Great Expectations: Understanding Undergraduate Students' Perspectives on Public Relations Careers

Xavier, R. (1), Mehta, A.M. (2) and Larkin, I.K. (3)
(1) Queensland University of Technology, QLD 4000,
r.xavier@qut.edu.au
(2) Queensland University of Technology, QLD 4000,
a.mehta@qut.edu.au
(3) Queensland University of Technology, QLD 4000,
ik.larkin@qut.edu.au

Abstract

International research suggests that student expectations differ from the realities of courses and careers in public relations (Bowen, 2003; Storto, 1990). Bowen's (2003) 'I thought it would be more glamorous' study confirmed that students expected to be trained in publicity and public appearances moreso than skills desired by employers such as critical thinking and business skills, and showed limited understanding of non-media specialities in public relations. This limited understanding of public relations has been attributed to the portrayal of public relations in entertainment and by journalists in media articles (Spicer, 1993). Although the gap between perception and reality is not unique to public relations, it has the potential to affect the continued development of public relations as a management function. The employability of graduates must also be considered, especially in light of significant gaps found between desired and actual outcomes of entry level graduates in the opinions of practitioners and educators (Neff, Walker, Smith & Creedon, 1999).

This study explores the Australian perspective through a survey of more than 350 undergraduate students to identify their preferences for positions and workplace environments. The survey was administered in a first year public relations principles unit across four consecutive semesters in 2004 and 2005. The findings are significant to the development of teaching and learning approaches to engage public relations students and to prepare them for the diversity of careers in public relations.

Keywords: public relations, students, career expectations.

Literature Review

A number of factors influence the decision-making process adopted by students when selecting university majors and individual courses. In turn, these factors shape student expectations for academic courses and also careers. This study is specifically interested in the factors that influence student selection of public relations as a course of study and the expectations held by such students. A number of studies based in the United States have been undertaken to guide course design and student learning outcomes, allowing for stronger links between students, industry groups and the academy. However, this area of study has received minimal treatment in Australia with the exception of work undertaken by Anderson (1999), Kirkby (2006), and Holt and Sheehan (2004). As a result, this study has three goals, which have implications for teaching and learning strategies in Australia: 1) to examine student expectations of career practice areas, 2) to identify student expectations of the organisational location of future careers, and 3) to identify factors that influence student selection of public relations courses.

The selection of courses and careers is influenced by a range of sources including family, location of universities, school guidance counsellors, and career interests. Student expectations for courses in public relations are

influenced by two main sources: impressions from the mass media and interpersonal sources such as influential students (Bowen, 2003). Bowen (2003) argues that the mass media's negative portrayal of public relations influenced the ideas of students. Spicer (1993) found that the views held by journalists of the public relations profession influenced how they referred to public relations in print media articles. The journalists' negative framing of public relations served 'as a behavioural indicator of a reporter's attitudes toward the public relations profession' (Spicer, 1993: 50). Spicer (1993) found that journalists suggested public relations was associated with the manipulation of truth under several content themes including distraction, hype and schmooze.

Students are interested in the career opportunities that follow from university courses. Through his role as the former chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, Kerr (1995) suggests that universities have become the port of entry for growing professions, which emphasises the importance of curricula design and the student experience in preparing future professionals. As such, the expectations of employers has also become a consideration for educators and students. Employers are looking for students that have writing skills (Stacks et al, 1999; Motschall & Najor, 2002), communication skills (Stacks et al, 1999; Kirkby, 2006; Trapper, 2000; Van Leuven, 1999), and practical experience (Stacks et al, 1999; Van Leuven, 1999). The US Port of Entry (1999) study confirmed that educators and practitioners agreed upon desired skill sets and Holt and Sheehan (2004) encourage public relations educators to be cognisant of the changing needs of industry and the resultant implications for courses (Holt & Sheehan, 2004).

Showing some agreement with international skill sets is the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) criteria for public relations course accreditation, a process aimed to ensure workplace readiness of graduates. PRIA accreditation requires that courses build student understanding of contemporary public relations, communication theory, research procedures and skills in communication problem solving (Anderson, 1999). Although the skills and attributes that increase student employability should be integrated into public relations courses (Holt & Sheehan, 2004), universities are mandated to provide learning opportunities that extend beyond discipline-based knowledge. According to research undertaken by The Australian Council of Educational Research, universities value skills in communication, problem solving, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, ethics, commitment to lifelong learning, and familiarity with technology (Trapper, 2000).

Both the academe and industry recognise that students need to be prepared for entry level as well as senior roles in public relations practice. Van Leuven (1999) argues that entry-level graduates want to advance into management roles and therefore require a stronger grasp of issues management, public affairs management, conflict resolution and strategic planning (Van Leuven, 1999). Supporting the call for educators to prepare students for lifetime careers, Turk (1989) encourages the incorporation of management skills into teaching programs. Despite general recognition of its importance, a study of undergraduate programs showed limited integration of management skills in public relations courses (Kinnick & Cameron, 1994).

Although educators and professionals recognise the need for and expect students to possess skills in management and public relations practice, what expectations do students have for courses and careers in public relations?

In comparison to how practitioners and educators accept and understand their profession, studies have shown that public relations students held several preconceptions or misconceptions of their field. Before a guest lecture to a public relations class, Storto (1990) administered a questionnaire to identify student expectations for their future careers. She found that the number one reason students wanted to work in public relations was because they liked working with people and making them happy and considered public relations as a glamorous business. More than a decade later, Bowen's (2003) study found that students thought public relations would be more glamorous and lacked knowledge about the importance of management, relationship-building and research skills.

Instead, students believed that public relations comprised mainly media relations and special event planning (Bowen, 2003). Participants in her study said, 'I thought it was mainly special events and party planning' (Bowen, 2003: 204). Sparks (1998) agrees that public relations is often viewed as a series of publicity tactics. When asked about the importance of management knowledge in public relations, Bowen's (2003) study revealed students identified minimal association between public relations and management. Further investigation showed that some students regard the management link as important to their knowledge while others believed it added additional stress to their planned careers (Bowen, 2003).

Building on this lack of awareness of management skills, Bowen (2003) found that students also had limited awareness and understanding of non-media public relations specialities such as financial, medical and not for profit public relations. The second phase of Bowen's (2003) research, which involved the administration of a survey after a teaching period, showed increased regard for the diversity of career options in public relations. One participant said, 'this career offers many different industries….It confirmed my choice of major, I feel positive' (Bowen, 2003: 206). A recent study conducted by Andsager and Hurst (2005) asked students to reflect on the gender orientation of particular specialities in public relations. Female-oriented areas of practice were beauty/fashion, travel/tourism, and not for profit public relations whereas male-oriented areas of practice were sports, industrial, financial, and high-tech public relations. Neutral areas of practice were entertainment, health, food and beverage, and international public relations (Andsager & Hust, 2005).

Armed with this understanding of the US perspective on student expectations, this study is interested in applying and extending Bowen's (2003) research to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: In what area of public relations practice do Australian students prefer to work?

RQ2: In what type of organisation do Australian public relations students prefer to work?

RQ3: What are the key sources of influence for Australian public relations students in selecting their course?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, a survey design was implemented to capture the perspectives of current public relations students at a large metropolitan university. A questionnaire was compiled which posed a series of questions about the students' preferred areas of practice, their preferred place of work, that is as an internal practitioner or as an external consultant,

and the information sources used by public relations students to help them select their course of study.

Data were collected from first year undergraduate students enrolled in the entry or principles course in public relations across four consecutive semesters in 2004 and 2005. The questionnaire was administered in the lecture period following a series of lectures on public relations careers and different areas of practice to ensure that students had some exposure to their different options.

The sample for this research consisted of more than 800 students and 363 valid responses were gathered across the four semesters. Similar to Bowen's (2003) study, participating students included those who were only taking the introductory subject in public relations as well as those who were undertaking a sequence of study in the area. Participation was anonymous and voluntary as per the University's ethics standard for research on current students. Results from the questionnaire were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for relevant variables with chi-square analyses conducted where appropriate.

A number of limitations impact the findings of this study. The questionnaire was limited to a finite number of questions in order to fit into learning and teaching requirements for the course and therefore did not explore all possible career outcomes for public relations students. The study was conducted at only one university and only with undergraduate students so the results may not be representative of all universities, especially those that involve distance and/or post graduates. As the survey was undertaken early in the course of study for the students, the results capture their impressions of public relations and career options when they enter the course. As Bowen (2003) found, these perceptions may change over the course of further study in public relations once students are exposed to a wider range of options.

Results

In what area of Public Relations Practice do Australian Students prefer to work?

Students were asked to identify their preferred area of practice from a range of options. Students could select from five specific practice areas drawn from the public relations literature or specify other options in writing (see Table 1 for full details). The preferred areas of practice within the group were publicity and promotion and event management. Approximately 20 percent of the sample was undecided.

Area of practice	Frequency	Percent
Publicity and promotion	**109**	**32.7**
Event management	80	**24**
Undecided at this point	68	**20.4**
Issues and crisis Mgt	23	**7**
Investor relations	14	**4.2**
Govt relations & lobbying	10	**3**
Other	29	**8.7**
Total	333	**100**

Table 1: Preferred areas of public relations practice

In what type of organisation do Australian Students prefer to work?

Given the diversity of public relations careers within Australia, students were asked to identify whether they preferred to work within an organisation or externally through a consultancy role. Inhouse public relations was preferred over consultancy positions with approximately 57 percent of the sample selecting this option. Internal preferences were also ranked in terms of the size and scope of the organisation with large organisations being preferred over small to medium organisations and both corporate positions being preferred over government positions (see Table 2 for full details).

Type of organisation	Frequency	Percent
In-house with a large organisation	**126**	**37.1**
Undecided at this point	97	**28.5**
Consultancy	51	**15.0**
In-house with a small to medium organisation	49	**14.4**
In-house with government	17	**5.0**
Total	**340**	**100.0**

Table 2: Preferred organisational type

Further analysis of the preferred organisational type data suggested a statistical relationship with the preferred area of practice (χ^2 (24, N = 318) = 84.965, p < .001). Table 3 outlines the preference in area of practice in rank order for three organisational types. Students who preferred to work in consultancy rated publicity and promotion as their preferred area of practice, whereas this ranked third and second for inhouse positions with large organisations and inhouse positions with small to medium organisations respectively. Government relations and lobbying was the least preferred option for those seeking to work in consultancy and in house with large organisations and the second least preferred option for those seeking to work in house with small to medium organisations.

Consultancy	In-house with large organisation	In-house position with small to medium organisation
Publicity and promotion	Investor relations	Event management
Investor relations	Issues & crisis mgt	Publicity and promotion
Issues & crisis mgt	Publicity & promotion	Investor relations
Event management	Event management	Govt relations & lobbying
Govt relations & Lobbying	Govt relations & Lobbying	Issues and crisis Mgt

Table 3: Preferred area of practice rankings within organisation type

What are the key sources of influence for Australian Public Relations Students?

As Bowen (2003) had raised the issue of sources of influence for American students selecting to study public relations, this study wanted to identify whether similar or different influences were operating in Australia. Students were asked to identify the strongest influencing factor on their choice to study public relations. The strongest influence was written information on public relations which had been available either through mass media or more specialised media. Because the class included students who were taking the introductory public relations unit as part of a study program in a non-public relations area, 17 percent of the students identified that they were studying public relations because it was required. This could have been part of an

advertising, marketing or mass communication course offered throughout the university. The traditional influences of knowing someone working or studying in public relations or school counsellor recommendations rated at very low levels across the sample.

Influencing Factor	Frequency	Percent
Read information on public relations	**139**	**40.1**
Required part of course	64	**18.4**
Watched television or movies portraying public relations	28	**8.1**
Someone working in the industry	16	**4.6**
Someone studying public relations	11	**3.2**
School counsellor recommendation	5	**1.4**
Other	84	**24.2**
Total	**347**	**100.0**

Table 4: Influencing factors on the study of public relations

Approximately 53 percent of students who were influenced by someone working in the industry selected event management as their preferred area of practice, whereas only 20 percent of those influenced by their school counsellor selected this area of practice for their preference. Those influenced by their school counsellor were more likely to select publicity and promotion. Publicity and promotion was also selected as the preferred area of practice for 64 percent of students who knew someone who was studying public relations. Those mostly influenced by television shows and movies selected publicity and promotion and event management as their preferred areas of practice and those influenced by reading information on public relations selected publicity and promotion as their preferred option. No statistical relationship was found between the influencing factor and preferred area of practice (χ^2 (36, N = 325) = 49.268, p > .05), however the chi-square test for significance was affected by a high level of small cell counts.

Influencing Factor	Preferred Area of Practice (1)	Preferred Area of Practice (2)
Someone working in the industry	Event management (58.0%)	Publicity and promotion (6.7%); Issues and crisis mgt (6.7%) Investor relations (6.7%)
School counsellor recommendation	Publicity and promotion (60.0%)	Event management (20.0%), Issues and crisis management (20.0%)
Read information on public relations	Publicity and promotion (29.4%)	Event management (19.8%)
Watched TV or movies portraying public relations	Publicity and promotion (40.7%)	Event management (37.0%)
Someone studying public relations	Publicity and promotion (63.6%)	Issues and crisis management (9.1%), Investor relations (9.1%)

Table 5: Preferred area of practice rankings by influencing factor

Discussion

The findings of this study are significant to members of the academy who are tasked with developing courses and curricula for a growing yet poorly defined profession. Public relations educators have a responsibility to their academic discipline to ensure students are well versed in relevant theoretical domains that inform the discipline. Educators also face pressure to engage with industry and to incorporate the knowledge and skills outlined by industry as important for new graduates. Thirdly, educators face pressure to meet student expectations for particular courses, helping students prepare for the diversity of careers available to them. And lastly, in the face of governmental and administrative review, educators must ensure their courses are viable.

Similar to Bowen's (2003) US based study, this study confirmed the strong student interest in publicity and promotion and event management. As both these areas have tangible outcomes and are often represented in media portrayals of public relations, these findings were predictable. Student interest in publicity and promotion shows high correlation with recent research on the key priorities of Australian communication professionals working in both inhouse and consultancy roles (Mercer Report, 2004). Student interest in event management also matches with the third most important priority of inhouse communication practitioners (Mercer Report, 2004). The challenge for educators with these findings is how to engage students through a range of subjects that focus on the broader applications of public relations theory, supported by either a liberal arts, communication or business education framework where the relevance to career outcomes is not apparent to the students.

The mass media's influence on prospective students was confirmed in this study, however, there was a stronger influence by written media as opposed to television or movies. Despite the often negative portrayal of public relations in the mass media, students were still selecting the courses, however, many other students are probably being deterred from taking up the profession. The academy, industry bodies and practising professionals can capitalise on this influence by accepting as many opportunities as possible in a broad range of media outlets to discuss the diversity of careers in public relations and the opportunities on offer to intending students.

The researchers had expected a higher level of influence from school counsellors given their importance in university course selection (Whiteley & Cameron, 1998) and from those working in the industry. As the university of focus has a high proportion of non-school leavers as students, the school counsellor influence may have been reduced in this sample. However, further investigation is needed to ascertain the low impact of practising professionals. Better opportunities may need to be created for them to engage with potential students as they represent a valuable resource in demonstrating the promising career options available. The inclusion of a range of professionals representing different demographics would be useful to help engage with the widely varied cohort of intending students.

The strong preference by students for work with large organisations raises a challenge for many public relations education providers in Australia whose local markets are mostly characterised by consultancy and small to medium size organisations. While graduates can and do find employment throughout Australia and internationally, employers in local markets provide a considerable level of employment each year for new graduates. A second interesting finding was the low priority given by students to government

positions when the Mercer Report (2004) suggests that local, state and federal governments were the second largest employer of communication professionals. More inclass examples using government and small to medium organisations, and industry professionals from these groups may help demonstrate the range of opportunities for new graduates. Many current case books tend to focus on the public relations programs of large national and international companies, thereby possibly influencing the consideration of career prospects for students.

Students appeared to be discriminating between different areas of practice within different organisational types. Students who preferred to work inhouse with large organisations were more likely to select areas of practice such as investor relations or issues and crisis management, whereas those in consultancy and inhouse positions with small to medium organisations were more likely to select publicity and promotion and event management respectively. This may reflect their exposure to the types of practice prior to their course as well as their in-class experience. Further investigation of this link is needed as the lecture material and case studies used in the introductory public relations course did not provide any consistent base on which to explain this outcome as all organisational types were linked with all practice areas in the examples used.

Further research in this area is planned with postgraduate students in their introductory public relations course, and both undergraduate and postgraduate students in their final course to identify how impressions of the discipline and career choices change over time. As suggested by Bowen (2003), Jablin's (2001) anticipatory socialization theory provides a useful framework to help educators understand the changes in student perspective through the encounter and metamorphosis phases of organisational assimilation. While the researchers are not proposing educators change their curricula design to focus on the most prevalent student preferences for publicity and promotion and event management practices, a more detailed examination of curricula would be useful to understand how different areas of practice are presented to current students and how students are encouraged to consider their career preferences. Such a review may also incorporate the marketing material used by universities to promote their courses, considering the range of career outcomes presented to intending students and/or the successful graduates who are featured in such literature.

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