

Student motivation for enrolling in public relations studies and their perception of the public relations profession and study in Croatia

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Abstract

The number of public relations (PR) students has been steadily rising in Croatia and so is the number of high schools teaching PR. The aim of this research was to learn about what motivates students to study PR and to explore their perception of the PR profession and the PR study. The survey was conducted online in October 2016 with 383 respondents: first year students, senior students and graduate students at undergraduate and graduate PR studies in Croatia. The respondents' common motive for enrolling PR studies is an interesting and creative curriculum, followed by personal interest and desire to work in PR and the attractiveness of the work in PR. The most desired jobs are in corporate communication and the participants were the most interested in event management, product promotion, media relations and internal communication. Seven in ten respondents said that a PR degree would help them to find a job in the profession, while 60% responded that PR experts are a profession sought after in the labour market. Essential for getting a job in the profession are work experience in PR, informal knowledge and skills, relationships and acquaintances and formal knowledge taught at university. The majority of respondents (87%) were satisfied with their selected studies, and they gave it a very good mark. Senior students believe that their studies gave them good communication skills, teamwork skills, good writing and reading, and less computer skills, analytical and problem solving skills, and foreign languages. Everyone in eight students of private universities experienced discrimination in recruitment process. Key words: public relations, public relations studies, expectations of public relations students, perceptions of public relations students

1. Introduction: purpose and literature review

Postgraduate studies in public relations were introduced in Croatia in 2005 and in 2008 on undergraduate level, first by private and later by public institutions. Currently, PR programmes are taught at nine high schools and universities. The number of students is steadily rising as well as the number of high schools and faculties that offer PR curricula. Motivation for studying PR and perceptions of the public relations profession among students has not yet been researched in Croatia, and only a handful of studies were conducted in the world.

In USA, Bowen (2003) concluded that students do not know what is involved in the PR profession and PR studies. Students think that PR is mostly related to media relations and event management and do not understand the part relating to strategy, management, research, and relationship building. 'Students often enrol PR studies unaware of how much emphasis

there is on management. They are shocked with how much strategic thinking and decision-making is required and surprised by the amount of research and knowledge required for the PR professionals' (Bowen, 2003 & 2009). Bowen also found that students choose to study PR because it seems to be an easier subject while career in PR seems to have fewer problems and challenges.

Erzikova and Berger (2011) compared the perceptions of PR students from Russia and the US and found that students from both countries consider the PR profession as being prestigious and glamorous. Fullerton and McKinnon (2015) studied motivation in a research with 789 students at 226 U.S. universities. Six in ten did not know that PR programmes existed while they were in high school, and 13% chose to study PR because it was easy to study and 17% admitted they had enrolled PR studies just to avoid math. What attracted students the most to PR were creative and business aspects of work in the PR. Three in four students intend to work in PR after graduation and three percent do not. About 8% plan to enrol postgraduate studies, while 10% are still not sure. Those who plan to work in the profession mostly want to work in PR consultancy (72%), followed by corporate communications (57%). Half tend to work in the media (50%), 42% in the non-profit sector and 23% in the Government. Other preferences were business consultancy firms (26%), production companies (33%) or research (10%). Although the majority of students believed they were ready for a career in PR, many suspected that they would find a PR job after graduation.

Brunner and Fitch-Hauser (2009) investigated why students choose to study PR in a research with 180 students from 21 U.S. institutions. Most of them chose to study PR because they like to plan events (34%), like people (25%), and like to write (12%), as well as liking to have a diploma similar to a business school diploma but with no mathematics (11%). The most important course is writing (23%) followed by PR campaigns (22%). Most of them would like to work with PR consultancies (29%), corporations (26%) and non-profit organizations (22%).

Gleeson (2013) discovered that Australian first year students choose to study PR for its "glamour", especially in fashion, music or sports. Student attitudes about the PR are influenced mostly by the media (50%), business activities (17%), government activities (15%) and family and friends (both 7%). Australian students have neutral perception of the PR profession (40%), while one in three students see the PR profession as having good reputation, and one in four negative reputation. The glamour of public relations is also reflected in the preferences for the ideal job - fashion industry and event management (female students) and entertainment industry and in sports (male students) followed by the media and corporate communications. Students have limited understanding of public relations and do not recognize areas such as internal communications, investor relations, research and strategic planning. The "Glamour" of the profession drops after the end of the first semester as students begin to apprehend how much the PR profession is multidisciplinary.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR, 2013) explored the perceptions of the PR profession among young people in the UK (1229 participants, age 16-18). It was found that most of young people (70%) did not know that PR profession exists and only 7% would consider choosing a career in PR. One in four students has positive perception of the PR profession "as a job in which they would enjoy what they are doing" (26%) and believes that "work in the PR helps earning well in the future" (18%). The survey showed that better informed students had a more positive attitude towards PR. Interestingly, more young men (34%) were familiar with the PR profession than young women (27%), while more women

(61%) than men (39%) would choose a career in PR.

2. Research of Croatian student motivation to enrol the public relations studies: results and discussion

In Croatia, there has been a steady rise in the number of PR students and this trend has not yet been explored. Therefore, a research of students' motivation was conducted in October 2016 among two groups:

- first year students who have just enrolled the public relations studies (58 respondents)
- senior or graduated students of undergraduate and graduate programs (280), of which 142 at the undergraduate level (50.7%) and 138 at the graduate level (40.3%)

The average age of first year students was 22, and 29 among senior students; 81% of participants were women and 19% men.

The rise in the number of students is not ensued by the demand in the labour market. It is a paradox that while increasingly more people study PR, the increasingly fewer jobs are advertised in PR. From January to November 2016, Croatian portals specialized in job finding published only 22 PR job ads: nine were for a job in PR consultancies, eight for jobs in corporate communications, two for marketing and PR managers and two for professional development without employment.

Motivation to enroll in public relations studies	Percentage of 1 st year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduated students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
Interesting and creative study programme	63,79 %	37	64,30 %	180	64,20 %	217
Personal interest and desire to work in PR	63,79 %	37	47,10 %	132	50,00 %	169
Attractiveness of the work in PR	44,83 %	26	32,50 %	91	34,62 %	117
Employment prospects after the study	41,38 %	24	18,90 %	53	22,78 %	77
I considered the course to be relatively easy	8,62 %	5	3,60 %	10	4,44 %	15
Shifted from another course	6,90 %	4	6,40 %	18	6,51 %	22
I did not know what else to study	1,72 %	1	4,30 %	12	3,85 %	13
My employer paid the fees or send me to study PR	-	-	3,60 %	10	2,96 %	10
Other:	3,45 %	2	5,40 %	15	5,03 %	17

Table 1: Motivation to enroll in public relations studies

The most common motive for enrolling PR studies among Croatian students is an interesting and creative study programme for two in three respondents, for one in two of them it is the personal interest and desire to work in PR, for one-third it is the attractiveness of the work in PR and for one-fourth employment prospects after the study. Senior students are less motivated by their interest and willingness to work in the PR profession (47% versus 64% of 1st year students). In addition, senior students are less motivated by the attractiveness of the job in PR (33% compared to 45% of the 1st year students) and the employment prospects (19% compared to 41% of the 1st year students), which is probably a consequence to having a better knowledge of the profession gained during the study and work experience.

Who/what has mostly influenced your decision to study PR ?	Percentage of 1 st year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
I read about PR in the media / forums / blogs and social media	20,69 %	12	21,10 %	59	21,01 %	71
Nobody/Nothing	18,97 %	11	20,70 %	58	20,41 %	69
Friend/acquaintance who study PR	8,60 %	5	11,80 %	33	11,24 %	38
Something else	10,34 %	6	11,10 %	31	10,95 %	37
Friend/acquaintance who works in PR	10,34 %	6	10,00 %	28	10,06 %	34
Parents/family	10,34 %	6	8,60 %	24	8,88 %	30
Movie/TV series/book casting characters from PR	10,34 %	6	7,50 %	21	7,99 %	27
Friends / social circles	6,90 %	4	5,70 %	16	5,92 %	20
I was advised so at professional counselling	3,45 %	2	3,60 %	10	3,55 %	12

Table 2: Who/what has mostly influenced your decision to study PR?

The students' decision to study PR was influenced by what they have read about PR in the media / forums / blogs and social media (21%). The same number of respondents were not influenced by anybody/ anything, followed by friends/acquaintances who study PR (11%) or work in PR (10%), parents/family (9%), movie/TV series/book casting characters from PR (8%), friends/social circles (6%), while the lowest percentage of students enrolled after professional counselling (3%).

What was your perception of the PR profession before having enrolled PR studies	Percentage of 1 st year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
Excellent	27.59 %	16	23,20 %	65	23,96 %	81
Very good	48.28 %	28	43,60 %	122	44,38 %	150
Good	20.69 %	12	26,80 %	75	25,74 %	87
Bad	3.45 %	2	1,40 %	4	1,78 %	6
None	-	-	5,00 %	14	4,14 %	14

Table 3: Perception of the PR profession before having enrolled PR studies

The majority of students had a very good perception of the PR profession before enrolment, and the results are similar for first year students (48%) and senior students (44%).

The perception of the PR profession improved in almost a half of the respondents (45%), for one third (36%) it remained the same and worsened for one fifth (19%).

The majority of participants (58%) believe that PR specialists are sought after in the Croatian labour market. The percentage of senior and graduate students who think so is significantly lower: 55% vs. 76% of the first year students, which is probably the result of the life and work experience after hitting the labour market.

The work experience or experience of volunteering in public relations prior to studies was shared by one in three (33%) respondents. Somewhat more first year students (31%) had experience in PR compared to older colleagues (24%).

Do you want to find a job in PR after the graduation?	Percentage of first year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
Yes, I do.	75,90 %	45	37,90 %	102	43,49 %	147
I do not know yet.	19,00 %	11	25,70 %	69	23,67 %	80
I work in another profession but I want to switch to PR.	0,00 %	0	22,30 %	60	17,75 %	60
I already work in PR	5,20 %	2	14,10 %	38	11,83 %	40

Table 4: Wish to find a job in PR after the graduation?

After the studies, a total of 43% of respondents want to find a job in the PR profession, while one in five first year students does not know yet. That is not surprising because of their youth and age, but what worries is that one in four senior students still do not know whether they want to work in the PR profession.

Where would you like to work in PR after graduation?	Percentage of first year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
In corporate communications	15,52 %	9	26,90 %	75	24,85 %	84
In PR consultancy	17,24 %	10	12,50 %	35	13,31 %	45
In PR department of marketing agency	10,34 %	6	11,50 %	32	11,24 %	38
As independent consultant	17,24 %	10	8,60 %	24	10,06 %	34
In PR department in state administration / local government	5,10 %	3	11,10 %	31	10,06 %	34
In PR department of small and medium-sized enterprises	8,62 %	5	9,70 %	27	9,47 %	32
Digital agency / community management	1,72 %	1	8,20 %	23	7,10 %	24
Nongovernmental/non-profit organisation	6,90 %	4	6,10 %	17	6,21 %	21
PR department in public institution	1,72 %	1	3,60 %	10	3,25 %	11
I do not know yet	15,52 %	9	-	-	2,66 %	9
Other	-			5	1,49 %	5

Table 5: The ideal PR job

The ideal job for participants is in corporate communications (25%); with runner-ups being PR consultancies (13%) and PR department in marketing agencies (11%) followed by job as independent consultant (10%), a PR job in state administration/local government (10%), small and medium-sized enterprises (9%), digital consultancies (7%) and NGO sector (6%) and institutions (3 %).

Huge differences were observed in the preferences of an ideal PR job. Senior students would most gladly work in corporate communications - 27% vs 16% of first year students – and they

would less prefer consultancies - 13% vs. 17% of first year students - and prefer more PR in state administration / local government (11% vs. 5% first year students).

On the other hand, twice as many first year students would like to work as independent consultant (17% vs 9% senior students, which might be the result of enrolment in private higher education institutions, because 70% of first year students came from private high schools). It surprises to see that first year students do not perceive a job in social media management as a possible career or are not yet aware of it. It is possible that those who wanted to work in digital communications enrolled the recently opened undergraduate courses in digital marketing at one private polytechnic. Twice as many senior and graduate students (11% compared to 5% of first year students), probably due to their (life) experience and the security that this job provides, want to work in the PR sector in state administration / local government or an institution.

What areas of PR profession interest you the most? (more answers is possible)	Percentage of first year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
Event management	22,40 %	13	52,10 %	146	47,04 %	159
Marketing and brand PR	12,10 %	7	40,40 %	113	35,50 %	120
Media relations	15,50 %	9	30,70 %	86	28,11 %	95
Internal communication	5,20 %	3	32,50 %	91	27,81 %	94
Crisis communication	10,30 %	6	29,30 %	82	26,04 %	88
Personal PR – publicity for celebrities	19,00 %	11	21,80 %	61	21,30 %	72
Social media management and digital communication	0,00 %	0	24,60 %	69	20,41 %	69
Education	5,20 %	3	17,90 %	50	15,68 %	53
Lobbying	-	-	18,90 %	53	15,68 %	53
Investor relations	1,70 %	1	8,90 %	25	7,69 %	26
I do not know yet	8,60 %	5			1,48 %	5
Political communication	-	-	1 %	3	0,89 %	3
Corporate social responsibility	-	-	0,80 %	2	0,59 %	2

Table 6: Most interesting areas of PR profession

Among PR specialisations, respondents were mostly interested in event management (47%), product promotion (marketing and brand PR 36%), media relations (28%), internal communication (28%) and crisis management (26%). These were followed by personal PR (21%), social media management and digital communication (20%), education (16%), lobbying (16%), financial relations (8%) and finally political communications (1 %) and coporate social responsibility (1%).

There are differences between first year and senior and graduate students, as the latter two are more interested in event management (52% vs 22%), marketing and brand PR (40% vs 12% first year students), internal communication (33% vs 5%), social media management and

digital communication (25% vs none), and investor relations (9% vs 1%), media relations (31% versus 16%) and education (18% vs 5% of first year students).

Most of the respondents (71%) think that they will have more success when looking for a job in PR if they study public relations. The big difference between the first year students (92% vs 2/3 of senior/ graduated students) might be interpreted as conviction of first year students that studying PR is a prerequisite for the employment in the PR sector.

What is crucial to find a job in PR according to you? (more answers possible)	Percentage of first year students	N=58	Percentage of senior and graduate students	N=280	Percentage of whole sample	Total N=338
Work experience in PR	48,28 %	28	61,40 %	172	59,17 %	200
Unformal knowledge and skills	60,34 %	35	49,30 %	137	50,89 %	172
Relationships and acquaintances/ networking	34,48 %	16	53,60 %	146	47,93 %	162
Formal knowledge taught at universities	60,34 %	36	43,20 %	120	46,15 %	156
Recommendations	27,59 %	20	43,90 %	123	42,31 %	143
Luck	20,69 %	12	21,40 %	60	21,30 %	72
Something else	1,72 %	1	2,80 %	8	2,66 %	9

Table 7: What is crucial to find a job in PR?

As the most important prerequisite to find a job in PR respondents consider work experience in the PR field (59%), followed by informal knowledge and skills (51%), relationships and acquaintances (48%) and only then formal knowledge taught at universities (46%).

First year students equally consider formal knowledge (60% vs 43% of senior students) to be equally important as informal knowledge and skills (60% vs 49% senior students), while work experience in PR (48% vs 61% of senior and graduated students) is less significant for them.

The results for senior respondents are not surprising because the situation in the Croatian labour market is characterized with high unemployment and nepotism, where relationships and acquaintances are more important than formal knowledge.

Asked how much professional knowledge and skills did their study provide, senior students and graduates rated with very good the communication skills, teamwork and good writing and reading skills.

They gave equal score to professional knowledge and skills related to PR, planning and organizational skills, ability to adapt and work in new situations, and knowledge of social networking (good). They were least satisfied with the knowledge of foreign language(s), analytical and problem-solving skills and computer skills.

Self-assessment of the knowledge and skills acquired at university	Average grade
Communication skills	3,86
Team work skills	3,69
Good writing and reading skills	3,65
Expert knowledge and competences related to public relations	3,39
Planning and organizational skills	3,36
Ability to adapt and work in new situations	3,34
Communication on social media	3,32
Knowledge of foreign languages	3,16
Analytical skills and problem solving skills	3,14
Computer skills	2,96

Table 8: Satisfaction of knowledge and skill acquired at University

These findings have highlighted the opportunity to improve current PR curricula in the areas of development of organizational and planning skills, adaptability and action in new situations, and communication on social media. Also, according to students, foreign languages, analytical skills and problem solving and computer skills are neglected in teaching.

It is interesting that representatives of PR employers in the US (Public Relations Education Summit, 2015) think that writing is the crucial and most important skill in PR, and the most challenging one since students need to be prepared to write effectively on different platforms and for various purposes. Also, students should know how to work on a range of traditional, but also contemporary and future media channels.

Most of the senior and graduated students (87%) are satisfied with their choice of studies and they grade their satisfaction with very good (3.72 on 1 to 5 scale). During the course of studies, 9% of students wanted to give up their studies and enrol another subject. The reasons for leaving were poorly structured and unorganized studies (6 participants), too much theory and too little practice (4), inadequate working atmosphere – student misconduct (2), situation in the labour market and employers unaware of the importance of PR, political situation and belief that PR does not comply with their personal ethical values (1 participant).

The participants were relatively satisfied with their lecturers 55%, 34% partially and 18% were dissatisfied. Respondents are mostly satisfied with internal communication between university management, lecturers and students (58% agree, 24% partially and 18% were not). Since one in five students pointed at the problem of internal communication, there is space for improvements

Can you please indicate to which extent you agree with the statements regarding your PR studies?	I do not agree at all	I do not agree	I agree partially	I agree	I agree fully
It is necessary to introduce mandatory professional practice in the course of studies unless already introduced	1 %	0 %	10 %	20 %	69 %
Studies enabled me sufficiently to work in PR	9 %	21 %	41 %	22 %	7 %
There is a good balance of theory and practice in the course of the studies	16 %	27 %	31 %	19 %	8 %
I had difficulties to find expert literature on PR	20 %	39 %	23 %	14 %	5 %
Study programme covers adequately all areas of PR (media relations, corporate, crisis, internal communication, planning, writing ...)	5 %	14 %	35 %	28 %	17 %
Study follows new trends such are social media management and alike	6 %	13 %	30 %	35 %	15 %
There were sufficient guest lectures by expert practitioners.	13 %	19 %	30 %	26 %	13 %
I am satisfied with the quality of the lecturers	4 %	6 %	35 %	37 %	18 %
I am satisfied with internal communication between university management, lecturers and students	8 %	10 %	24 %	34 %	24 %

Table 9: Satisfaction with the relationship between theory and practice and lecturers

Nearly all respondents (98%) agreed that it was necessary to introduce mandatory professional practice in the course of studies unless already introduced (at some public universities it isn't, and according to student comments it should be).

It is interesting that the attitudes of the participants were divided in their statement that studies enabled them to work in PR: 29% agreed entirely, 41% agreed in part, while 30% disagreed, which indicates relative dissatisfaction with the knowledge that students gained during their study.

A large number – as many as 42% of respondents - disagreed with the statement that studies provided a good balance of theory and practice. Approximately one in five respondents (19%) considered it difficult for them to find expert literature on PR in Croatian.

That studies adequately cover all areas of PR (media relations, corporate, crisis, internal communication, planning, writing ...) was agreed fully by one in five respondents and 45% of students agreed only to an extent, while one in five disagreed with that statement.

One in two respondents agreed with the statement that the studies follow new trends such are social media management, etc., while one in three only partially agreed, and one in five disagreed.

One in three participants said they did not have enough practitioners as guest lecturers, and 30% agreed only partially that there were not sufficient lectures by expert practitioners. Based on this and on comments of the participants, it may be concluded that students like guest lectures by practitioners and consider them to be extremely useful.

The participants were relatively satisfied with the quality of lecturers (55%, 34% partially) and 10% were dissatisfied with their lecturers. The respondents were mostly satisfied with internal communication between university management, lecturers and students (58% agreed fully, 24% partially and 18% did not). Since one in five students pointed at the problem of internal communication, there is space for improvements.

Current employment status of senior and graduated students	Percentage	N= 280
I graduated and work in PR profession	11 %	31
I graduated and work in other profession	28 %	77
I graduated but am currently unemployed	7 %	20
I stopped studying	0,4 %	1
I study and work	15 %	43
Regular student	39 %	108

Table 10: Current employment status of senior and graduated students

Since among 128 graduated students 24% are employed in the PR profession and 60% are employed in another profession, while 16% do not work, we may conclude that it is not easy to find a job in the PR profession in Croatia, but it is a positive fact that 84% students are employed.

Among those who are employed in the PR profession, the majority work in corporate communications and only slightly less in the PR of small and medium enterprise.

Job position of those working in the PR profession	Percentage	Number of respondents (n=70)
In corporate communications	21,4 %	15
In PR department of small and medium-sized enterprise	20,0 %	14
In nongovernmental/non-profit organisation	12,9 %	9
In PR consultancy	10,0 %	7
In PR department in state administration / local government	10,0 %	7
In Digital agency / community management	7,1 %	5
In PR department in public institution	7,1 %	5
As independent consultant	7,1 %	5
In PR department of marketing agency	2,9 %	2
In lobbying agency/company	1,4 %	1

Table 11: Job position of those working in the PR profession

As many as 12% of graduate students studying at private education institutions experienced some form of discrimination in the employment process. Mostly it was about stereotypes of potential employers and distrust in the quality of the knowledge and skills acquired at private faculties.

3. Conclusion and final remarks

In their final comments, the participants mostly referred to excessive amount of theory and shortage of practical work in teaching (26 participants), insufficiently recognized importance of the profession in the society and business (8), misconduct of other students (4), insufficient guest lecturers (3), insufficient follow-up of new trends, such as web design, digital marketing and marketing (3), rise of tuition in private universities compared to the knowledge acquired (2), opportunity for all to work in PR (2), lack of basic skills such as writing and too much emphasis on public performance (2), lecturers unfamiliar with the practical part of the

profession (2), a too demanding field requiring expert knowledge and timely reaction to events in the environment (2), “manufacture” of too many students in relation to the labour market needs (2), insufficient practice (2), lack of links with other faculties and companies (2), difficult to get employment due to nepotism (2). Individually mentioned were the lack of understanding PR in local governments, the lack of literature in libraries, the discrimination of graduated students, the insufficient recognition of the need for PR in companies and the discrimination of elderly students because of their age.

The participants also made a few positive comments about prospects of the PR profession, increased practice at studies, encouraging of students’ creativity and personality, which all make the PR studies an attractive and interesting choice.

It is evident that the increase in the number of PR students is not matched by the labour market demand. Nearly 60% of the participants think that PR experts are sought after at the labour market. When taking into consideration intense advertising campaigns of some private universities before enrolment, it is easier to understand the ever rising number of PR students. The results of the research direct at the possibility to improve curricula, primarily in transferring experience through practice or joint projects of higher education institutions with companies and other organizations.

As was concluded at the session of the Public Relations Education Commission of the American Public Relations Society with Employers in New York (COMPRED, 2015), the profession changes extremely quickly, while half of the knowledge now required has not even existed ten years ago. Although basic skills remain valid, the context is very different and changes in the last few years have shaken the foundations of skills that have been taught for decades at universities. All this is a challenge for educators who must adapt content and teaching methods to the needs of the labour market as quickly as possible.

4. Literature

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