
Undergraduate students' perceptions of public relations: An Australian study

Damian John Gleeson

University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Although public relations has been taught at tertiary levels in Australia for nearly half a century, there has never been a detailed study of why students elect to study public relations. This paper surveys attitudes and perceptions of an Australian cohort of undergraduate students studying public relations for the first time. Responses are reported by gender and major programme sequence to gain a deeper understanding. Findings include that many students hold stereotypical mass media images or at best ambivalent attitudes about public relations, while family, friends, business or government activities have little influence on those attitudes. The 'glamour' of public relations is reflected in idealised job preferences of fashion public relations and event management (females) and the entertainment industry and sports public relations (males). While less than half the students consider public relations to be a profession, many would combine an Industry Code of Conduct with their personal values to navigate through ethical issues in a future workplace. The findings are germane to educators, university administrators, the industry, and its various peak bodies, notably the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). Not only do students entering public relations degrees need to be better informed about public relations by universities, there are multiple opportunities for the PRIA and the industry generally to help articulate and shape students' ethical and professional frameworks.¹

Introduction

There have been three major phases in Public Relations Education (PRE) in Australia. The

first, the early 1950s-ca.1970, was largely driven by professional industry associations. The PRIA (Victorian chapter)², established in 1952, took the lead by emphasising tertiary education as fundamental to the dual goals of professionalism and ethical status (Sabey, 1953). From the early 1950s its senior practitioners delivered short courses in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) (Gleeson, 2012b). In 1964 the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) established Australia's first tertiary-level public relations programme, a part-time certificate in business (Gleeson 2012a). The first intake resulted in 19 successful students (Reid, 1965). During the first two years lecturers (i.e. industry practitioners) worked pro bono to create a "fund of some value which will be used to furnish notes for students and to initiate a handbook which will set standards which can be applied in other states" ("Public relations education", 1966, p. 7).

Public relations was situated in the School of Management, and quickly upgraded to a six-year part-time Associate Diplomaship in Management (RMIT, 1967). In NSW, a leading practitioner and PRIA member, John Flower, championed the commencement of a part-time business diploma in public relations through the newly formed NSW Institute of Business Studies (Flower, 1966; 1967a; 1967b; 1967c). The first intake was in 1969. This institute was one of several entities that merged to form what is now known as the University of Technology, and by 1972 also offered a full-time public relations diploma (Gleeson, in press). A year earlier, Mitchell College of Advanced Education (now Charles Sturt University) commenced Australia's first full-time public

relations diploma (“Public relations round-up”, 1971, p. 3).

The mid-1980s represents the second growth phase in PRE. Unlike the earlier period, the main characteristic of this second period was public relations being situated in arts and humanities faculties. Public relations had lost its early resonance within business management as envisaged by Victorian industry practitioners (Gleeson, in press). New degrees developed in a fairly haphazard manner, which led to “no codification of public relations teaching at university levels” (Starck, 1998, p. 5). The loosely federated PRIA introduced its first accreditation procedures for members in 1985 (Anderson, 1999). In 1990, a landmark report by American academic, Jan Quarles, and Australia’s first full-time public relations lecturer, David Potts, established national PRIA accreditation procedures for university courses (Quarles, 1993; Quarles & Potts, 1990).

Since the start of the new millennium, the third – and current – phase of Australian PRE has occurred. The diversity of public relations programmes includes postgraduate coursework and online degrees, new undergraduate courses offered by private providers and a growing number of unaccredited degrees offered by sandstone universities. With few exceptions, public relations is located in Arts or Social Science faculties. Today, 27 public relations undergraduate degree programmes at 18 Australian universities have full accreditation. There are another 24 postgraduate and 9 online accredited degrees (PRIA, 2013). Several public universities, and all private sector institutions but one, do not have accredited programmes.

The PRIA says its (optional) accreditation system provides an “academic accreditation program to ensure Australian public relations and communication degrees are of a high standard” (PRIA, 2012, para. 1).

“This program ensures that professional knowledge is passed onto future generations of practitioners through a controlled and

industry-supported education system” (PRIA, 2012, para. 2).

A national accreditation programme, however, has not been a panacea for industry reputation. Concern remains that public relations is an academic field with an “ambiguous disciplinary status” (Hatherell & Barlett, 2005).

Resulting from PRE growth has been a large increase in student numbers. Aggregate numbers of public relations students in Australia are unknown; neither industry nor educational authorities collate state or national statistics, a factor also noted by another researcher (Smith, 2006). Moreover, in a competitive post-deregulated sector, individual educational providers closely guard their statistics. Yet, anecdotal information and informal discussions with colleagues suggests fairly strong increases in student numbers in recent years, as well as female dominance of enrolments in public relations programmes (Smith, 2006).

A rise in public relations student enrolments can be attributed to both public relations’ popularity, especially among females, and the Commonwealth Government’s deregulation of higher education, which has included lifting restrictions on student numbers (Rosenberg, 2012). The number of offers into Australian universities rose 5.5% in 2012 (Australian Government, 2012). At the University of New South Wales (UNSW), enrolments in an introductory public relations course rose from 75 to 260 students between 2009 and 2012.

An expanding PRE sector has implications for students, educators, industry and industry associations. Yet there has been little analysis of the causation or implications. With the exception of Quarles and Potts (1990), and more general surveys of the ‘state’ of public relations in Australia (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Singh & Smyth, 2000), public relations has not been examined. Unlike the United States, Australia has not benefited from a national PRE inquiry for more than two decades (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006; DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2009; Quarles & Potts, 1990). In 2013, the PRIA hopes to undertake a national survey of public relations

enrolments (Julian Kenny, PRIA, personal communication, 2013).

Students as a salient public

Several scholars refer to the importance of public relations students. Gallicano and Stansberry (2011) argue that students are critical to the ongoing development of professional public relations practice in the 21st century global economy. Erzikova (2010) has observed that students are both “consumers of and investors in public relations education” (p. 188). In Australia, the fee-for-service higher education sector has encouraged increased student numbers and some institutions have become reliant on high student numbers as a major income stream.

In terms of PRE, much of the discourse incorporates the views of educators and practitioners. Talbot and Onsmam (2010) exemplified this position by enlisting industry leaders to support a “reconceptualisation of undergraduate PRE”. Students have infrequently been considered a salient public in terms of pedagogy, though clearly enrolment statistics are critical. Smith (2006) undertook the first study of the female-intensiveness of public relations. There has been no published Australian research on the motivations and perceptions of undergraduates entering public relations programmes. A possible exception is Xavier, Mehta, and Larkin’s (2006) Queensland study. Other research has focused on students’ reflections on degrees or internships (Fall, 2006; Gower & Reber, 2006) or their experiences of assessments (Xavier & Mehta, 2006). A landmark examination of gender in a Western Australian public relations context by Smith did not include first year students “as it was considered that they had not decided on public relations as a major” (2006, p. 32). Postgraduate surveys (Chia, 2009; Howell & Bridges, 2009; Xavier, Mehta & Larkin 2007/8) are not considered germane to this study as life skills and work experiences of postgraduates are fairly dissimilar to school-leavers.

Internationally, there has been little research into the perceptions of students

entering public relations degrees. Smith (2006) cites unpublished research by Noble (2005) which sought to understand why students enter public relations and their misconceptions. Bowen’s North American studies (2003, 2009) are the most significant research in this area. Bowen concluded that students entering public relations have considerable misconceptions about their field of study, arising from:

The discipline of PR ... doing a great disservice to itself by not countering the negative and inaccurate representations of the PRP as a professional manipulator, face of marketing, front of superficial image, or accidental professional, completely devoid of the ethical responsibility inherent in professionalism. (Bowen, 2003, p. 409)

The “PR profession is doing a lax job of communicating its core responsibilities and activities to new and potential university majors” (Bowen, 2009, p. 199). She also noted that: “Ideological confusion among publicity, marketing, advertising, integrating marketing communication, and propaganda, has further degraded understanding of the function and purposes of public relations” (Bowen, 2003, p. 200).

Whether students are considered to be publics, consumers or financial stakeholders, they appear integral to PRE. The rapidly changing business and community landscape means that student attitudes also pose pedagogical and possibly potential ethical issues. In a broad review of Australian undergraduate education, Price (2007) suggested students are likely to perceive “education as a consumable commodity to be ‘packaged’ and delivered by their teachers” (p. 599). Price (2007) also detected that “shifting discourse from ‘learner’ to ‘customer’ was also evident in student attitudes to grades” (p. 600). Applying this paradigm to PRE, students can no longer be perceived by universities and the industry as passive recipients of information. Students are ‘informed consumers’ (White, 2007), notwithstanding some jaundiced perceptions.

Several factors could give rise to students being fairly well informed about public

relations. First, most Australian students are financial stakeholders, paying fees either upfront or after they enter the workforce. Second, there is a clearer vocational aspiration among the current generation of undergraduate students, which may have an important bearing on students' degree choice. Third, the information revolution brought about by Web 2.0 and new social media has given students unprecedented access to degree and course (unit) information. These factors have helped mould students into their own 'public' category, which is worth examining.

Methodology

This study sought to identify the attitudes and perceptions of first year undergraduate communication students studying an introductory public relations course at UNSW in 2011. This course, inaugurated as an elective in 2009, became a core course in UNSW's new Public Relations and Advertising degree in 2011.

This study's methodology broadly adopted Bowen's (2003) North American platform. "Intrigued" to understand the "sources of misconception", Bowen (2003) undertook research at two large US public universities, which included seeking to uncover if

students' attitudes to public relations might change after a semester's study of public relations. While the present study was confined to one large university, it involved two surveys: one at the start of the semester, and another at the completion of the public relations course. These surveys sought to identify the nature and influences on students' perceptions, and in the case of the second survey, any shifts in attitudes and expectations as a result of their learning experience.

Students did not receive the university's course outline until after the first survey, "to keep the definition of public relations on the syllabus from biasing the responses" (Bowen, 2003, p. 203). While some motivated students might have previously gained access to the outline online, students were asked to complete the survey without reference to prior university information. Given the high, though largely inaccurate, portrayal of public relations in the mass media and on television, students could not be expected to form perceptions entirely free of such influences. Indeed, this study intentionally included questions about sources of their perceptions and possible influences on students' decisions to study public relations. Non-academic prior knowledge, therefore, was anticipated.

Table 1: Study overview by degree major and gender

	Survey one	Survey two
PR		
Female	38	43
Male	16	10
Journalism		
Female	56	53
Male	14	10
Law/Media		
Female	n/a	5
Male	n/a	2
Other Media		
Female	18	10
Male	7	9
Total: 291		

Results

In both surveys, students were asked to indicate their gender, major sequence of study and whether a local or international student. The response rates were approximately 70% for both surveys. The majority of students, as per Table 1, above, were female, regardless of their major sequence of study.

The number of usable surveys, 291, excludes a small number (7; 1) that did not identify gender and/or major sequence, and contrasts with samples of 159 by Bowen (2003) and 45 by Xavier et al. (2006). The two largest degree majors were public relations (ca 37%) and journalism (ca 48%). The second survey included a category of law/media students, who had been included under 'other media students' in survey one. There were very few

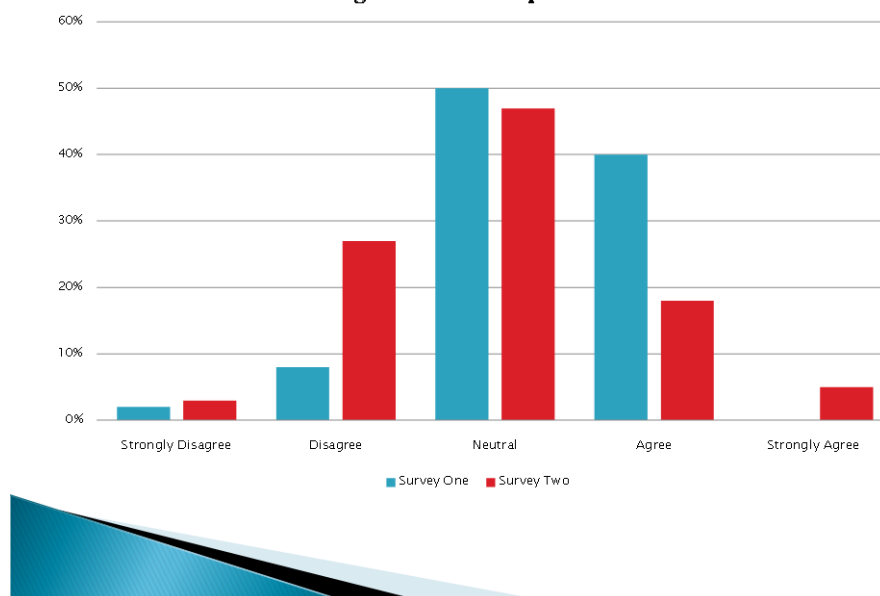
international students and thus they were not separately identified in the results.

Glamour

The perception that public relations is a glamorous occupation appears to have been immortalised through celebrities such as Samantha Jones in *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998-2004). Yoon and Black (2007) identified characteristics of public relations characters in television shows as mostly women who engaged in undemanding tasks of publicity and event planning. Misperceptions abound, as one blogger noted: "Who knew that PR involved such hard and dedicated work, long hours, time management skills and proper spelling and grammar at all time" (Dessinger, 2008, para. 5).

Chart 1 shows female public relations students' perception of whether public relations is glamorous as recorded in both surveys.

Chart 1: Female PR students' perceptions that PR is a glamorous occupation



14

The second survey shows relatively large changes in the number of female public relations students disagreeing that public relations is glamorous, which might be attributed to knowledge resulting from a semester's study of public relations. Surprisingly though, a small number of respondents strongly agreed that public relations is about glamour.

Table 2 shows the attitudes of male students at the beginning and semester-end. The number of respondents is quite low so care should be taken in extrapolating from the results. However, the number of public relations and journalism students agreeing that public relations is glamorous did decline in the second survey.

Table 2: Male students' perceptions that PR is glamorous

Survey two results in brackets

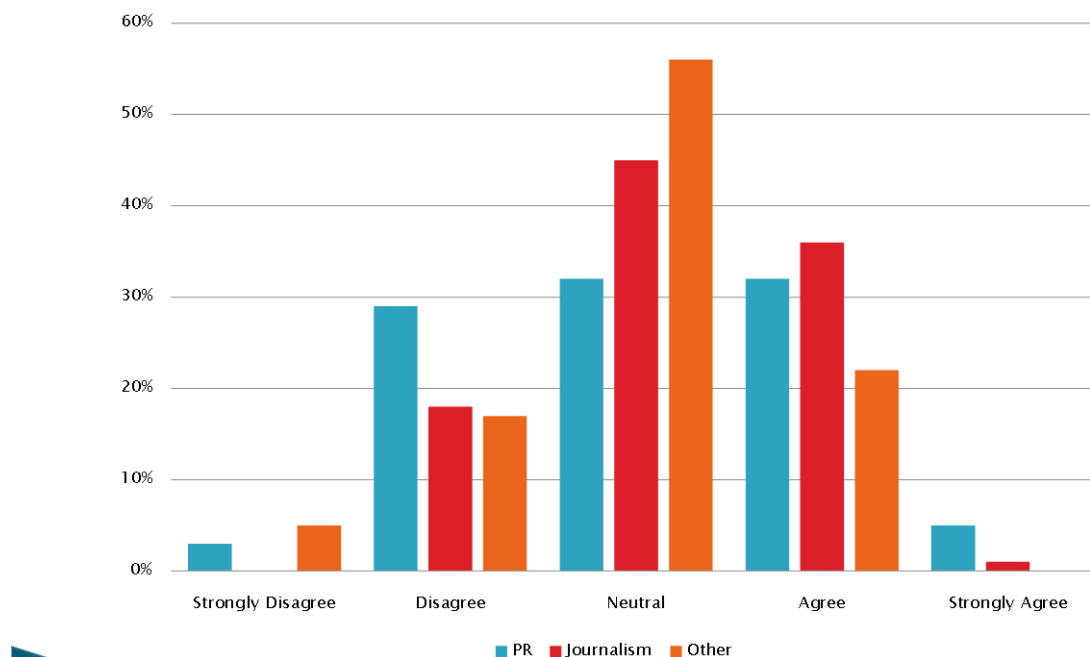
Major sequence of study	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
PR	0 (0)	3 (4)	7 (3)	4 (3)	1 (0)
Journalism	0 (1)	2 (4)	7 (3)	6 (2)	0 (0)
Other	0 (1)	4 (1)	3 (6)	0 (0)	0 (1)
Law	na (1)	na (0)	na. (1)	na. (0)	na. (1)

Reputation

Public relations' reputation is a hotly debated topic (for example Devin, 2007; Marken, 2009; Wright, 2005). Australian industry associations have long sought to enhance the reputation of public relations through education and accreditation programmes. Nevertheless, on a national and also an international front, public relations continues to have a low reputation (Callison, 2001, 2004; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Gibson & Gonzales, 2006/07).

The next series of charts depicts students' perceptions about public relations' reputation. While neutral perspectives form the largest response across all major sequences of study, it is notable that female public relations students were more likely to disagree that public relations has a good reputation, and less than four in 10 agreed or strongly agreed that public relations has a good reputation.

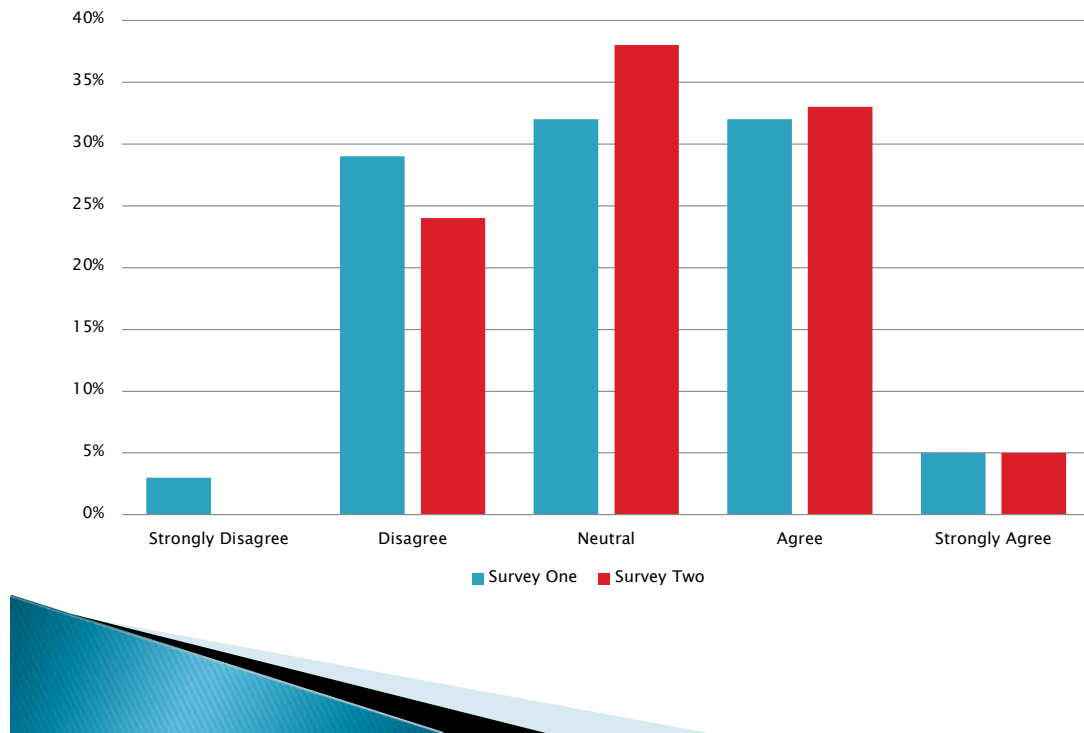
Chart 2: Survey One: Female students' perception that PR has a good reputation



17

Chart 3 examines the responses of female public relations students to the question of whether public relations has a good reputation.

Chart 3: Female PR students: Perception that PR has a good reputation



18

Table 3: Male students: PR has a good reputation

Major Sequence of study	Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
PR	0	3	8	4	1	16
Journalism	1	4	5	4	0	14
Other media	0	0	6	0	0	7

Table 3 statistics reflect that males were more likely to hold neutral opinions of public relations having a good reputation. That only one out of 37 male respondents strongly agreed that public relations has a good reputation is an indicator, again, of the ongoing perception that overshadows the public relations industry or profession.

Influences on perception

The surveys sought to not only identify students' perceptions but also factors that influence their thinking. Table 4 records students' responses to the following four specific categories: journalism/media; corporate/business community; political/government sector; and, family/friends, had an influence on their perceptions.

**Table 4: Most influence on shaping my impression of public relations:
All students in Survey One**

Students	Journalism/ media	Corporate	Political	Family/friends	Other
FEMALE					
Public relations	23	8	4	3	1
Journalism	28	9	8	2	9
Other media	12	3	1	2	1
Sub-total	63	20	13	7	11
MALE					
Public relations	2	3	7	1	2
Journalism	6	2	2	1	2
Other media	3	1	1	1	2
Sub-total	11	6	10	3	6
TOTALS	74 (50%)	26 (17%)	23 (15%)	10 (7%)	17 (11%)

The mass media's dominance in influencing student attitudes is clear. Regardless of gender or degree major, 50% cent of students indicated that journalism/mass media had the single most influence in shaping their impression of public relations. Female students recorded the higher proportion (58%). Female journalism students were more likely to be influenced by political processes than public relations students, whereas amongst males, public relations students, rather than journalism students, gave political influences a higher rating. Regardless

of degree major or gender, family and friends had the lowest possible on shaping students' perceptions of public relations.

Ideal public relations job

This question was restricted to public relations students (as other students could reasonably be expected to follow a non-public relations career, at least initially, upon graduation). Survey one results are presented in Table 5, and include a generic description of special events management and sports management.

Table 5: Female public relations students' ideal public relations job ranked by first three preferences

Ideal job	First Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference	Total
Media relations	11	9	1	21
Special events management	4	9	8	21
Corporate communication	5	5	4	14
Not-for-profit	3	3	5	11
Corporate affairs	3	2	4	9
Integrated marketing communications	2	2	3	7
Sports public relations	4	1	1	6
Government relations	1	1	2	4
Community relations	1	1	1	3
Relationship building	0	0	3	3
Strategic planning	0	1	1	2
Investor relations	0	1	1	2
Internal communication	0	0	0	1
Research	0	0	0	0

On first preference, a majority of female public relations students favour media relations as their ideal job, followed by special events management and corporate communication. The sum of the first three preferences positions special events and media relations equally. The not-for-profit sector came in fourth position overall. At the other end of the scale, virtually no female students expressed interest in

research, strategic planning, investor relations or internal communication. As a result, and also recognising anecdotal feedback from some students, the second survey excluded research, strategic planning and internal communication categories, though included two new specific categories of entertainment industry and fashion public relations.

Table 6: Second survey: Female public relations students' ideal public relations job

Ideal job	First Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference	Total
Entertainment industry	9	6	7	22
Special events management	4	10	8	22
Media relations	7	5	7	19
Fashion public relations	7	8	3	18
Corporate communication	2	2	4	10
Corporate affairs	3	2	4	9
Sports public relations	4	2	3	9
Financial/investor relations	3	1	3	7
Integrated marketing communications	2	2	3	7
Community relations	1	1	3	5
Not-for-profit	2	2	1	5

The inclusion of entertainment and fashion sectors had a significant impact on the results. Undertaking publicity in the entertainment industry emerged as the most favoured ideal job. While working in special events retained its (equal) first place when the first three preferences were added together, fashion public relations was also attractive. Media relations retained a high ranking. Offsetting these new categories was a large decline in corporate communication, which might also be a reflection that it was a topic studied during the

semester, which students may have become acquainted with. Community relations, while the not-for-profit sector slipped to equal last spot in popularity with female public relations students.

For males, the highest preferences are jobs in the entertainment industry or sports public relations, with a sprinkling of management type roles such as investor relations, community relations and government affairs.

Table 7: Male public relations students' ideal public relations job

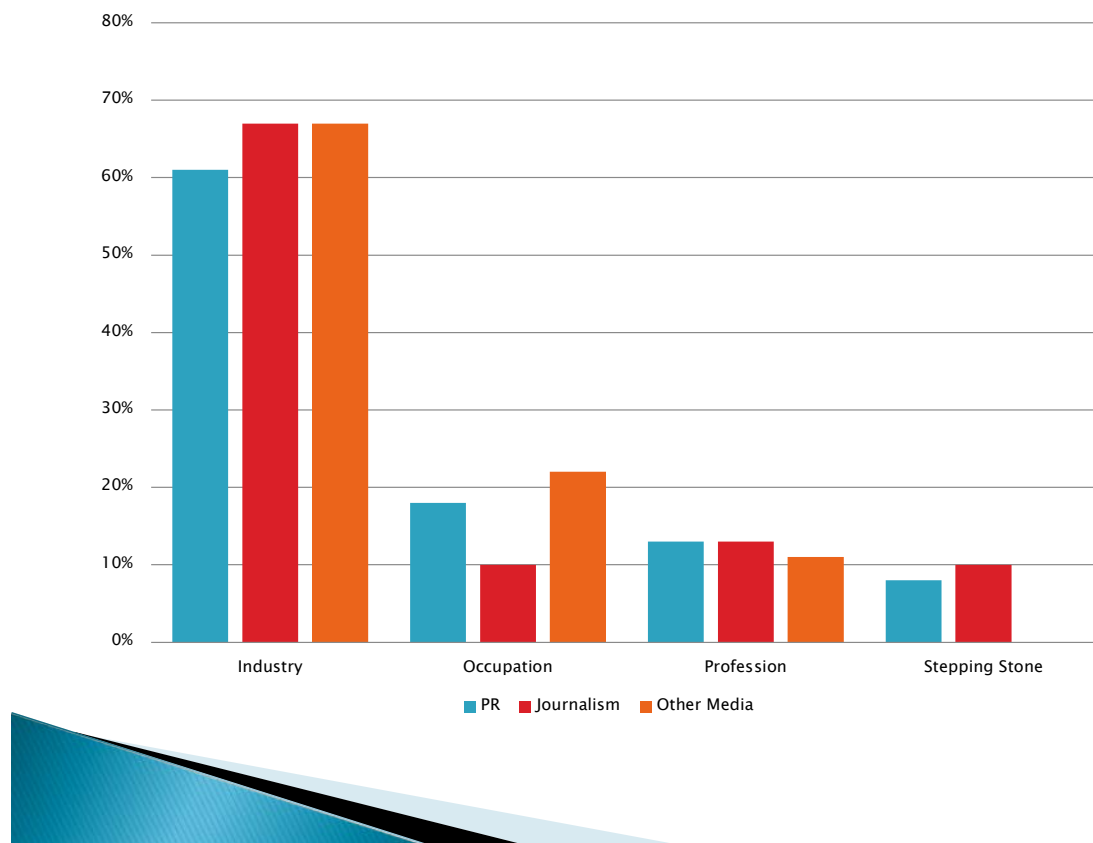
Ideal job	First Preference	Second Preference	Third Preference	Total
Entertainment industry	3	2	1	6
Sports public relations	3	1	0	4
Media relations	1	2	3	6
Integrated marketing communications	1	1	2	4
Corporate communication	0	0	3	3
Special events management	0	2	0	2
Government relations	0	2	0	2
Financial/investor relations	1	0	1	2
Fashion public relations	1	0	0	1
Community relations	1	0	0	1
Strategic planning	0	0	0	1

Industry or profession?

This question sought to elicit responses from students as to whether they consider public relations to be an industry, occupation,

profession, or a stepping-stone to another career. As seen in Chart 4, a clear majority of female students perceive public relations to be an industry.

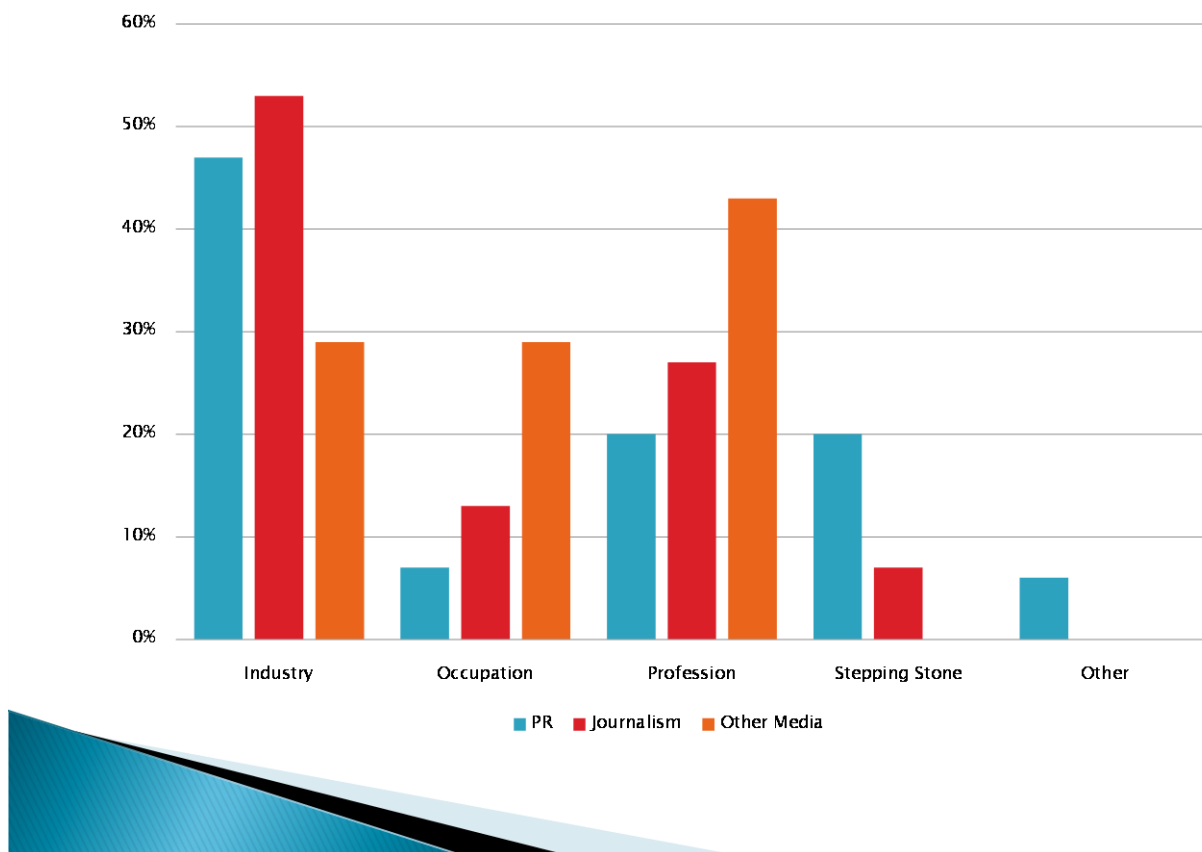
Chart 4: Female students' perception of public relations



As depicted in Chart 4, at least 60% of female students, regardless of degree major, perceive public relations to be an industry; the second highest ranking was 'occupation'. The category 'profession' attracted just over 10% of respondents' preferences.

Amongst males surveyed (see Chart 5), industry attracted the largest ranking. Yet, proportionally, more males placed emphasis on public relations being a profession than their female counterparts.

Chart 5: Male students' perceptions of PR



20

Ethics

Several questions were posed about ethics. The first asked students to imagine they worked as a public relations practitioner and faced an ethical dilemma, and then to rank the importance of possible influences on their responses to the situation. Table 9 shows the results of both public relations and journalism female students. For both cohorts the trends

were clear: personal values clearly dominate, though with second preferences taken into consideration, an Industry Code of Conduct emerged more strongly. Both outranked other possible responses, such as a workplace or organisational code of conduct. Societal expectations and international ethical expectations ranked very lowly in the ethical decision making process.

**Table 8: Influences on a public relations ethical dilemma:
Female public relations and journalism students' preferences**

Responses in brackets = journalism students

Major Influence	1: Highest Preference	2	3	4	5: Lowest Preference
Personal values	19 (19)	4 (5)	6 (7)	5 (6)	7 (9)
PR industry code of conduct	9 (16)	19 (16)	5 (9)	6 (5)	2 (0)
Workplace code of conduct	8 (5)	5 (11)	14 (15)	10 (7)	4 (3)
Societal expectations	4 (4)	8 (6)	10 (7)	7 (8)	11 (19)
International ethical expectations	3 (2)	2 (5)	7 (9)	13 (13)	16 (15)

**Table 9: Influences on a public relations ethical dilemma:
Male students' first two preferences**

Major Influence	Public Relations	Journalism	Law	Other Media	Total
Personal values	5	6	1	5	17
PR industry code of conduct	5	3	1	2	11
Other	0	1	0	2	3

Personal values and Industry Code of Conduct again ranked favourably amongst male students (all majors).

At the end of semester students were asked their opinion as to whether the discipline of public relations has an ethical basis.

Table 10: Public relations has an ethical basis – male students' preferences

Major Influence	Public Relations	Journalism	Law	Other Media	Total
Neutral	5	5	1	3	14
Agree	4	2	0	2	8
Strongly Agree	1	2	0	3	6
Disagree	0	1	1	1	3
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	0

Proportionally, more female students (all majors) believe that the profession of public

relations has an ethical basis than male students.

Table 11: PR has an ethical basis – female students’ first two preferences

Major Influence	Public Relations	Journalism	Law	Other Media	Total
Neutral	22	23	2	4	51
Agree	14	17	0	1	32
Strongly Agree	6	9	2	3	20
Disagree	1	4	0	2	7
Strongly Disagree	0	1	0	0	1

Discussion

Study uniqueness

This research study is significant in terms of unique methodology and key results. First, it focused on a cohort of newly enrolled undergraduate communication students in an Australian setting. Second, it sought to capture their attitudes and perceptions at the commencement of study. Students were intentionally surveyed with minimal information about public relations as an academic discipline or a career choice. This contrasts with Xavier et al.’s (2006) study which “*followed* [emphasis added] a series of lectures on public relations careers and different areas of practice to ensure that students had some exposure to their different options” (p. 84). Third, this study differentiated responses by gender and programme sequence, important variables overlooked by scholars (Bowen 2003; 2009). Female students outnumbered male students by at least three-to-one in this study, and “addressing this issue is of critical importance to the profession” (Farmer & Waugh, 1999, p. 238). One of the highlights of Salt and Shein’s (2012) public relations industry report was the impact of gender imbalance on recruitment of senior public relations staff. Their report concluded: “with the corporate affairs profession increasingly dominated by women, the issue of gender diversity is becoming an issue” (Salt & Shein, 2012, p. 3).

Key findings

In terms of preconceived notions about public relations, this study’s results were fairly consistent with Bowen’s studies (2003; 2009) that identified glamour as a major perception held by students, initially, at least. Despite

being media savvy, and having a heightened vocational interest in employment after graduation, many public relations students in this study entered their degree with common misperceptions about public relations and fairly limited understanding of public relations’ broad-based nature. Such attitudes were reflected, for example, in the almost negligible responses to ideal job positions, in areas such as internal communication, investor relations, research, and, strategic planning.

This study revealed some interesting results especially when the responses to the second survey were contrasted with the first survey. While questions such as glamour, good reputation, and influences on perceptions elicited a change in sentiment between the surveys, some other responses were little changed. For example, (all) female students’ perception of public relations as glamour had halved by the end of the course. A much smaller male cohort also experienced a decline in perceptions of glamour by semester-end. It might reasonably be thought that such modified attitudes might also be reflected in responses in the broader question of whether public relations has a good reputation. However, there was little change between the two surveys on students’ perceptions about whether public relations has a good reputation. The majority of students, regardless of gender or degree major, continued to hold neutral attitudes. This included female public relations students, who were little changed in responses between the two surveys, except for some movement from disagree to neutral. Responses from all male students demonstrate that the public relations industry also has an entrenched issue of reputation. It is therefore somewhat disconcerting that public

relations has such a poor image among the next generation of practitioners.

Despite having relatively poor or ambivalent reputation – amongst this cohort and in the broader community – public relations paradoxically remains highly attractive as an undergraduate university degree, especially among women. These important questions, with few exceptions (Smith, 2006), have been under-explored in an Australian context. In this study female student respondents outnumbered males 3:1, and across the total student cohort studying public relations at UNSW (i.e. including those who did not complete surveys) the ratio of female to male students is 6:1.

This study also found that the mass media strongly influences at least one-in-two students' perceptions of public relations. It is therefore not surprising that students have mixed preconceptions about public relations and intended careers. In this respect, this study's findings align with Xavier et al.'s study (2006). Bowen (2003) argued that the "insular behavior" of educators and the public relations industry "allows negative representations found in the mass media to be accepted without question, and the infamous ethical lapses of some firms add to the perception that public relations is manipulation" (p. 210). This study confirms that public relations educators and industry have a major role to play in communicating the strategic and ethical nature of public relations.

Another salient finding was that public relations students, regardless of gender, did not perceive the industry's gender imbalance as having a negative influence on their career. Nearly one-third of both male and female public relations respondents thought the dominance of women in public relations might assist their respective careers, while another one-third (male) and half (female) public relations students thought it would have no (adverse) consequences. Only one female public relations student thought the gender imbalance would be a disadvantage. These responses are largely at odds with several recent Australian surveys. Wolf and de Bussy reported that 'respondents felt that there were 'too few males'' entering the industry (2008, p.

11), while a survey, mainly of senior public relations practitioners in Sydney noted that "at the recruitment level, some practitioners admit they are now actively exercising positive discrimination towards male candidates in an effort to increase gender diversity on their teams" (Salt & Shein, 2012, p. 24).

Industry and its peak bodies may take heart from student responses to ethical questions. For instance, students ranked an Industry Code of Conduct as one of the main factors that would influence their attitudes when confronted with an ethical dilemma in the workplace. Surprisingly, a code of ethics in a workplace attracted little support, though students highlighted their personal values as a guiding light.

In terms of the general perception of public relations, more than 80% of students surveyed at semester-end said their perception had changed as a result of studying a public relations course: the numbers were slightly higher amongst journalism and other non-public relations major students. While this question did not specify it, the intent was to measure changed attitudes in a positive manner. It is therefore surprising that despite this strong response, there was little evidence that altered attitudes translated into more realistic views about the public relations industry.

This study also sought to elicit an ideal/ised job. Caution needs to be applied before comparing such responses with Xavier et al.'s (2006) results as the latter exposed students to the public relations industry before the survey. This study, focused on new students, considered it premature to consider 'career outcomes' and did not expose students to such information. Nevertheless, in broad terms a preference for employment in events management and promotion was prevalent in both Australian studies.

Limitations and further research

This study has a number of limitations. First, public relations' popularity, especially amongst females, is an important subject. This study highlighted gender as an important variable and has provided some evidence of differences in expectations between young males and females. Although outside this study, it is important to

note that there is a dearth of information as to why young people, especially males, are not attracted to study public relations. That so few males are entering public relations is a fact often noted, but rarely explored. The small number of male students sampled, while providing interesting responses for analysis, do not allow a fuller appreciation of why more male students do not study public relations. What we don't know from this study is if public relations' reputation for 'glamour' and/or its female numerical intensiveness or dominance, might be factors that give rise to male students exploring other study or work options, and what they may be. Further, has a growth in other specialist degrees, such as sports management, attracted males away from public relations degrees? Such information might enhance our understanding of public relations' reputation.

With only one possible Australian precedent (Xavier et al., 2006), the extent to which the results of this study might be representative of other students studying public relations in the same city (Sydney) or across Australia is (at this point) unknown. Some possible factors for consideration: first, respondents were among the foundation public relations cohort at UNSW (a 'sandstone' or member of the Group of Eight (G8) Universities in Australia); second, for privacy reasons, respondents were not asked their high school educational levels, geographic location or postcode. The latter might have been one possible indicator of the socioeconomic status.

Notwithstanding these possible limitations, this study hopefully might help to inform future PRE and the public relations profession/industry. On one level it aims to give students greater recognition as publics in PRE. On another level, this study has identified deficiencies in knowledge about public relations that many would-be public relations practitioners hold when they enter university.

Further research is required to examine relationships between PRE and student perceptions. Does the location of public relations in Arts in most Australian universities have a bearing on perceptions of prospective public relations students, including those who

choose not to study public relations? Anecdotal feedback from students over a number of years suggests a few trends, which while generalised, are possibly worthy of consideration. When public relations is embedded in Arts, males especially perceive it as a 'softer' discipline and lacking a 'business purpose'. Conversely, a majority of female students are either reluctant to or cautious studying public relations in a business/management faculty, given the inclusion of quantitative and statistical-like units in business/commerce degree. More research needs to occur to test the veracity of these 'trends'.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations arising from this study. First, student perceptions of public relations are highly relevant to the ongoing practice of public relations and the next generation of practitioners. The solid growth in public relations education in Australia over the past two decades in particular has not been accompanied by adequate planning and analysis of the implications; on another front, PRE has not been a panacea for the industry's dual quest of professionalism and reputation. We still know too little about why students chose to study public relations and how the next generation of public relations practitioners views the industry. Such questions might be included as part of a larger and national study of PRE in Australia, similar in purpose and structure to the United States' precedents. An industry group, such as the PRIA, which has a dedicated Education Advisory Group, might be the appropriate vehicle to take the lead and it is recommended that the PRIA allocate sufficient funding for this to occur in the foreseeable future.

Second, while this paper acknowledges the significance of educators and practitioners, it nonetheless believes that students offer perspectives that may help educators to shape curricula, especially first year courses focused on principles and fundamentals of public relations. Undoubtedly, a range of factors impinge upon public relations curricula, such as budgets, the 'housing' of public relations within academic disciplines areas, enrolment

numbers, and perceptions held by university administrators. To this list may be added aspiring public relations students, who deserve recognition as a salient public in PRE. Marketing campaigns by tertiary institutions appear to have generated a good investment yield in terms of student recruitment, though they have done little to dispel widespread misperceptions about public relations, such as glamour, the lack of strategic basis, and the absence of professional recognition. Industry and peak bodies also have a larger responsibility to communicate with confidence and clarity the inherently strategic nature of public relations.

Despite contributions cited earlier in this paper, PRE in Australia remains a fertile area for research. Xavier et al. (2006) concluded that “a more detailed examination of curricula would be useful to understand how different areas of [public relations] practice are presented to current students” (p. 93). While supporting this view, a preliminary step might be encouraging universities to deliver more accurate communication campaigns about public relations, which attracts better informed public relations students. In this regard, the PRIA could play an active leadership role, not dissimilar to the vision articulated by its founders in the 1950s and 1960s (Gleeson, 2012b). Prospective public relations students would benefit from knowing that public relations is not narrowly focused and glamorised, but a multi-disciplinary professional discipline that is central to the effectiveness of organisations.

References

- Anderson, M. (1999). Public relations education in Australia. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 1(1), Summer, 121–128.
- Australian Government, Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education. (2012). *The demand driven system: Undergraduate applications and offers* (February).
- Bowen, S.A. (2003). ‘I thought it would be more glamorous’: Preconceptions and misconceptions among students in the public relations principles course. *Public Relations Review*, 29 (2), 199–214.
- Bowen, S.A. (2009). All glamour, no substance? How public relations majors and potential majors in an exemplar program view the industry and function. *Public Relations Review*, 35 (4), 402–410.
- Callison, C. (2001). Do PR practitioners have a PR problem? The effect of associating a source with public relations and client-negative news on audience perception of credibility. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13, 219–234.
- Callison, C. (2004). ‘The good, the bad, and the ugly: Perceptions of public relations practitioners’. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 1(4), 371–389.
- Chia, J. (2009). Intercultural interpretations: making public relations education culturally relevant. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 6(1), 40–43.
- Commission on Public Relations Education (2006). *The professional bond*. Retrieved from: <http://www.commpred.org/theprofessionalbond/index.php>
- Dessinger, D. (2008). Public relations: Not as glamorous as Samantha Jones wants you to believe. Available at: <http://womeninpr.wordpress.com/2012/01/23/public-relations-not-as-glamorous-as-samantha-jones-wants-you-to-believe/>
- de Bussy, N.M., & Wolf, K. (2009). The State of Australian public relations: professionalization and paradox. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 376–381.
- Devin, R.M. (2007). Rescuing PR’s reputation. *Communication World*, July-August, 34–36.
- DiStaso, M.W., Stacks, D.W. & Botan, C.H. (2009). State of public relations education in the United States: 2006 report on a national survey of executives and academics. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 254–269.
- Erzikova, E. (2010). University teachers’ perceptions and evaluation of ethics instruction in the public relations curriculum. *Public Relations Review*, 36, 316–318.

- Fall, L. (2006). Value of engagement: factors influencing how students perceive their community contribution to public relations internships. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 407–415.
- Farmer, B., & Waugh, L. (1999). Gender differences in public relations' career attitudes: A benchmark study. *Public Relations Review*, 25(2), 235–249.
- Flower, J. (1966, 16 December). Letter to Secretary, Committees, NSW Department of Technical Education (DTE). Public Relations Course Ad Hoc Committee File, University of Technology (Sydney) Archives (UTSA).
- Flower, J. (1967a, 6 March). Letter to Mr J.E. Gillis, Assistant Director General, NSW Department of Technical Education (DTE), 6 March. Public Relations Diploma Committee (PRDC), File 71/728, UTSA.
- Flower, J. (1967b, 30 March). Letter to Mr J.E. Gillis, Assistant Director General, NSW DTE, PRDC, File 71/728, UTSA.
- Flower, J. (1967c, 6 November). Letter to NSW Institute of Business Studies, PRDC, File 71/728, UTSA.
- Gallicano, T.D., & Stansberry, K. (2011). Communication with diverse audiences through a case study approach. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 556–561.
- Gibson, D., & Gonzales, J.L. (2006/07). Elegant understatement: A new paradigm for public relations practice. *Public Relations Quarterly*, Winter, 51(4), 12–16.
- Gleeson, D.J. (2012a). *Revisiting the foundations of public relations education in Australia*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pria.com.au/priablog/revisiting-the-foundations-of-public-relations-education-in-australia> (Accessed 30 September 2012).
- Gleeson, D.J. (2012b). *Early initiatives in Australian public relations education*. Paper presented at 'PR and the Past in Local and International Contexts' Symposium, University of Technology, Sydney, November.
- Gleeson, D. J. (in press). Australian public relations education, 1950-1975. Forthcoming in *Journal of Communication Management*.
- Gower, K.K., & Reber B.H. (2006). Prepared for practice? Student perceptions about requirements and preparation for public relations practice. *Public Relations Review*, 32, 188–190.
- Hatherell, W., & Barlett, J.L. (2005). Positioning public relations as an academic discipline in Australia, in *Proceedings Public Relations Institute of Australia Academic Conference*, 2005, Brisbane, Australia.
- Howell, G.V., & Bridges, N. The role of tertiary education in preparing students for a career in public relations. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 10.
- Marken, G. A. (2009). Will public relations be a profession by 2010? *Public Relations Quarterly*, 52(4), 34–37.
- Price, C. (2007). Towards ethical consumerism: authors, teacher librarians and students in collaboration. *Access*, (November), 5–8.
- Public relations education: A big task but worthwhile. (1966, January/February). *Public Relations Journal* 2(10), 7.
- Public Relations Institute of Australia. (2013). *Summary accredited degrees*. MSS. Provided by Julian Kenny, PRIA National Education Officer, 1 February.
- Public Relations Institute of Australia (2012). PRIA's university degree accreditation program. Available at: <http://www.pria.com.au/development/accredited-university-degrees>
- Public relations round-up: N.S.W. PR Course. (1971, April/May). *Public Relations Australia* 8(2), 3.
- Reid, I. (1965). Convention: A critical look at public relations. *Public Relations*, 2(3), 8, 16.
- Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. (1967). *Calendar*. Associateship Diploma of Public Relations. RMIT, Melbourne, 221-222.
- Quarles, J. (1993). Up from down under: Public relations education in Australia. *International Public Relations Review*, 16(4), 21–24.
- Quarles, J., & Potts, D. (1990). A report of a survey of the public relations industry and profession in Australia. Sydney: Chanmac Services.

Rosenberg, J. (2012, February 15). Uncapped units offer record student places. *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 2.

Sabey, I. (1953). First Annual Report of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (Victoria Chapter). *Pro-Files*, 1(8), 1-7.

Salt, P. & Shein, J. (2012) *Trends and Issues in Australian corporate affairs*. Retrieved from: <http://www.saltshein.com.au/media/salarys/1/Trends and Issues in Corporate Affairs 2012.pdf>

Singh, R., & Smyth, R. (2000). Australian public relations; Status at the turn of the 21st century. *Public Relations Review*, 26(4), 387–404.

Smith, G. (2006). *The predominance of women in public relations*. PhD Thesis, Central Queensland University.

Star, D. (Producer). (1998-2004). *Sex and the city* [Television series]. New York, NY: Home Box Office/Time Warner.

Starck, N. (1998). Accredited or discredited?: A qualitative study of public relations education at Australian universities. Masters Thesis, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Talbot, G.A., & Osman, A. (2010). Reconceptualising undergraduate public relations learning. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 11(2), 51-61.

White, N.R. (2007). The customer is always right' Student discourse about higher education in Australia. *Higher Education*, 44, 593-604.

Wolf, K., & de Bussy, N. (2008). Perceptions of professionalism: Practitioners' reflections on the state of Australian public relations. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 9(1), 1–15.

Wright, D.K. (2005). We have rights too: examining the existence of professional prejudice and discrimination against public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 31(1), 101–109.

Xavier, R. & Mehta, A. (2006). Understanding assessment: The student experience of a criterion-referenced assessment in a public relations course. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 7, 223.

Xavier, R., Mehta, A., & Larkin, L. (2006). Choosing public relations as career: Student

expectations and implications for practice. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 7, 81-94.

Xavier, R., Mehta, A., & Larkin, L. (2007/8). Destination public relations: Understanding the sources that influence course selection for career preferences of postgraduate students. *PRism*, 5(1&2), 1-8.

Yoon, Y., & Black, H. (2007). *Planning media strategy vs. planning parties: Public relations presentations in television*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association. Retrieved from: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p170034_in dex.html

Author contact details:

Damian John Gleeson,
DamianJGleeson@gmail.com

Copyright statement:

The author retains copyright in this material, but has granted *PRism* a copyright license to permanently display the article online for free public viewing, and has granted the National Library of Australia a copyright licence to include *PRism* in the PANDORA Archive for permanent public access and online viewing. This copyright option does not grant readers the right to print, email, or otherwise reproduce the article, other than for whatever limited research or educational purposes are permitted in their country. Please contact the author named above if you require other uses.

¹ An extract of this paper was presented at the 2012 ANZCA Conference 'Communicating Change and Changing Communication in the 21st Century', July 6, Adelaide, South Australia.

² The PRIA (Victoria) was established separately from the Sydney-based Australian Institute of Public Relations (AIPR), which was formed in December 1950. In 1960 the two Institutes formed a National Council, but it would be at least another three decades before a fully-fledged federated body came into existence.