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# **Destination public relations: Understanding the sources that influence course selection for and career preferences of postgraduate students**

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## ***Abstract***

The growth of accredited postgraduate courses in public relations highlights the need for research that understands the motivations and career expectations of postgraduate students. Australian and international research suggests that undergraduate student expectations differ from the realities of courses and careers in public relations (Bowen, 2003; Storto, 1990; Xavier, Mehta & Larkin, 2006). Undergraduate students favour training in publicity and promotion more than the critical thinking and business skills preferred by employers (Bowen, 2003). The gap between perception and reality has the potential to affect the continued development of public relations as a management function.

Using international research as its base, this study explores the Australian postgraduate perspective through a survey of approximately 140 students to identify their motivations to study public relations and preferences for positions and workplace environments. The survey was administered in an introductory postgraduate public relations theory unit across four consecutive semesters during 2004 and 2005. The findings provide insight into the career expectations of postgraduate students who prefer careers in event management and publicity. Educators must balance student needs with university teaching and learning goals and industry expectations by preparing students for the diversity of careers in public relations.

## ***Introduction***

While a number of studies have found that undergraduate students pursue courses and careers in public relations based on expectations of glamour and parties (Bowen, 2003; Gower & Reber, 2006; Storto, 1990), the motivations of postgraduate students remain largely unexplored. Postgraduate students' expectations for, and selection and experiences of postgraduate programs present an opportunity for further study.

Existing research in Australian postgraduate education has established the broad motivations and expectations of students (e.g. Ross, 2001). However, much of the career and counselling literature reviews the decision-making processes of students in undergraduate programs (e.g. Bregman & Killen, 1999, Walker, Alloway, Dalley-Trim & Patterson, 2006) and focuses on teaching, medical, nursing or information technology professions. This study builds on existing research to explore the decision-making processes of students as they enter postgraduate study in the particular field of public relations.

## ***Literature review***

Selecting and training for a new career or advancing an existing career is risky business for many postgraduate students who often balance study with work and family commitments (Feldman & Whitcomb, 2005). In line with any significant decision, the selection of courses and careers should involve a range of alternatives and strong familiarity with each of these options (Gati, Krausz & Osipow, 1996; Germeijs & De Boeck, 2003; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006).

Information about courses and careers can be gathered from personal and media sources. A study of public relations students suggested that impersonal mass media impressions influenced course and career expectations (Bowen, 2003). While some portrayals of public relations as a glamorous career may persuade students to select public relations, Bowen (2003) argues that journalists' negative portrayal of the practice of public relations influenced other student perceptions of careers in the discipline.

When starting these courses, postgraduate students expect their program to be mostly similar to their undergraduate experience but different in scope (Ross, 2001). In a study of first-year postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne, Ross (2001) found that most students pursued postgraduate study to advance their careers and acquire new knowledge within their subject area.

In the United Kingdom, Clewes (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of part-time postgraduate students to explore their service-quality experiences in business schools. In a pre-course interview, Clewes (2003) found that students' initial expectations were to "develop or confirm management skills, obtain the qualification, experience other sectors and people, acquire new knowledge, and experience a coordinated and progressive course" (p. 77). The results of her research show that students' expectations remained the same throughout their course but each educational experience set a new benchmark (Clewes, 2003). Although students expected to become experts in particular fields, educators and industry also believe students need to display professional and generic skill advancement (Ross, 2001).

Apart from the learning opportunities, a critical success factor for postgraduate students is the ease of transition from university to work (Conneeley, 2005). A focus group study revealed that while students wanted to build professional and personal confidence through postgraduate studies, they often faced a lack of support from work environments and at times, the negative perceptions of colleagues hampered how they transferred newly acquired knowledge into professional practice (Conneeley, 2005). Educators are tasked not only with

### **Perceptions of and expectations for careers in public relations**

Armed with this understanding of the expectations of postgraduate students, this study aims to identify specifically their perceptions of and expectations for courses and careers in public relations. This study adds to a small but growing body of research in public relations education, course design and student outcomes that until recently emphasised the perspectives of practitioners and educators over students (Neff, Walker, Smith & Creedon, 1999; Stacks, Botan & Turk, 1999).

In comparison to how practitioners and educators accept and understand their profession, several studies have shown that public relations students held 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 students wanted to work in public relations because they liked working with people and making them happy, and considered public relations a glamorous business.

More than a decade after Storto's study, Bowen (2003) found that students expected the study and practice of public relations to be more glamorous than they experienced, and they 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 and party planning (Bowen, 2003). Earlier work by Sparks (1998) showed that the practice of public relations was 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 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, p. 206). In a recent study of 209 public relations students in the United States, Gower and Reber (2006) identified that students felt most prepared in basic computer skills, ethics, the role of public relations, and public relations duties, and least prepared in accounting skills, new technologies, crisis planning, and labour relations.

This gap is not unique to public relations. A recent study by Danziger and Eden (2006) revealed a significant gap between accounting students' initial perceptions and expectations compared with their actual experiences. According to Danziger and Eden (2006), the size of the employing accountancy firm influences students' perceptions of its attractiveness. Their research showed that first year students had a more favourable view of professional accountancy firms than advanced or postgraduate students (Danziger & Eden, 2006). A key reason for this is that early assumptions were challenged after exposure to the work environment (Danziger & Eden, 2006).

Encouraged by the research of Bowen (2003) and Gower and Reber (2006) using student samples, and recognising the limited exploration of postgraduate students, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- In what area of public relations practice do postgraduate students prefer to work?
- In what type of organisational setting do postgraduate public relations students prefer to work?
- What are the key sources of influence for postgraduate public relations students in selecting their course?

## ***Methodology***

This study was designed to further explore and build on the findings of an earlier study by the authors into undergraduate students' perceptions of a public relations career (Xavier, Mehta & Larkin, 2006).

To explore 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 administered that 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 over four consecutive semesters during 2004 and 2005 from postgraduate students enrolled in the entry level public relations management unit, available as part of graduate certificate and masters programs. The questionnaire was administered in the lecture period following a series of lectures on public relations careers and different areas of practice to ensure students had some exposure to their different options. Participation was anonymous and voluntary as per the University's ethics standard for research on current students. From a total enrolment of 228, 141 valid responses were collected and analysed.

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 and ANOVA 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 or motivating factors for public relations students. The study was conducted at only one university so the results will not be representative of all universities. 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 with undergraduate students, these perceptions may change over the course of further study in public relations once students are exposed to a wider range of options.

## ***Results***

### **Preferred area of public relations practice for postgraduate students**

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 event management and publicity and promotion; the least preferred area was investor relations. Approximately 15% of the sample was undecided at the point of study, that is, in the early stages of the students' studies.

AREA	2004	2005	2004/05
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	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Event management	16	28.1	17	21.5	33	24.3
Publicity and promotion	13	22.8	17	21.5	30	22.1
Issues and crisis management	8	14.0	12	15.2	20	14.7
Government relations and lobbying	4	7.0	8	10.1	12	8.8
Investor relations	3	5.3	2	2.5	5	3.7
Other	5	8.8	6	7.6	11	8.1
Undecided at this point	7	12.3	13	16.5	20	14.7
Will not work in public relations	1	1.8	4	5.1	5	3.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1: Preferred areas of public relations practice

### Preferred type of organisational setting for postgraduate public relations students

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. In-house public relations was preferred over consultancy positions, with approximately 54% 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).

ORGANISATIONAL SETTING	2004		2005		2004/05	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
Consultancy position	17	30.4	14	17.1	31	22.5
In-house – large organisation	16	28.6	27	32.9	43	31.2
In-house – small-to-medium organisation	4	7.1	13	15.9	17	12.3
In-house – government	8	14.3	7	8.5	15	10.9
Undecided at this point	11	19.6	21	25.6	32	23.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2: Preferred organisational setting

Further analysis of the preferred organisational setting data suggested there were significant relationships between preferred job and preferred organisational setting for the combined 2004 and 2005 sample,  $\chi^2 (28, N = 132) = 52.00, p = .004$ . For all preferred jobs, excluding government relations, the most preferred setting was an in-house role in a large organisation. Students wanting to work in a consultancy were equally likely to prefer a job in event management or issues and crisis management, whereas those who wanted to work in-house preferred to work in event management (see Table 3 for full details).

Consultancy	In-house with large organisation	In-house with small to medium organisation
Event management (1)	Event management	Event management
Issues and crisis management (1)	Publicity and promotion (2)	Publicity and promotion
Publicity and promotion	Issues and crisis management (2)	Issues and crisis management
Government relations and lobbying	Investor relations	Government relations and lobbying (4)
Investor relations	Government relations and lobbying	Investor relations (4)

Table 3: Preferred area of practice rankings within organisational setting

### Sources of influence for postgraduate public relations students

Students were asked to identify the strongest influencing factor on their choice to study public relations at a postgraduate level (see Table 4 for full details). The most cited influencing factor was reading interesting information on public relations. This information could have come from a wide range of sources including academic literature, popular press, and industry publications. Of least influence were television shows or movies portraying public relations. A large proportion of students in each year stated “other” reasons, suggesting there may be other important influencing factors. These “other” factors should be investigated further via exploratory research.

INFLUENCING FACTOR	2004		2005		2004/05	
	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
I have read information on public relations and it seemed interesting	23	40.4	31	36.9	54	38.3
Public relations is a required part of my course	5	8.8	8	9.5	13	9.2
I know someone working in public relations	8	14.0	3	3.6	11	7.8
I know someone who studied public relations	1	1.8	4	4.8	5	3.5
I watched TV shows/movies portraying public relations as interesting	0	0	4	4.8	4	2.8
Other	20	35.1	34	40.5	54	38.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4: Influencing factors on the study of public relations

## ***Discussion***

The findings of this study are significant to members of the academy who are tasked with developing courses and curricula for postgraduate education in public relations. These courses have grown considerably over the past decade and now represent almost 45% of the public relations courses accredited by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA, n.d.). As the recent report by the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) outlines, there will be a growing focus on postgraduate education by accrediting bodies who will be looking for “focused knowledge experience” (p. 51) as the current status of many programs is considered less than ideal.

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. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) suggests the majority of practitioners and educators surveyed agreed that graduate public relations education should have either an interdisciplinary focus drawing from communication, management and behavioural science or a discrete academic area with a management focus. This approach to curricula design will meet some of the diverse career outcomes better than others and needs to be monitored as more graduates enter the market.

Educators face pressure to meet student expectations for particular courses, helping students prepare for the diversity of careers available to them. While all careers have some underlying public relations concepts including theory, research and professional practice, educators must decide what balance of generalist versus specialist knowledge they will include in their courses and this may be influenced by student demand. And last, in the face of governmental and administrative review, educators must ensure their courses are viable.

Similar to Bowen’s (2003) US based study of undergraduate students, this study confirmed the strong postgraduate student interest in event management and publicity



and promotion. 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 in-house and consultancy roles (Mercer Report, 2004). Student interest in event management also matches with the third most important priority of in-house communication practitioners identified in the study (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 management, supported by a liberal arts, communication or business education framework where the relevance to career outcomes is not always apparent to the students. While this survey was administered in a subject offered as part of a coursework degree that stands alongside a distinct postgraduate research degree, it may be possible that students were interested in academic careers.

The mass media's influence on prospective students was confirmed in this study; however, there was a stronger influence by written media compared with television or movies. 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 practising professionals; however, this impact was minimal. 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 results also identified a high percentage of students identified "other" sources of influence on selecting a public relations course. Future research will clarify this "other category".

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 relatively 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 promotion in relevant literature by 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.

Unlike an earlier study with undergraduate students (Xavier et al, 2006), there appeared to be little discrimination between different areas of practice within different organisational types, with event management and publicity and promotion roles dominating across all sectors of the industry, closely followed by issues and crisis management. This may reflect students' exposure to types of practice before their course as well as their in-class experience. The postgraduate cohort showed significantly lower levels of indecision at the point of study than their undergraduate

colleagues, suggesting postgraduate students had a more specific focus on what they wanted from their study and where it would lead. 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.

Additional research is planned in the area to compare the career expectations of international and domestic students in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs. Further research is also being undertaken with both undergraduate and postgraduate students in their final semester of study to identify how impressions of the discipline and career choices change over time and whether this is different within the two cohorts. These changes may occur as a result of natural progress in student understanding of public relations and exposure to real world learning opportunities.

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 event management and publicity and promotion, 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.

This study has confirmed a strong student preference for careers in event management, and publicity and promotion. Public relations educators face a balance between the interests of students, university teaching and learning policies, and industry. Educators need to acknowledge and consider student preferences as they engage postgraduate students in their first and continuing semesters of study at the same time as maintaining a curriculum that supports extended learning in the discipline of public relations.

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