

Recognising a signature pedagogy for public relations teaching and learning in the last twenty years

Signature pedagogies in public relations teaching

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Abstract

Purpose – This study attempts to identify the drivers for change in Public Relations education and what assumptions are made about professional practice. The authors suggest signature pedagogy has the potential to deepen our understanding of the teaching and learning of Public Relations and what this means as the Public Relations curriculum adapts. The paper has theoretical and practical value. It forefronts the concept of signature pedagogy as a fresh way to look at Public Relations teaching and learning that can be developed.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper aims to explore the historical and contemporary context of teaching Public Relations within a university setting, how it has evolved and the assumptions that underpin it both nationally and internationally. Using a mixed methods approach, the paper investigates how the curriculum has changed since 2000, how it interacts with industry and how it reflects educational historical and contemporary frameworks. It also explores the assumptions on which Public Relations education was and is based and whether signature pedagogy is evidenced.

Findings – This study concludes that, from a signature pedagogy perspective, many current Public Relations curricula emphasise surface structures of learning. Deep structures, focusing on critical engagement and conceptual approaches to problem solving, are more variable, disconnected and contested. The data indicate the existence of an Anglo-American, skills-based approach to Public Relations knowledge, alongside international nuances around multi-culturalism. From a practical viewpoint, the paper contributes to how Public Relations programmes can be designed, taught and adapted in the future.

Originality/value – The paper evidences fully unique, primary research.

Keywords Signature pedagogy, Public relations pedagogy, Public relations degrees, Public relations education, Public relations in higher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the historical and contemporary context of teaching Public Relations within a university setting, how it has evolved and the assumptions that underpin it both nationally and internationally. It builds on work completed by one of the authors as part of the 20th anniversary of the Public Relations postgraduate degree at Cardiff University and presented at the International History of Public Relations Conference 2021. A 20-year time frame was chosen to reflect the developmental trajectory of the Cardiff MA in International Public Relations and Global Communications Management as part of these anniversary celebrations. Additional perspectives were then drawn from international voices and shared at the International History of Public Relations Conference in 2022.

The historical study of Public Relations pedagogy is ripe for development as although work exists in this area (Willis and McKie, 2011; Fitch, 2016), it is widely recognised that the area is under-explored (Freberg, 2015). Fresh analysis is timely given the changing understanding of Public Relations and communications following the Covid-19 pandemic and its relevance in a complex world characterised by what Cascio (2020) calls BANI – one that is brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible. Such a world is beset by wicked problems, a term coined by Rittel and Webber (1973), and defined by Willis (2016, p. 307) as a “complex



cocktail of factors and conditions” with multiple stakeholder perspectives requiring on-going action and a commitment to search out solutions. As Valdés *et al.* (2019) suggest, these wicked problems are symptoms of a sickly society and argue that “we need to evaluate the sociocultural implications of PR impacts” (p. 3) and its potential to be a stimulus for collective intelligence and knowledge sharing.

Historical perspectives can illuminate current understanding of Public Relations and provide insight to contemporary debates, for example in the UK about the future of Public Relations degrees. PR Moment (Ogden, 2022) discussed the closing of many single honour’s Public Relations programmes in the UK and the rise of integrated communication degrees of which Public Relations is a constituent part. Additionally, Mules (2021) has championed the importance of embracing activism studies in Public Relations curricula to open the possibility of greater critical reflection and consideration of the discipline’s role in society, while simultaneously recognising the complementary professional capabilities of both fields.

Against this topicality, we suggest that the concept of a signature pedagogy is valuable as a conceptual lens to understand teaching and learning in professional practice. Theorised by Shulman (2005), a signature pedagogy focuses on the knowledge necessary for a profession but also incorporates a moral and ethical dimension linked to attitudes, values and dispositions to better reflect the characteristics required to be an effective practitioner. Such a theoretical lens also enables a discussion to compare pedagogical orientations in different cultural settings. Consequently, our study adds to the body of knowledge in three ways. First, it investigates the nature of Public Relations teaching and learning, identifying its specific components and whether this has changed. Second, it brings to the fore the notion of signature pedagogies as a way of theorising Public Relations pedagogy in a professional practice context. Finally, it adds insight to the challenge and opportunities of developing a global curriculum.

This paper initially identifies key themes in Higher Education teaching and learning literature before establishing three core research questions. It then outlines a methodological approach before presenting and discussing key findings.

Literature review

Higher education and trends in pedagogy

The management of, and access to, higher (or university) education is not uniform with numerous variations between countries. Despite this, several patterns have emerged over the last twenty years regarding the teaching of Public Relations in a university setting. Firstly, many universities now operate within a neoliberal setting underpinned by marketisation, performance metrics, and stratification (Schulze-Cleven *et al.*, 2017) that relate to the post-massification of Higher Education itself (King and Marwala, 2017).

Secondly, many Western style universities are attempting to shift away from what Barr and Tagg (1995) call *instruction* or the *banking* paradigm to the *learning* paradigm. Literature points to the growing importance of a postmodernist approach, or pedagogies (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013) that draw on liberationist pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and creative rationality (Forest and Faucheux, 2009) that embed agility, creativity, instability and learning by doing. There is also a growing recognition that learning comes from lived experiences and is an embodied process (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2017).

Indeed, this shift reflects the view that there are many different styles and approaches to teaching based on different philosophical positions. Constructivist approaches point to learners needing to be active rather than passive with student-centred activities that lead to change and transformation. Social constructivist perspectives, illustrated through the work of Vygotsky (1978), amplify the importance of collaboration and socio-cultural approaches. Conversely, behaviour focussed pedagogies place instruction as centrally drawn from the individual (Skinner, 1968), while liberationist pedagogy views learning as a journey of discovery (Freire, 1970).

Such debates have become amplified, in part due to the need to equip graduates to deal with a world of “unknown unknowns” (Jensen and Toth, 2017). Students face a world and career landscape that is increasingly complex and dynamic, manifesting in networked problems (Dorst, 2015). In response, Peschl *et al.* (2021) argue for greater entrepreneurial thinking to be embedded into education. Such an approach would move learning beyond procedural knowledge to encourage risk, initiative and creativity, whilst learners would become more comfortable with ambiguity, critical feedback and adaptation. Such shifts call for a greater variety of pedagogical approach to learning and assessment, but have not been fully embraced due to the institutional constraints and barriers experienced within the neo-liberal higher education classroom (Bowman *et al.*, 2022; Serrano *et al.*, 2018). These include, for example, student as customer, ends (good grades) over means (process), and both institutions and learners being risk averse (Giroux, 2011; McGettigan, 2013).

Finally, educators have been increasingly challenged, despite marketisation, to return to the purpose of pedagogy (Christensen *et al.*, 2010) focused on transformative education that maximises individual potential, encourages a vibrant, participative democracy, develops skills and competencies for economic growth and, above all, helps people to see things differently (Currie and Knights, 2003). In part this strives for a re-focusing on authenticity in learning in the tradition of Freire (1970) that allows learners to be more conscious of their situation and the world around them. As Serrano *et al.* (2018) stress, authenticity relates to understanding, not the mechanical memorising of facts.

Public relations pedagogical perspectives and disciplinary issues

According to Jones and McKie (2009), Public Relations pedagogy has mirrored pedagogical trends which have moved away from instructor-led pedagogy, with a greater recognition instead of the knowledge students bring to Public Relations (Willis and McKie, 2011) and a focus on intelligent participation, personal reflection on learning and co-created knowledge.

However, the teaching of Public Relations as a discipline cannot be divorced from the position of Public Relations practice itself as part of the academy. The teaching of a discipline relates to ways knowledge is understood and organised including tools, theories, and concepts (Klein, 1990) which construct a particular worldview of the discipline and establish boundaries. Such tools, theories and concepts are evident in the teaching of Public Relations, which has been shaped by credentialism as an element of its emerging professional status (Fawkes, 2015). University curricula have therefore been informed by professional body criteria surrounding the knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary for employment. For example, the Commission on Public Relations Education (2017) and the Capabilities Framework produced by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management (2018) are widely benchmarked in the validation and review process for university programmes in many countries.

Consequently, teaching and learning has reflected a functional and practical orientation such as research, writing, planning, and digital literacy rather than wider critical reflection looking at Public Relations from the perspective of power, as well as its social, cultural, and political responsibilities. Such an orientation does not give primacy to criticality and although critical theorising does exist, with notable scholars including Lee Edwards, Jacqui L’Etang and Derina Holzhausen, such ideas remain located within a functionalist curriculum (Mules, 2021) or are taught mainly at postgraduate level (Edwards, 2015). However, greater recognition is now being given to ethics and values in the curriculum (Bowen and Erzikova, 2013) while a more balanced approach to both conceptual and skills-based knowledge is starting to emerge in some programmes (Azionya *et al.*, 2019).

Yet the relationship between Public Relations academia and Public Relations practice (through professional bodies) is not straight forward and is subject to country variability. For example, [Fitch \(2016\)](#) points to the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) wanting more involvement in controlling the curriculum, whilst in the UK the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) has limited involvement and an inconsistent relationship with academia.

Additionally, the relationship between Public Relations and Higher Education inside the academy itself has not been an easy one. As [Mules \(2021\)](#) suggests, pedagogies associated with the functionalist skills-based paradigm, and by implication employability and careers, can cause tension with the wider aspirations of a more holistic university education for individual and social transformation and citizenship ([Christensen et al., 2010](#)). Inside the university, Public Relations is seen as a vocational discipline that is not afforded the same academic status as other non-vocational subjects or more established professional fields such as law and medicine, or is compared unfavourably to traditional university subjects. Many teachers of Public Relations are former practitioners who build scholarly careers (through research obligations and publication) later than their academic peers, which may potentially compound the status issue. Given the industry focus of curricula, research too has tended to be more practice-led, leading to the reproduction of knowledge rather than new knowledge ([Jelen, 2008](#)).

Role of signature pedagogies

Against these pedagogical debates, [Shulman \(2005\)](#) suggests that the professions warrant specific attention as “professionals need to be able to respond competently and efficiently to often irreversible and high-stakes work situations” ([Esterhazy et al., 2021](#), p. 135). Preparation for professional life is contextual, requiring appropriate knowledge, practical skills and moral reasoning that equate to good professional habits ([De Lange et al., 2018, 2020](#)).

Signature pedagogies have been studied in different settings such as law, medicine, and design ([Esterhazy et al., 2021](#)) but there is limited attention in the Public Relations field. A signature pedagogy intends to support individuals “to think, to perform, and to act with integrity” ([Shulman, 2005](#), p. 52). When taken together, these elements form the three dimensions of professional work. Most professional degrees (or other types of professional study) typically attempt to reflect and integrate these dimensions in their programmes ([Esterhazy et al., 2021](#)) recognising that “signature pedagogies are pedagogies of uncertainty and create a classroom that is unpredictable and surprising” ([Peschl et al. 2021](#), p. 9).

According to [Shulman \(2005\)](#), signature pedagogies involve understanding.

- (1) Surface structures (e.g. operational acts of teaching) that, for Public Relations, align to experiential learning, simulations and live briefs.
- (2) Deep structures (e.g. exploring assumptions about how best to impact the professional body of knowledge) that involve recognising the emergent and improvisational nature of Public Relations, adaptability, collaboration, critical dialogue and recognition of failure. Such structures mirror the reality of the unpredictable workplace.
- (3) Implicit structures that look at underlying professional beliefs and embrace professional attitudes, values and dispositions. Such structures align with codes of conduct, integrity, ethical reflection, problem-solving, strategic thinking, tackling uncertainty and understanding others’ perspectives ([Shulman, 2005](#)).

These three components equate to a form of professional preparation and, for Shulman (2005), allow students to build and demonstrate their professional knowledge and skills whilst performing professional tasks. Students taught via such a pedagogy develop integrated knowledge, skills and ethical approaches involving a moral understanding of their profession that helps establish “habits of the mind, hand and heart” (Shulman, p. 59).

Of relevance to professional education is the focus on on-going oral feedback to learners that is disproportionately greater compared to learners in non-professional studies (Jessop and Maleckar, 2016). The role of realistic tasks that link theory and practice is prioritised, together with students experiencing situations that challenge knowledge and highlight ethical dilemmas (Esterhazy *et al.*, 2021).

Consequently, we argue that signature pedagogy provides a way to understand Public Relations teaching and learning and to reflect on the challenges of balancing the competing responsibilities of supporting professional practice and the academy.

As this brief pedagogical overview has established, there is a gap in the literature to deepen our understanding of Public Relations pedagogy and its evolution. At the same time, signature pedagogy has received little attention in the field of Public Relations scholarship. Consequently, our study has three specific questions:

RQ1. Can we detect a signature pedagogy for Public Relations?

RQ2. How has this evolved over the last twenty years?

RQ3. What are the international similarities and differences?

Methodology

This is a small scale mixed methods study that investigates how the curriculum has changed since 2000, how it interacts with industry and how it reflects historical and contemporary educational frameworks. It also explores the assumptions on which Public Relations was and is based and whether signature pedagogy is evidenced. It attempts to identify the drivers for change in Public Relations education and what assumptions are made about professional practice. It looks at how we currently teach Public Relations graduates to think and whether this has changed over time. The study also analyses the major assumptions embedded in our current curriculum and explores the need to review these. Finally, it attempts to understand any significant differences in Public Relations pedagogy between cultures and countries to inform future research activities.

This approach draws on two phases:

Phase 1: Electronic (email) interviews using survey style open-ended questions distributed via snowball sampling through various professional and teaching networks. Participants were drawn from six different universities across the UK and USA.

Phase 2: Four in depth qualitative interviews with academics that have taught on various Public Relations programmes in Australia, New Zealand and Nigeria.

Electronic (email) interviews are increasingly seen as a valid research method (Dahlin, 2021) especially when arranging interviews is challenging. Snowball sampling is one of the most commonly used sampling methodologies within qualitative research (Parker *et al.*, 2019). In this approach, researchers use their social networks to create links with potential participants who in turn recruit study participants not easily accessible or known to the researcher (Leighton *et al.*, 2021). Snowball sampling was chosen as a methodology for Phase 1 of the research and combined with purposive sampling due to its convenience. In this case, the purposive parameters of the target population were university academics

teaching Public Relations, and participants were selected using a linear approach where each subject suggested another participant from their own academic networks. The methodology and approach were granted approval by the Research Ethics Board of the researcher's home university.

The research was conducted in two phases with the initial phase focusing on academics now working in the UK and US as the Public Relations profession is larger in these two countries than elsewhere in the world (Gregory, 2011). In order to provide a more holistic overview of Public Relations teaching during the period under review, the second phase then focused instead on Public Relations academics in other countries. Non-probability convenience sampling was selected as a methodology for identifying the first interview respondent, followed again by linear snowball sampling to recruit further participants. While the respondents had originally worked as Public Relations academics in the Middle East and Africa as well as Oceania, three of the four respondents now work in either Australia or New Zealand, which subsequently became the main focus of the findings. As the research therefore investigates firstly the dominant localities of the profession, and secondly more emergent localities in the Global South, the findings are presented in two parts to reflect these different contexts.

While the research project is small in scale, both interview phases provided rich, highly detailed data which was subsequently analysed using general thematic approaches as outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020). This method of analysis involves "searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 92). The patterns observed as part of this process were subsequently tested against the themes specified in the literature review to identify meaningful insight relating to the research questions.

Findings and discussion

Phase 1 – electronic (email) interviews

This involved six Public Relations academics from the UK and USA and yielded the following key themes:

- (1) A historically different approach to the development of Public Relations education in the UK and US.
- (2) A belief that the traditional focus on employability limits actual understanding of the subject among Public Relations graduates.
- (3) The general lack of educational leadership at professional body level with regard to tertiary Public Relations education.
- (4) A disconnection between practice and teaching regarding digital communication.

Thematic analysis of the responses identified the following themes or nodes with participants offering differing perspectives of each area:

Basis of the Curriculum

Different Geographical Practices

Education Narratives

Professional Narratives

Areas of Difference or Development

Basis of the curriculum. Respondents noted that, in the early years of course development, the curriculum was based on the personal experience of staff rather than criteria agreed with the professional and awarding bodies. For example, one respondent noted that:

The curriculum was constructed from the personal experience of those putting together the courses. I was given the course handbook and given three months to put together the first year's modules from a paragraph of text on each.

Early courses were often written by communications or media specialists, who then brought in Public Relations practitioners to teach once courses were established. This led to multiple and frequent reviews and revalidations as the capacity and skill sets of staff changed over time.

A significant influence on the curriculum taught was where the programmes were located within universities. For example, one respondent argued that:

How a Public Relations degree is constructed will depend on the department in which the course is based. Ours is a School of Communication, so there were a lot of modules around interpersonal communication etc. Obviously this won't be true of a Public Relations degree in a business or media school.

Courses were often revalidated to find shared modules with other business or media programmes, which influenced the pedagogies employed.

The emphasis in early course development was on functional skills – how to write a press release, how to prepare a crisis communications manual, how to plan an event, how to write material for internal communications. Respondents felt this stemmed from a “monolithic consensus” where the curriculum was not predicated on contested ideas, but on the teaching of practical skills, often because these skills were being taught by former practitioners rather than traditional academics. While this prepared graduates well for their first job in Public Relations, it was often all that was being taught. For example, one respondent noted that:

There was no focus on the skills nor competencies needed by future leaders in Public Relations – rather just on the employability of junior account executives.

Respondents also noted an overriding focus on Grunig and Hunt as *the* dominant paradigm within Public Relations practice, coupled with an overfocus on practical skills teaching. Some argued this led to universities teaching students what was required to deliver “good” Public Relations – i.e. elevated vocational training – rather than using the discipline as a lens through which to critique societies, bodies of thought, or other signature pedagogies common in liberal systems of education.

Different geographical practices. There was a difference in pedagogical approach between the UK and US, and this was driven, in part, by the relative professional institutes and their different approaches. In the US, where Public Relations courses were mainly based in Schools of Media or Communication rather than business schools, universities were focused on gaining one off accreditation via the Public Relations Society of America. By contrast in the UK there was an uneasy relationship between the developing courses and professional accrediting body, which was more focused on practical skills than graduate competencies.

UK Public Relations degree programmes have always incorporated a strong emphasis on employability. Professional advisory boards were used for validation from 2000 onwards and in the earlier years of course development, a student placement was required for programmes to gain CIPR approval.

This is no longer the case as “not all students can afford to undertake a work placement” in the current UK economic climate, especially since the restructuring of UK Higher Education finance. Instead, UK courses often include opportunities for students to undertake consultancy projects as part of, or in place of, a dissertation. As noted by one respondent:

This enables students who have regular part-time employment to continue with their jobs whilst undertaking some form of project based work experience.

Education narratives in Public Relations teaching. In the developing courses of the early 2000s, there was an ongoing narrative of encouraging students to become independent, rather than dependent, learners. However, the structure of degree programmes did not support this due to the didactic teaching models employed.

The major assumption of Public Relations teaching at university is still that, whilst this is a “degree subject” and therefore needs to have a theoretical underpinning, the emphasis is on the end goal of employment, which is then reflected in teaching structures and marking practices.

The foundational aspects of what constitutes Public Relations knowledge has not changed. As one respondent notes, “the sheer volume of social and digital media content is fairly new,” but writing, in whatever form, remains the “biggest component” of a career in Public Relations. It is therefore writing, and the ability to write, which continues to shape the educational narrative, or signature pedagogy, of Public Relations education.

Professional narratives in public relations practice. There is little change in the major narratives of Public Relations practice itself. Professional bodies and industry leaders talk of the necessity for Public Relations to have a “seat at the boardroom table,” but much industry practice, as well as employability focused university teaching, still emphasises Public Relations tactics rather than strategy. For example, one respondent noted that:

There is a longing to be in the boardroom but there is still an emphasis on tactics. Social media is constantly put forward as the best way that Grunig’s symmetrical model can be realised, but few organisations actually do this well. There is still a focus on coverage rather than engagement.

The industry is still dominated by a gender pay gap, long hours culture and lack of respect for diversity and equality, despite several respondents noting that this was an increasing preoccupation of Public Relations education. One respondent noted that:

Our initial courses sent female graduates out into the world of work ill prepared for what they would face, and with expectations that exceeded what the industry was ever going to deliver. Little has changed. It’s only a few years since the CIPR recognized the gender pay gap. And in an industry which is three quarters female, the vast majority of senior personnel are still men.

Areas of difference or development. Respondents noted that much of the content of Public Relations teaching is very similar to what it was twenty years ago, although there is more emphasis now on repurposing content for different communication channels, especially digital ones, and for different campaigns.

The difference between the pace of change in practice and in education was noted by several respondents. The digital revolution is leading to fast paced change within industry itself, while universities struggle to keep up as it can take 2–3 years to revalidate modules and/or programmes. For some universities, this has led to an emphasis on generic Public Relations skills rather than specialised ones, further exacerbating the difference between education and professional practice in Public Relations. While universities do teach digital communication, it therefore tends to be insufficiently future focused. An exception to this pattern is where new, younger academics with the confidence and ability to focus on digitally themed research, who are able to bring their expertise into the classroom for the benefit of students.

From these interviews the following is identified as major drivers for change in Public Relations education.

- (1) Professional body degree recognition criteria
- (2) The willingness of Public Relations practitioners to support education

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- (3) Changes in Public Relations practice (e.g. the digital landscape, increasingly blurred boundaries with marketing)
 - (4) University policy changes (e.g. assessment policies, restructuring options, policies about paying and hiring part-time tutors who come from industry)
 - (5) Increasing number of PhD qualified lecturers which means there is a desire teach research interests and that teaching has become more rigorous
 - (6) Lengthy university reviews of degrees

These findings demonstrate a pattern of increasing professionalisation of teaching, occurring concurrently with the professionalisation of practice. At the same time, these courses have experienced a transformation from bespoke skills-based education to the homogenisation of courses. However, as these respondents were all based in the UK or USA, their experience of Public Relations teaching may differ from the experience of their peers in localities from the Global South where the history and/or scale of Public Relations teaching may be less developed. These localities therefore feature, instead, in the findings of the in-depth interviews conducted in Phase 2 of the research.

Phase 2 in-depth interviews

The interviews of four Public Relations academics from Australia, New Zealand and Nigeria yielded the following key themes:

- (1) The changing focus and purpose of Public Relations Education
- (2) The impact of changing university leadership practice on the development of Public Relations Education
- (3) Drivers of change are external as well as rooted in changing practice
- (4) There are significant differences in degree format across countries
- (5) Digital technology has caused incremental rather than discontinuous change
- (6) The curriculum is still dominated by conceptualisations of the Global North and Excellence Theory

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified the following themes or nodes with participants offering differing perspectives of each area:

Origins of Public Relations Education

Curriculum Development

University Leadership

Changing Priorities

Changing Assumptions

Drivers for Change

Origins of public relations education. In all countries represented in the research, Public Relations Education started as a module within a wider course, then emerged as a distinct programme, with many appearing around twenty years ago. The opposite is happening now as Public Relations is again being subsumed into wider disciplines.

The first modules came out of an identified need within English and/or Management subject areas. However, in most countries represented, Public Relations is taught within

media and communications or business schools. This means the subject is often combined with media, communications or business subjects, which shapes the framework of the curriculum and what are regarded as success factors. However, participants did note an increasing understanding of what Public Relations constitutes as a discipline:

A lot of the early curriculum focused on defining Public Relations by what it wasn't – i.e. it wasn't advertising, it wasn't marketing, it wasn't journalism etc. Now we have a much broader understanding of what Public Relations is, built on more critical and research-based perspectives of the discipline.

Curriculum development. Once a full programme had been established, the emerging curriculum was built around the criteria set down by accrediting bodies, although this differed country to country. For example, Australian universities focused on the Public Relations Institute of Australia while New Zealand institutions chose to look to the Public Relations Society of America for accreditation purposes. In Australia, PRIA are very involved in the formulation of an accredited curriculum, which has influenced how the curriculum has developed in partner universities.

The curriculum has been affected more by who universities can recruit to teach the programme than student need. In Australia this has led to a dependence on industry practitioners and case studies, whereas in New Zealand this initially led to an academic research focus rather than emphasis on practical skills. Curriculum development in both countries, as well as elsewhere in the Global South, is still heavily influenced by a university's ability to attract visiting Public Relations speakers and academics from the UK and US.

Globally, Public Relations as a university subject area still struggles with a poor reputation and this impacts both curriculum development and the reputation of Public Relations academics due to widely publicised instances of unethical practice in industry.

University leadership. The location of Public Relations education has resulted in tensions between Public Relations academics on the one hand, and media and marketing academics on the other. One participant noted that tenured business and marketing academics from more established programmes “*feel that Public Relations is an inappropriate subject to be taught alongside their disciplines.*” This tension is reflected in leadership decisions about the development of Public Relations education, with substantial stand-alone programmes or research clusters being axed to allocate resource elsewhere in the department, with consequent impacts on Public Relations academics and programmes.

Some Public Relations courses have become “cash cows” and yet are allocated continuously decreasing resources. As a result, Public Relations is increasingly taught again as a single module, or limited suite of modules, as part of another general marketing, media, or communications programme where a broad approach is taken to teaching multiple disciplines.

Curriculum development is subject to internal forces within university departments. Participants reported a hiatus in development when academic teams are subject to what they regarded as “unjustified resource constraints, despite being more successful than other areas at both recruiting students and producing research outputs.” However, academics also noted that accreditation gave them some limited protection against such constraints where accrediting bodies require minimum benchmark topics to be covered as part of the accreditation process.

Changing priorities. The boundaries between Public Relations and more general marketing, media and communications disciplines are now much more permeable, which makes it difficult to “silo” Public Relations as a career. This was noted by participants from both Oceania and Nigeria where curricula is perceived in highly interdisciplinary terms. One participant felt this meant that “modern students need a broader range of transferrable skills across a range of marketing, media and communications applications” to that required in the past. They argued that:

This approach foregrounds a critical understanding of the application of media and communications work and challenges the traditional assumption that Public Relations is a strategic management discipline that is predominantly rooted in the corporate sphere.

Participants reported that employability has always been a curriculum priority and continues to be so now. While modern generalist courses are still positioned as “professionally focused,” one participant argued that employability is now founded on “critical engagement with media and communications scholarship in order to develop students for their future careers.” This, therefore, represents a significant shift away from the skills focus of the early curriculum.

According to one participant, this different emphasis reflects the fact that “the career Public Relations education prepares students for now is likely to follow a very different trajectory to that pursued by their peers twenty or thirty years ago. Students are less likely to have only one career, and the modern emphasis on transferrable skills and critical engagement with marketing, media and communication therefore prepares them for the three or four different careers they may have over their lifetime.” This contrasts sharply with the tactical, skills focussed programmes of twenty years ago which would not have prepared students in the same way.

These changing priorities are reflected in the modern curriculum by a focus not only on the skills that might have been in a traditional Public Relations degree, but by a deeper understanding of the societal impacts of Public Relations in a manner that helps students solve real world “Wicked” problems. In Australia, this is articulated as critical engagement; in New Zealand this is expressed as “empowering students to become ethical practitioners;” while in Nigeria this is demonstrated by the foregrounding of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Changing assumptions. Participants noted that the early Public Relations curriculum was based on the assumption that Public Relations “experts” were in industry, not in the academy, or universities. The second over-riding assumption was that two-way symmetrical communication was the most ethical form of practice, “even when in practice it wasn’t.” One participant noted that:

Public Relations education is still, to this day, dominated by assumptions that conceptualise the Global North and Excellence Theory as the foundation of Public Relations. This has built injustices around gender and race into our theorising of the field.

The need to address diversity, social justice and multi-culturalism are therefore significant themes underpinning Public Relations curriculum development and teaching in global institutions. As noted by one participant:

We still have a tendency to teach ‘how to’ practical skills from an ‘excellence’ perspective without fully understanding the damage some of those practices do. Such assumptions have not been challenged enough by university academics in terms of their impact on society.

Students also bring their own assumptions to Public Relations learning and teaching. Academics from all countries represented in the interviews noted that students tended to find organisational solutions to case study topics, rather than focusing on ethical solutions, which reinforced the need to challenge such assumptions through critical engagement.

Drivers for change. While Public Relations as an industry has changed dramatically in recent decades, the development of the curriculum has been influenced by structural changes in Higher Education itself as much as changes in Public Relations practice. All countries represented in the research had experienced significant structural shifts in the structure of, access to and financing of Higher Education, as well as impacts related to the increase in international student mobility over the last decade.

The increasing diversity of the student body has also impacted curriculum development, leading to more international scholarship, less dependence on American perspectives and a

developing Asia–Pacific and trans-national understanding of Public Relations and how it can be harnessed in pursuit of social justice.

Participants also noted the significant role of digital communication in driving pedagogical change, but felt the response of institutions had been variable, with some universities better equipped than others to adapt to this new digital focus. For those programmes which emphasised critical engagement over skills acquisition, the impact of digital transformation had been less profound. For example, one Australian participant argued that:

Digital has, of course, transformed everything we know about Public Relations and media, but this change has been incremental rather than abrupt. Students now need to think not only about how digital can be used as a suite of tools and tactics, but how the hierarchies and prejudices we have had in the past are encoded in artificial intelligence and digital channels.

An ethical understanding of digital deployment is therefore key to any future understanding of Public Relations practice.

Change has also been driven by the need to create academic legitimacy. Participants from all countries represented felt that the growth in research and scholarship had a demonstrable impact on the curriculum. One participant argued that:

The evidence base for Public Relations itself has started to challenge our understanding of the societal impact of Public Relations. But to fully address the deficit, we must find opportunities for collaboration which foreground what we can contribute to society and how we can help solve some of the big societal issues.

Interview participants therefore identified the following as major drivers for change in Public Relations education.

- (1) The need to improve internal reputation – Public Relations education thrives in departments where senior leaders value the contribution the subject makes as both a teaching and research discipline. Without strong support from leadership, Public Relations academic teams are vulnerable to marginalisation and shrinking resources, regardless of how successful their recruitment and research outputs may be.
- (2) The need to build academic credibility – Public Relations as an academic discipline requires greater academic scholarship, stronger international networks for collaboration and further engagement in interdisciplinary epistemology to evidence how it can contribute to solving the world’s “Wicked” problems.
- (3) Broadening the Public Relations curriculum – The future curriculum needs to equip students with a broader understanding not only of how digital communication enhances their ability to create content, but how digital affects their capacity to think critically and ethically about Public Relations work itself.

Conclusions

In response to RQ1 and RQ2, analysis of interview data points to the existence of a signature pedagogy for Public Relations and its evolutionary nature. It reveals a paradox and tension as Public Relations teaching has always foregrounded post-modernist approaches to teaching (e.g. experiential and live briefs), yet with a pivot towards modernist content (e.g. banking and functional focus on employability). In this it embraces aspects of [Shulman's \(2005\)](#) surface learning with some attention to building deeper approaches, although there is less evidence that the signature pedagogies employed embed extensive entrepreneurial thinking as demanded by [Peschl et al. \(2021\)](#).

Nonetheless, the data reveals a significant level of interdisciplinary working and knowledge as Public Relations can be seen proliferating in all directions while focusing on continuous learning and adaption, therefore aligning with the concept of the rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1988). Such an approach contests disciplinary boundaries, which reflect an outdated view of disciplines as highlighted by Klein (1990) and suggests that Public Relations pedagogy could be well placed to build on the importance of interdisciplinary approaches required in modern times. It supports the view of Nothhaft and Zerfass (2023) that Public Relations' education plays the role of a "job market feeder" (p. 247) and that differences between communication disciplines, including theoretical underpinning, are tribal rather than logical.

We argue that, despite this focus on employability, such a growing interdisciplinary orientation, including in knowledge and theory, could bring benefits to those studying Public Relations. However, as Public Relations continues to situate itself in the liminal space between different scholarly traditions, professional practices and academic locations (Jensen and Toth, 2017), its status within the academy remains precarious.

Overall, the survey and interview data suggest that

- (1) The same overarching narratives, or signature pedagogies, of Public Relations education exist in modern universities as existed in the universities of the early 2000s, driven by the subject's applied employability role and attempt to build professional authenticity (Serrano *et al.*, 2018).
- (2) While in the 1990s and early 2000s some universities included philosophy, critical thinking and ethics in university courses, much of this has been lost in the drive for employability alongside the current university leadership emphasis on cost benefit analysis and internationalisation. This challenges the importance of embedding greater critical, societal and moral dimensions in Public Relations curricula despite its growing evidence in programmes (Azionya *et al.*, 2019).
- (3) There is still a focus on coverage rather than engagement, and while social media is presented as the embodiment of Grunig's symmetrical communication model, few universities teach digital communication in a manner that supports a genuine understanding of what ethical engagement is.
- (4) There is a disconnect between professional practice and Higher Education as universities are not fast enough to review, revalidate and adapt to changes in the profession.

Signature pedagogy suggests the current Public Relations curriculum is broadly consistent in its approach to surface structures of learning, although these have evolved in some institutions to reflect contemporary Public Relations practice itself. Deep structures, focusing on critical engagement and conceptual approaches to problem solving, are more variable, disconnected and contested. This reflects, in part, the tension evident in neo-liberal Higher Education, as identified by Schulze-Cleven *et al.* (2017) and Xing and Marwala (2017). Public Relations education therefore mirrors wider trends in university teaching and learning practice, as argued by Willis and McKie (2011).

Although contemporary Public Relations education tends to pivot towards surface and employability-led curricula, there is still tension. Often the curriculum is slow to adapt to changes in practice (such as digital communications) given university structures, and in some institutions is now orientated less towards skills for a graduate's first job and more towards future professional and managerial roles. There appear, therefore, to be challenges to embedding deep learning opportunities as well as reflection on values and dispositions of practice to enhance criticality and societal perspectives. The need for criticality reflects the wider purpose of Higher Education in line with Christensen *et al.* (2010), as well as developing higher-level graduate capabilities to tackle what Jensen and Toth (2017) reference as "unknown unknowns" such as wicked problems.

In respect of RQ3, there is a strong Anglo-American thread of what constitutes a skills-based employability approach to Public Relations knowledge, alongside international nuances around multi-culturalism that require further exploration. The thread of credentialism (Fawkes, 2015), we argue, still haunts the global curricula, yet what this means to modern-day in-country practice warrants further unpicking.

While recognising that there are limitations to this study (its small scale and interpretivist orientation), we therefore believe it has opened fresh ways to investigate Public Relations teaching and learning that can be developed, debated, and extended to country-specific studies to broaden comparisons. In this, the research has contributed to knowledge in three ways. Firstly, we investigated the nature of Public Relations teaching and learning, and our research has identified key components driven by the focus on employability. We demonstrate that the same educational narratives predominate as were prevalent twenty years ago. Secondly, we have given visibility to signature pedagogy as a way of understanding the teaching and learning of Public Relations, enabling the paradoxes and tensions in pedagogy to be revealed. Such tensions include the importance of amplifying the critical and moral dimension in professional practice that is constantly being challenged in Public Relations pedagogy. Finally, we have added insight to the difficulties of developing a global curriculum given the neo-liberal, marketised condition of Higher Education, including the need to move beyond an Anglo-American centric approach to practice.

We believe signature pedagogy could provide a useful tool to understand, construct and re-construct Public Relations curricula. A signature pedagogy has the potential to embrace more fully different socio-cultural contexts by mapping these to the dimensions of professional education. In so doing, it could provide a vehicle for greater postmodernist tendencies in higher education to ensure future Public Relations practitioners can rise to the challenges posed by wicked problems and a world of unknown unknowns.

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