who can demonstrate that their learning outcomes reflect the skills and attributes desired by the industry will in return be equipped with a powerful marketing advantage as their graduates are more likely to be employed (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2005).

The PR degree is positioned as an industry focused, practical course, which prepares students for a smooth transition into an exciting, fast pace and ever-changing industry. PR students are currently required to cover a minimum of six (Bachelor of Arts) or eight (Bachelor of Commerce) public relations units, ranging from technical writing skills and campaign planning to critical thinking and academic writing. All units are industry focused and draw on real life case studies, industry speakers and other work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities. Commerce students' need to complete a Law unit, which is essentially focused on and structured around the Australian legal environment.

According to Kerr (2005), public relations employers are particularly looking for graduates with real life and relevant work experience. In comparison to traditional professions, such as law and medicine, public relations is still in its infancy. Consequently, there is increased global pressure to ensure the professionalisation of the industry, which ultimately emphasises the need for stronger and more successful partnerships between academia and practitioners. Australian universities introduced dedicated PR majors as early as 1970, followed by a comprehensive accreditation process, introduced by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) in 1991

(Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2008). In addition to an industry based *advisory committee*, a professional internship, practicum or work experience component is currently a core criterion for accreditation. As a result, over two hundred public relations students, across five campuses, actively seek out industry placement opportunities every semester. The PRIA accreditation guidelines are currently under review, however, the compulsory industry placement has long been perceived as a key characteristic and marketing advantage for Curtin's PR degree.

PR393 Professional Practice

The Professional Placement unit is a compulsory requirement for all public relations students at Curtin University of Technology, and a crucial element of the current accreditation of the PR Major by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The final year unit is positioned as a *stepping stone* for a successful career in the industry and an opportunity to put into practice what has been learned during previous years. A large number of students retrospectively refers to the unit as (one of) the best unit(s) of their degree (Curtin University of Technology, 2007, Curtin University of Technology, 2008), thereby supporting Bates' (2004) findings, describing placements as the "most significant part of [the] undergraduate program".

The Crucial Role Of Industry Placements

Practical and compulsory work placements are not new to higher education and have long formed a crucial element of the curriculum, particularly in health and education. However, while work integrated learning is becoming increasingly popular across disciplines, Kerr and Proud (2005) discovered that *real life* experience and industry placements as part of higher education training are particularly emphasised by the public relations industry, even more so than in other communication disciplines, such as advertising. And they are popular: Bates (2004) states that students often refer to placements as the most significant part of their undergraduate program. In comparison to traditional professions, such as law and medicine, public relations is still in its infancy. Consequently, there is increased global pressure to ensure the professionalisation of the industry, which ultimately emphasises the need for stronger and more successful partnerships between academia and practitioners; and realistic expectations of placement students and graduates, who ultimately act as *ambassadors* of their university when they enter the industry.

In its 2002 report, the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) identified eight core Graduate Skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organisation, self-management, learning and technology. However, research by Rundle-Thiele et al. (2005) into Australian-based marketing courses indicated that merely 3% covered all eight DEST skills in their curriculum. Curtin's PR Major has recently undergone an extensive review and remapping exercise as part of Curtin's Curriculum 2010 (C2010) process. Centred around Curtin's recently re-defined nine Graduate Attributes (Curtin University of Technology, 2006), which are closely aligned with the DEST skills, curriculums are being streamlined, with a focus on *hands on* learning experiences and industry relevant learning outcomes. As final year unit RP393 Professional Practice is an industry-based capstone unit, which should at least theoretically embrace all nine Graduate Attributes. Students are provided with an opportunity to apply skills and theories acquired during earlier stages of their studies in a real life setting. This starts with the students' responsibility to find their own placement, which gives them early exposure to job searching and effective self-presentation skills (Green et al., 2005).

Higher Education institutions are under pressure to provide the industry with *job ready* graduates, which require minimum training and fully understand what is required of them in the so-called *real world*. Institutions who can demonstrate that their learning outcomes reflect the skills and attributes desired by the industry, will in return be equipped with a powerful marketing advantage as their graduates are more likely to be employed (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2005). According to Kerr and Proud (2005), public relations employers are particularly looking for graduates with real life and relevant work experience.

Although work integrated learning (WIL), or Work-Based Learning (WBL) (Reeders, 2000), has become a buzzword in education circles over the past years, the concept itself it is definitely not new. The potentials and benefits of WIL been recognised since the early 20th century, predominantly in Northern America and Europe (Jancauskas et al. , 1999). However, as Australian universities find themselves under growing pressure to produce *job ready* graduates, WIL is now being recognised as integral to the curriculum (Green et al., 2005). However, work integrated learning

does not require a placement component and can be easily facilitated within the classroom environment.

Counteracting Students' Misconceptions

A number of studies (Xavier et al., 2006b, Bowen, 2003) have confirmed what most academics have been long aware of: a large number of students enrol in a public relations degree with only a limited understanding of what the industry actually entails, including a strong focus on promotion and event management. However, these studies were conducted early to mid way through the public relations degree. To date there is a lack of research into how these expectations and understanding of the industry may have changed by the time students are preparing for graduation, and the role industry placements may play in this development.

These misconceptions, or limited understanding, are not unique to the public relations industry. However, they are representing a serious challenge for academics and the industry as the discipline is maturing and actively working towards a move away from the distorted, glamour-focused representation and negative connotation in the mainstream media.

Furthermore, by running units and even identical courses across campuses we often fail to acknowledge that the understanding of disciplines, particularly relatively new subjects such as public relations, may differ between locations. Whilst offshore units are modelled on the onshore *blueprint*, the social standing, responsibilities and training of public relations professionals may vary drastically between countries. Consequently, the assumption that at the end of their degree students across locations will be equally prepared for a graduate position is inherently flawed – as is the assumption that students' placement experience (i.e. PR393 Professional Practice) will be of comparable quality.

PR393 Professional Practice is run simultaneously across five campuses: Bentley (Perth, Western Australia), Mauritius, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Sarawak, both in Malaysia. Every year, over 200 final year PR students venture out to spend a minimum of 20 days full-time -or part-time equivalent- in a public relations, communication or (corporate) communications department, or consultancy. However,

whilst students follow an identical unit outline, the quality of their placement experience varies greatly, depending on personal motivation and enthusiasm, the suitability of the placement organisation and arguably the placement location itself.

A professional industry placement provides students with an opportunity to gain a *glimpse of the real world*, whilst still benefiting from the relative safety and support provided by the university. It offers them an opportunity to apply their professional skills and knowledge in an authentic environment, as well as to re-adjust and adapt their expectations and industry perception before entering the graduate employment market. Consequently, internships provide academics and researchers with a limited, but nevertheless valuable, insight into students' level of industry preparedness and potential skills gaps prior to graduation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, a survey design was implemented to capture students' perception of the industry. An online questionnaire was compiled which asked a number of quantitative and qualitative questions about students' insight into the industry and how their perception had changed since enrolling into the course. Data were collected from final year public relations students as they had just completed their compulsory industry placement and in many cases were getting ready to graduate.

The sample for this study consisted of 89 students, due to a relatively small cohort in semester 1 2009. 54 valid responses were gathered across four campuses. Participation was anonymous and voluntary as per the university's ethics standards for research on current students.

A number of limitations impact the findings of this study. Firstly, the study is limited to students enrolled in the PR393 Professional Placement unit in semester 1 2009. Furthermore, the study was conducted at only one university in Australia, which means findings will not be representative of other universities or public relations courses. However, this study builds on previous research into graduate perceptions (Bowen, 2003, Xavier et al., 2006b, Xavier et al., 2006a) and consequently may provide some useful insights for other institutions or related fields of study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Valid responses were equally split between Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Arts (Mass Communication) students, with the vast majority of Mass Communication students (72%) being based at one or Curtin's offshore campuses. Students from five campuses (Perth, Mauritius, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur) participated in the study. Despite the international focus of this study, 63% of responses came from onshore, i.e. Perth based, students. 70% of respondents were in the third year of their degree, 28% were part-time or double-degree students in their fourth year and one respondent was in his or her fifth year of study.

Improved understanding of the PR industry

Students overwhelmingly (95.9%) agreed that the placement unit had improved their understanding of the industry. Many commented on the benefits of being able to implement theory in a real life setting: "Before I just knew about the theory now I can see how it works", explained one student. This is an interesting statement in itself, considering that all public relations units in this degree are highly practice orientated, including the involvement of *real life clients* in most of them. However, comments suggest that students nevertheless fail to make the connection between university and theory on one hand, and industry and practice on the other until they find themselves in the placement situation.

A number of students were already working in the industry (predominantly in related marketing communications roles) but nevertheless enjoyed the opportunity to gain a glimpse into another organisation or area of practice (e.g. consultancy). Being able to shadow practitioners and learn from industry mentors was perceived as particularly valuable.

As part of the unit students were required to reflect on their experience in a group blog. A number of respondents commented that it was particularly this exchange of insights that broadened their understanding of the PR industry and its many facets: "By reading through the reflective blog, [...], I could see the PR industry is huge".

According to respondents the placement also fulfilled another very important function by preparing students for the job application process and taking away the fear of having to leave the perceived *safety* of the university environment. 89.9% agreed that

the placement had provided them with a better understanding of what would be expected of them as a graduate and entry level job seeker: “I was unsure of where I was heading. Now, I am more confident, I've worked in the field, I can handle it”, explained one respondent. Reassuringly, a number of students had detected gaps in their knowledge or weaknesses in their writing, which they were now keen to improve on before they entered the industry on a full time basis. Many of these students may have previously described lecturer feedback as “too harsh”, but had now been able to benefit from real life benchmarking.

However, respondents did not ultimately agree with the next statement, that the placement had *changed* their perception of the PR industry (44.9% - neither agree nor disagree). Particularly Perth-based students stated that they already had a very good understanding of what the PR industry would be like after three or more years of study. As one respondent explained: “I always knew that the PR industry is fast paced and dynamic, so [the placement] didn't really change that perception, it just solidified it.” Offshore students were more inclined to agree that the placement had changed their perception (82%), which poses an interesting challenge: Either students felt inclined to provide the answer they felt was expected of them, or offshore units, despite being modelled on the onshore program, might not provide the same level of industry insight and relevance.

Some respondents were surprised about the less central role the media release played in day to day industry practice: “Through the internship I've learnt theres [sic] more to pr than mere writing.” A number of students also commented on the fact that they got a better understanding of how public relations fits within a larger marketing or communications department, or even the organisation as a whole, being responsible for far more than simply media relations. There were also a number of rather frustrated respondents who were disappointed with the lack of creativity and previously unaware of the less glamorous side of public relations, involving monotonous task, research and background preparations.

Changing perceptions

Students were asked to think back to their first year at university and to recall what had initially motivated them to enrol in a PR Major. Most students were relatively

sincere: “To be honest I really didn't have a clear idea of what Public Relations was.” As expected, many students referred to the glamorous perception of public relations as being “all about wining and dining, parties, celebrities, events etc”. “Socialising”, “events management” and “being good with people” were mentioned frequently. Particularly amongst offshore students there appeared to be some confusion between PR and the role as a “professional host” or hotel receptionist. A number of respondents also stated that they were enticed by the promise to manage an organisation's reputation and crises.

Three years later respondents reported that they had come to realise “how diverse this field is”. Despite some disappointment due to the less glamorous day to day practice, many students were positively surprised about how much they enjoyed the background planning and unexpected wide scope of the industry, stating areas like sponsorship, internal and community relations. Many had also underestimated the strong focus on writing skills, particularly in entry level positions. This focus on writing and more technical tasks had disappointed some of those students that enrolled in the PR degree with very high, top level strategy focused expectations. As one student explains: “Most positions are much more technician based than strategy based, this is disappointing. I know the importance of the technician aspect of PR, but at times feel it is more like secretarial work which may not really require a university degree.” Overall, these comments support Bowen's (2003) findings that students (mis)conceptions of the public relations industry may change over the course of their studies. The placement unit appears to play a very powerful role in this.

“If you do not enjoy reading or writing, do not take up PR”

Finally, students were asked what advice they would give to a first year public relations student. Alongside encouragement for their peers to research public relations thoroughly before embarking on a degree with the perception that this would be “an easy or *fluffy* option”, two very clear themes emerged: First of all, students emphasised the need to be up to date with current affairs and different news channels – traditional or new. Secondly, a large number of respondents emphasised the need for more placements and industry involvement, rather than delaying industry experience until the final semester: “Do as much work experience as you can get, and don't be afraid to put yourself out there.” Another student emphasised: “Do prac ALL

THE WAY THROUGH not just the last year- it really gives you that extra edge". Networking and industry involvement also featured strongly, as well as the need to be proactive and develop your skills, particularly in writing.

Overall, respondents reported to have obtained a greater recognition of multitasking, time management, continuous professional development, the need for adaptability and the fast pace the industry is operating in. From a teaching perspective it is reassuring to see that the placement had not essentially changed students' understanding of the industry during this late stage of their studies, but had rather clarified and solidified previous knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This research confirmed that students continue to enter their PR degree with a distorted perception, focused on glamorous elements, hosting of parties or top level crisis management. These need to be addressed by both academics and the wider PR community. This study merely provides a brief snapshot into graduates' perception of the PR industry. However, respondents' overwhelming endorsement of the industry placement and its role in preparing them for graduate positions reopens the debate around the role of compulsory placements as integral part of arguably any communications degree. The revision of the PRIA Accreditation Guidelines may result in an influx in accredited courses, however, for those universities that are prepared to invest in placement units there may be a number of long term benefits, such as graduate ready students, improved industry relationships and ultimately a clear marketing advantage for the course itself.

Further, longitudinal research should be conducted, effectively tracking students' perception on entry, graduation and after their first years in the industry. Insights gained would be valuable for the industry, academics and particularly for PRIA, in gauging how the PR industry is maturing.

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