The value of academia: variance among academic and practitioner perspectives on the role of public relations academics

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of investigation into the perceived value of public relations academics and academia by public relations academics and practitioners in Australia. This research forms part of broader doctoral research into areas of convergence and divergence in terms of perceptions of theory and practice in the public relations field among practitioners and academics in Australia.

While most practitioners in the sample see academics as adding value to the public relations field, a significant proportion do not. Of the public relations practitioners who do not perceive academia as adding value to the field, responses are underpinned by a common theme; academia is out of touch with industry and unresponsive to practitioner needs.

Findings indicate that academics may not be as out of touch as practitioners imagine. The majority of academics in the sample have worked as practitioners, and demonstrate insight into public relations practitioner duties. Furthermore, findings show that practitioners and academics research interests overlap, indicating that academics can be useful contributors to public relations practice.

Practitioners imagine academics in the field as teachers, researchers, credibility builders, practitioner problem solvers, facilitators, and industry advocates. Meanwhile, most academics in the sample did not perceive their roles as broadly. This paper posits that variance in academic role expectations between each group devalues notions of academia, and promotes the role of the Public Relations Institute of Australia as a potentially powerful intermediary between academics and practitioners in Australia.
Introduction and review of the literature

Research and commentary into the academic/practitioner divide continues to engage scholars across business disciplines. In management, various authors such as Porter and McKibbin (1988), Abrahamson (1996), Mowday (1997), and Rynes, Bartunek and Daft (2001), discuss the differences and divide between academics and practitioners. Bolton and Stoicis (2003) raise issues surrounding the ‘disconnect’ between academics and practitioners in public administration. Senge (1988) notes that a gap exists between teaching and practice in the field of management accounting. Lee, Koh, Yen and Tang (2002) write about the academic/practitioner divide in information systems. Hunt (2002, p. 305) notes that “throughout its 100-plus year history, one of the most recurring themes has been that there is a ‘gap’ or ‘divide’ between marketing academe and marketing practice”.

As the literature on academic–practitioner relationships to public relations specific contexts is limited, this paper reviews a variety of relevant perspectives across business disciplines such as advertising, marketing, management, public administration, organisational psychology, and information technology.

Cheng and de Gregorio (2007) are one of the few to consider the interface between practitioners and academics in public relations. They asked public relations scholars about their views on the perceived gap and relevance of research to practitioners. The researchers found that overall academic respondents did identify a gap between these groups as well as a desire to forge closer ties with practitioners.

Many authors and social commentators alike have made the case for academia’s limited relevance to practitioners. Starkey and Madan (2001) question the ongoing relevance of academics in management research. Hodgkinson, Herriot and Anderson (2001) alert us to the academy’s likely significantly reduced role in the future in terms of the knowledge production process in organisational psychology. Brennan and Ankers (2004) considered the relevance of academic research to management practice in business-to-business marketing. They found that academics saw potential value and relevance in their work for managers; meanwhile practitioners claimed that they were not interested in academic research and were more inclined to value the work of consultants.

Ho (2000, p. 6), when discussing the academic/practitioner gap in information technology, posits “much academic research on information technology, systems, and management has been branded by practitioners in business as unusable, irrelevant, and unreadable”. Anderson (1998) describes managers’ views of academic research in the field of organisational behaviour as “unreadable, banal and inconsequential” (cited in November 2004, p. 39).

In their brief article, Gibson and Mohr (1977, p. 612) point out three foundational assumptions linked to the relationship between practitioners and academics.
Assumption 1. There is a gulf between the academic and practitioner worlds.

Assumption 2. Each world has something to contribute to the other.

Assumption 3. Each world will learn from the other if, and only if, the two are brought into contact with each other on a continuing basis.

While Gibson and Mohr made these assertions particularly in the context of their unique research project, a review of the literature indicates that these assumptions underpin most academic literature on the topic.

The literature presents almost universal consensus that a divide between academics and practitioners exists. Highlighting this, Brennan, when Guest Editor for a special issue of the journal Marketing Intelligence & Planning, entitled ‘the academic/practitioner divide in marketing: myth or reality?’, noted that “nobody chose to submit a paper supporting the ‘myth’ side of the argument” (2004, p. 492). Rather, authors across the board present reasons for the divide and discuss recommendations for improvement. Commentators offer different explanations for this gap, and as a result, different potential solutions. Interestingly, the vast majority attribute the problematised gap to academics themselves.

The AMA Task Force on the Development of Marketing Thought posits that academic researchers do not communicate well, “most importantly with practitioners” (1988, p. 4). Tapp (2004) argues that academics must take responsibility for directly communicating their work to practitioners, and without action, academic research will become obsolete.

Others point to the sociological context of academia, whereby “academic incentive and reward systems are not conducive to research that is of direct use for practitioners” (Nyilasy & Reid 2007, p. 431) when explaining the gap. November (2004, p. 41) writes about reasons why practitioners should ignore academic research, including the inadequate structure of academic knowledge building:

The reality is that, while we do seem to have an agreed standard as to what a brick is, there is no agreement as to which bricks need to be made first, no foundations, no architect of the final wall, and no idea as to what the wall is expected to do when, if ever, it is built.

November (2004, p. 47) goes on to suggest that the abstruse academic writing style “is actually an advantage since it is less likely that practitioners will read the work”. Otherstoo blamethedensenessofmostpublishedacademicresearch for the academic/practitioner divide (Brennan 2004; Ottesen & Gronhaug 2004; Crosier 2004). Indeed, as Brennan (2004, p. 495) asserts “It seems to be the case that the type of research output that is viewed by academics as being of the highest quality, is the type of research that is viewed by managers as being of the least interest”.

The value of academia

Assumption 1. There is a gulf between the academic and practitioner worlds.

Assumption 2. Each world has something to contribute to the other.

Assumption 3. Each world will learn from the other if, and only if, the two are brought into contact with each other on a continuing basis.
All of the above arguments place the blame for the perceived academic/practitioner divide squarely on the shoulders of academics. That said, some authors such as Brennan and Ankers (2004); McKenzie, Wright, Ball and Baron (2002); Holbrook (1985, 1987); Ottesen and Gronhaug (2004); and Cohen and Levinthal (1990); clearly implicate in part the practitioner – mainly in terms of a lack of interest or receptivity towards, or limited capacity to comprehend, academic information. Meanwhile, Nyilasy and Reid (2007, p. 437) explain the gap by suggesting that practitioners may have “their own autonomous knowledge forms […] which in both content and form are independent of academic knowledge”.

A final explanation offered by authors for the academic/practitioner divide relates to negative attitudes held by practitioners, whereby academia is positioned as irrelevant. Holbrook (1985, 1987) discusses this anti-intellectualism on the part of business people broadly. Meanwhile, Rotfeld, Tinkham and Reid (1983) advise that practitioners tend to consider academics as having minimal if any industry experience and thus limited understanding of the field. With this in mind, it is practitioner attitudes towards academics and academic output that is of particular interest to the current study.

From the literature it is reasonable to conclude that public relations practitioners, like practitioners in related business disciplines, may question the value of academics in the field for various reasons.

It is worth noting that, with the exception of Cheng and de Gregorio (2007), McKenzie et al. (2002), and Brennan and Ankers (2004), much of the current literature relating to the academic/practitioner divide is normative, without positive support. Empirical inquiry into the field such as the current study can further support (or refute) conceptualisation of the academic/practitioner disconnect, and along with it practitioner perspectives on the value of academics in business disciplines.

This paper presents the results of inquiry into the value and role of public relations academics as perceived by Australian public relations practitioners. This study forms part of broader doctoral research into areas of convergence and divergence among Australian academics and practitioners in terms of perceptions of definition, theory, practice, and education, in the field.

Research was facilitated via the administration of two online questionnaires – one targeted to those that self-identified as academics and the other for those that identified as practitioners in public relations. The questionnaires, administered between October 2006 and January 2007, contained a mixture of open and closed questions designed to yield both qualitative and quantitative data. Given the research strategy design it is not possible to report a response rate, however 107 practitioners and 40 academics participated in the study. Byrne (2007) provides further information about this study’s research design.
Findings and discussion

To begin with, it is worth stating that the notion of value presented here is broadly understood in terms of both 1) utility to the individual practitioner (i.e. helping the practitioner to do a better job), and 2) utility to the field of public relations as a whole (i.e. strengthening professional standing of the field). This general understanding of the term was derived through consideration of qualitative practitioner responses to various questions throughout the questionnaire. Examples of this understanding will be presented throughout the paper.

It is hardly news that much of the research to date concludes that practitioners see the work of academics in the field adding little or no value to them due to issues surrounding utility and accessibility.

It is perhaps due to an awareness of the trends present in the above reviewed and similar research that, when academics in the current study were asked about whether or not they believed public relations practitioners value their work in the field, a third of academic respondents (33.3%) reported a belief that practitioners do not value academic work.

Further cementing this expectation, a large portion of academic respondents who did indicate that they believe practitioners do indeed value academic work conditioned this affirmative response – suggesting that value is only perceived by pockets of practitioners and not across the board.

Yes. In small amounts.

Yes. Some do, but not all.

Yes. Only some.

Yes. Not all practitioners value academic work.

In particular, exposure to university training was seen as a prerequisite for practitioners to value academic work.

I think that the value is being better recognised, certainly by those who have a university trained background.

More and more practitioners are university educated and are aware of the value of theory-based practice.

Yes. But probably only those who have a tertiary education themselves.

The younger ones do because they have been through the degree and know what is taught.

I believe the industry is united in understanding the need for academic work in so far as teaching goes. I don’t believe practitioners value much academic research outside of this teaching role.

Indeed, several academics here, even while agreeing that practitioners value academic work, question perceived academic value in terms of practitioner
emphasis on practical application of skills and practitioner access to, and reputation of, academics.

PR practitioners, like journalists, often question the practical ability of students and opportunities for students within academic settings to get their hands dirty.

There is limited understanding of what academics are able to provide. Academics need to work on their reputation and earn the respect.

These academic respondent expectations were largely mirrored by practitioners, with 66% of practitioners in the study seeing value in academic work. Of the remaining 34% of practitioners that did not perceive academic work as valuable, the most frequently cited reason for this lack of value was a complaint that academics are out of touch and unresponsive to the needs of industry.

From my experience, PR academics offer little compared to PR practitioners who are out in the field, working with clients and engaging the community. A real-world aspect must be brought into any PR activity, blended with just the right amount of knowledge.

From the students I train while in third year uni [sic] and immediately after I am at a loss as to how the current academic approach at the universities equips them to be a PR practitioner.

I think the general perception is that academics are out of touch with what PR actually is when it is practiced (either really well or badly) every day.

Imaginings of academics as out of touch with industry were evident throughout both practitioner and academic questionnaire responses. It is interesting then that, when asked about their professional experience, more than 80% (81.3%) of academics in the current study indicated that they had only previously worked as a practitioner, but had actually spent more time working as a practitioner than as an academic.

This figure indicates that most public relations academics in Australia do indeed have personal insight into the world of public relations practice. Evidence of this insight is further reinforced when taking into account some of the broadly consistent results across both academic and practitioner groups. Alignment across groups is clear when considering two key variables indicating academic awareness of industry practice and priorities; that is, practitioner duties and research interests. The results associated with both of these variables are now presented in turn.

Public relations practitioners were asked to rank the top five ‘main duties’ of their job based on their current personal experience. In order to check the degree of ‘practice’ awareness, academics were asked to rank the five main duties most likely to be undertaken by public relations practitioners, based on their general knowledge and opinion of the industry.
Both groups of respondents were asked to nominate the duties from the following selection.

Table 1: Questionnaire response options for main public relations practitioner duties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media relations</th>
<th>Event mgmt</th>
<th>Speech writing</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Counselling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gov't relations</td>
<td>Media monitoring</td>
<td>Copy writing</td>
<td>Corporate communications</td>
<td>Promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>Human resources</td>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Issues/crisis mgmt</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

When considering only the frequency of nominations and not allocated rankings, overall media relations and corporate communications shared equal position (both with 15.5%) as the main duty for public relations practitioners in Australia. Practitioners next most frequently nominated issues/crisis management (10.1%). Following these three stand out duties, overall findings indicate that other significant duties for public relations practitioners include copy writing (7.3%), research (6.6%), and event management and publicity (both nominated by 6.3% of practitioner respondents).

Echoing these results, media relations was the most frequently nominated practitioner duty (19.1%) by academics. Corporate communications was second most frequently nominated (14.6%). Academic participants also nominated publicity (12.4%), issues/crisis management (10.1%), and event management (7.9%) as part of their most likely five main duties for practitioners. These results are obviously broadly consistent with the data provided by practitioner participants, particularly in terms of the top two main duties of practitioners, and clearly indicate a degree of academic insight into the day-to-day duties of practitioners.
Table 2: Comparison of overall main practitioner duties frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Practitioner responses</th>
<th>Academic responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media relations</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event management</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech writing</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government relations</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media monitoring</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy writing</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate communications</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotions</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues/crisis management</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study’s findings relating to research interests are another area where practitioner and academic results display considerable overlap. In their review of the literature on academic-practitioner relationships, Cheng and de Gregorio (2007, p.2) noted the presence of two schools of thought in terms of research relevance to practitioners:

1. The academy should be closer to its industry roots – research should not be irrelevant, esoteric, excessively abstract in subject matter, and unusable by practitioners. The communication of that research has become overly complicated and highly unreadable, while academic members are not cognizant of the needs and challenges of practice.

2. The academy should remain distant from the industry – increased devotion to pleasing the practitioner will result in research that is limited in its scope and bankrupt of its joy. Academic members should not give up their academic freedom and selling their intellectual souls to cater to the industry.
As can be gleaned from the earlier literature review, the majority of published work in this area appears to come under the first category – that is promoting a desire for greater academic/practitioner collaboration, and calling for more practitioner relevant research (see, for example, Lindenmann 1979; Baker & Erdogan 2000; Polonsky & Mankelow 2000). As cases in point here, Grunig (2006) has recently identified the improvement of public relations practice as a key goal of public relations scholars; Gower (2006) asserts that academics must work to ensure their research will be useful to practitioners; and Broom (2006) emphasises the need to select practice derived research topics.

In the current study, more than 70% of practitioner respondents (73.2%) indicated that they saw a need for more research into the field of public relations. The practitioner research agenda put forward by the sample is varied and well considered (only three practitioners confirmed a need for further research into the field, yet were unable to provide any area of particular interest). As is to be expected, on the whole, research interests are practitioner focused. Through review of the raw data it was apparent that research into the evaluation of public relations activities and outcomes, and the reputation of public relations, were most frequently nominated by practitioners.

Academic respondents were also asked to list their research interests. A broad range of interests were put forward. Academic research interests were at times difficult to categorise as associated methodological and theoretical perspectives were frequently unclear, and the topics presented could weave through numerous meta-themes. That said, issues and crisis communication and/or management was the most frequently nominated research interest. In addition, research interests relating to ethics; technology; evaluation; internal communication; and rhetoric were all nominated more than once.

The following image presents both practitioner and academic research interests, and highlights those interests identified by practitioners that are currently being pursued by academics in the field. It is evident that there exists considerable overlap in terms of academic and practitioner research interests in the Australian public relations field.
It is reasonable to nominate the (degree of) awareness of practitioner duties and alignment of research interests as central (although not sole) variables when operationalising the concept of ‘being in touch with industry’. When reviewing the above presented results then, it appears that public relations academics in Australia are not as out-of-touch as some practitioners claim. While certainly not precluding the existence of a ‘gap’ between public relations academic and practitioner thinking and knowledge in Australia, the gulf may not be as wide as commonly thought.

Why is it then that an image of the academic as out-of-touch with industry persists in the minds of many public relations academics and practitioners alike? This author asserts that variance between academic and practitioner expectations in terms of the nature and scope of the role of academics in the field may be at fault.

As part of the online questionnaires underpinning this research project, academic participants were asked to outline their role in the field of public relations. Unsurprisingly, academics overwhelmingly imagined themselves fulfilling the roles of 1) teachers, and 2) researchers. The data indicated that academics also, to a lesser extent, perceive themselves as 3) credibility builders. The following table presents each of these main role themes along with examples contained in the data.
Table 3: Academic role themes nominated by public relations academics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Supporting citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>[B]uilding effective professionals for industry. We can train up emerging and existing practitioners. Educate [practitioners] in such matters as ethics, to make government regulation of the field less likely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Objectively examine and inform practice. [C]ontinuously updating the body of knowledge. Analysing and critiquing. Staying ‘ahead of the game’ in detecting new trends, issues, areas where the profession can demonstrate leadership, ethical challenges in the contemporary global context, and so on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility builder</td>
<td>To bring credibility to the profession as a necessary intermediary for ‘flowing’ communication between publics. Perform a surveillance role, monitoring standards within the industry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outside of these clear themes, one academic mentioned consulting, and only two others noted information sharing with practitioners, as an academic function.

Provide information on changes in the industry and help practitioners identify implications for their own work.

Sharing that information back to the practitioner body.

Practitioners participating in the study were also asked to identify the role of academics in the field of public relations. Practitioner responses are varied, ranging from “to ensure universities can continue to offer courses” to “Keeping us on our toes”. While some respondents clearly see little to no role for academics in the field (“Very little”, “Not very useful – they tend to have little understanding of the daily pressures”), the vast majority of comments were positive. Of these positive perspectives, the public relations academic in Australia is imagined in a range of complementary roles.

While the role themes of undergraduate teacher, researcher, and credibility builder, were all present in the practitioner data, three other role themes were clearly present – that of practitioner problem solver, facilitator, and industry advocate. The following table illustrates each of these role themes and offers citations exemplifying each category. It should be noted that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

In contrast to the few academics that identified information sharing, public relations practitioners see the functions of solving practitioner problems,
facilitating information sharing, and achieving a range of advocacy based outcomes, as central to the role of academic.

It is clear that practitioners imagine the role of academics in the public relations field more broadly than academics do themselves. If, in the minds of practitioners, academics are accountable for bridging the ‘divide’ between these groups by solving practitioner problems, informing practitioners of developments in the field, and advocating the field within the wider business community; and if few academics actually nominate this function as part of their role – and thus do not pursue associated activities; then it is unsurprising that a significant percentage of practitioners are unsatisfied with academic output.

Australian PR academics have little interaction with industry or agencies

I have limited contact with or exposure to PR academics

You don’t hear about [academic work] until you study it. The academics need to mix more with the mainstream. However, once known, it is valuable.

It is interesting that only one out of the more than 100 practitioners who participated in the study suggested that academics could “help us promote the industry” indicating a shared responsibility in terms of advocacy. No other practitioner participants indicated that public relations practitioners should perhaps hold some responsibility for problem solving, information sharing, or advocacy roles. These roles, if mentioned, were always positioned firmly within the academic domain.

This author firmly agrees with Gibson and Mohr’s (1977) earlier noted assumptions about the relationship between academics and practitioners. That said, given the different goals, rewards systems, and traditional fora, of the academy and industry, in addition to probable resourcing constraints, it is perhaps unrealistic to assume a ‘constant’ direct flow of appropriately packaged information from academy to practice and vice versa. Narrowing the gap through mediated indirect flows of information is perhaps more achievable in a real world context.

There is no doubt that information sharing as well as broader industry advocate roles are crucial to enriching both public relations practice and research in Australia. If academics and practitioners do not imagine themselves accountable, who accepts these responsibilities?

The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) website sets forth the aims of the peak industry body.

[...] to promote and enhance the profession and its status to the broader community throughout Australia, to enforce the principles of ethical standards and represent public relations practitioners in the best interests of the profession.
It is evident that the PRIA’s intent is to encompass, among other things, these vital information sharing and advocacy roles on behalf of the public relations field in Australia. Given the focal variable nature of the public relations industry, this is a formidable task.

Table 4: Academic role themes nominated by public relations practitioners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>To provide students with thorough and practical PR knowledge so that they can bring a good understanding of PR with them into the workforce. To teach that PR should be outcomes-focused so practitioners know that their job doesn’t stop at getting an article in the paper. It’s about much more than that. They play a key role in educating people who are entering the industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>[To be a] leader in theoretical/academic applications. [To provide] innovation/new directions in theory. To keep formulating theory based on interdisciplinary study, to contribute to the body of knowledge on PR as a profession. To research and explain the changes and trends in communication as our society becomes more sophisticated, busy and crowded. Provide continual updates on theories and methods to be used by practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility builder</td>
<td>To ensure the PR industry is an expert field. Academic analysis and study […] legitimises the profession. Enhance the standing of PR in the business community. Build respect for PR as a profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solver</td>
<td>They need to find more practical approaches and solutions to help us promote the industry. Ideally it would be to come up with processes that help us do our jobs better, with better outcomes. Find us more techniques to use!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Work with industry to support and upgrade professional development. The bridge between theory and practice. Academics must teach practitioners how to apply theory to practice. To act as a bridge between practical PR, e.g., through case studies and training future PR practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry advocate</td>
<td>Share ideas with the industry. Creating a sense of identity/community within the profession. Sharing findings and research from all over the world. Creating dialogue about the industry. Discuss role publicly, get involved at PRIA level for good discussion, and act as advisers where appropriate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the PRIA coordinates a range of opportunities for information sharing, networking, and professional development (see the PRIA website for examples), data drawn from the current study indicates that more could be done to promote awareness of these and other opportunities. Practitioner comments overwhelmingly indicate limited insight into the role and scope of the PRIA.

The role of academics in the field of PR could be a useful tool, if the industry in Australia had appropriate channels for distributing theory - such as an active and representative industry association dedicated to the promotion of thought leadership.

A greater effort should be made to get this theory into the public arena.

There are very few fora for the academic work of PR practitioners. With limited channels for distribution it is difficult to access the majority of information.

I think [academic work] could add a great deal however, I never seem to have access to it - where is it all?

It is interesting that only two practitioner respondents referred to the peak industry body explicitly or otherwise, the first suggesting that academics should “get involved at PRIA level for good discussion”, and the second noting that they “rarely have time to read academic work – [and] mainly stay up-to-date through PRIA activities and guest speakers etc”.

While promoting the value of further opportunities for practitioner and academic interaction, dialogue, and cross-pollination, this paper does not suggest dilution of either academic or practitioner roles in the field. Rather, differences and the space between these roles should be embraced and respected. As Nyilasy and Reid (2007, p. 438) assert

The existence of a conversation does not imply that the conversing partners have identical norms, underlying assumptions, styles of expression, or ways of knowing. In fact, that is rarely the case.

Indeed it is for this reason that intermediaries, such as the PRIA, should “have a very instrumental role in implicit transfers” (Nyilasy & Reid 2007, p. 438) between academics and practitioners.

Eighty percent of academics who took part in the study claimed to be members of the PRIA. In contrast, only 52.8% of practitioner respondents confirmed that they were members of the self-professed peak body. These figures raise questions about the true representativeness of the Institute. As noted by Melville (2003, p. 94), in his report into peak bodies in Australia,

The issue of what constitutes representation is a critical part of the whole jigsaw puzzle […] It is not enough to talk on behalf of consumers […] I think the idea of constituency and representation, and how you represent diversity within that representation, is crucial too.
The notion of what constitutes ‘representative’ is difficult to define, and the literature indicates that there is no silver bullet for operationalising this term. For the purpose of this paper, when considering the findings presented here, it is reasonable to say that the PRIA must continue to promote and expand its membership and active engagement of that membership to truly fulfil its important intermediary role of increasing communication channels between public relations academics and practitioners for mutual gain.

In summary

This paper is predominately concerned with practitioner perceptions of academics and the value of academia in the public relations field in Australia. Theto-date largely normativeliteraturesuggeststhatagapexistsbetween these two groups and that practitioners imagine academics in business disciplines as out of touch, lacking practical relevance, and inaccessible.

Findings presented here do not deny the existence of a gap, however empirical data indicates that academics may not be as ‘out-of-touch’ as many practitioners imagine. Rather, most academics have first hand insight into the public relations industry and the work pressures faced by practitioners. Further, significant overlap in practitioner and academic research interests suggests potentially strong academic relevance to practice.

There is notable variance in academic role themes identified by each group, with practitioners perceiving the functions of practitioner problem solving, information sharing, and industry advocacy, as central to the role of academic, while few academics actually perceive themselves as responsible for these significant tasks. This role expectation variance could be a major contributor to practitioner perceptions of the academic as out of touch.

Findings position academics as (potentially) useful contributors to the public relations profession. Withthisinmind, strongavenuesforcommunication between academics and practitioners in the field are valuable. Given the importance of information sharing across both groups, and industry advocacy activities, the PRIA can be a powerful intermediary in the field and must continue to provide opportunities for useful academic-practitioner interaction and dialogue. In light of the many practitioner comments indicating limited awareness of the scope and function of the PRIA, the peak industry body must work to promote their role and active membership more widely across the field of public relations in Australia.
References


