

# A Study of Public Relations Knowledge and Skills From Public Relations Curriculum, Academicians'View and Professionals'View

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*Bu-nga Chaisuwan*

## **Abstract**

***T**his study is to explore the knowledge and skills provided by the offering courses of the Public Relations (PR) curriculum in undergraduate level to know the expectation of PR academicians and PR professionals towards the knowledge and skills of the PR graduates. Also, it is to investigate the similarities or differences between the knowledge and skills provided by the PR program in undergraduate level, and how they are expected by PR academicians and PR professionals. Six undergraduate PR curriculums offered by six leading universities in Thailand were studied along with the interview with the key informants who are 14 public relations academicians and 19 public relations professionals.*

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Bu-nga Chaisuwan (Ph.D. (Communication), Chulalongkorn University, 2002). is the full-time lecturer of the Department of Public Relations, Albert Laurence School of Communication Arts, Assumption University

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The research finds the similarities as well as the differences among the public relations curriculum, academicians' expectation and professionals' expectation towards the public relations graduates.

In terms of PR knowledge, both curriculum perspective and professionals focus on persuasion concepts and strategies while academicians and professionals have the same opinion on the importance of societal trends. The differences are marketing which is provided by curriculum, where as principle of business, and business case study are expected by academicians.

Curriculum, academicians, and professionals all agree on the mastery of language in written and oral communication as the highest expected skill for graduates. However, while the curriculum puts its effort to train the graduates in terms of media selection and usage and strategic planning, the academicians expect to see the graduates have the computer literacy, and photography literacy, whereas PR professionals give their expectations on issue and crisis management as well as public speaking and presentation.

In addition, the academicians expect the graduates' confidence as the most common personality trait while the professionals expect patience or a strong work ethic and high energy from the graduates.

The research results can provide the framework for developing public relations curriculum, especially, regarding to Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education: TQF: HED which is designed to support implementation of the educational guidelines set out in the National Education Act.

**Key words:** Skills of public relations, knowledge of public relations, public relations personality traits, public relations curriculum, curriculum development, public relations education

Although university-based public relations education has evolved for more than half a century, a huge gap between what universities provide and what the public relations practitioners require has emerged. (Wright and Turk, 2007: 588) While practitioners have requested for giving the priority on practical and applied studies, many educators have insisted on providing more abstract and theoretical research. Even though there have been opportunities to combine the theoretical with the practical, these opportunities are not enough.

Moreover, the scope of public relations education may need to be broadened. As the professional's responsibilities increase, the requirements of the job entry have been risen up. It is very difficult to clearly define the qualifications that are necessary for the skillful and practice of public relations, especially for the requirements of the job entry. Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997) said that in addition to public relations theory, some organizations wanted their practitioners to have additional knowledge in business, finance, or specific technologies; some want their practitioners to understand more thoroughly about their employers or client's business and industry.

As such, there is wide range of recommendations for public relations education. These suggestions emphasize the lack of consensus among scholars, educators and practitioners about public relations education (Hornaman, 2000).

From the educator or curriculum provider's point of view, Wilcox (2006: 26) suggested that

those who would like to have careers in public relations should develop knowledge and ability in five basic areas. These are: (1) writing skill, (2) research ability, (3) Planning expertise, (4) problem-solving ability and (5) business/economics competence. He also noted that all jobs in public relations do not require all five essential abilities in equal proportion. It often depends on specific job responsibilities and assignments.

From the practitioner's point of view, Hulin (2004: 11) asked job placement experts what set of skills and experience that were needed in today's employment market. The result was reported in PR Tactics, monthly publication of the PRSA, as follows; Good writing, Intelligence, Cultural literacy, Knowing a good story when you see one, Media savvy, Contacts, Good business sense, Broad communications experience, Specialized experience, and Avoiding career clichés.

Elizabeth (1992) conducted the research to examine job applicant qualification factors that affect the employability of graduates of undergraduate public relations. This research found the following knowledge: writing subjects, ethics courses, principles of public relations and mass communication, and the people-oriented business courses of advertising, marketing, and consumer behavior were highest rated by the employment decision makers at 214 Michigan organizations.

Guiniven (1998) surveyed 192 public relations executives about their views toward public relations education. Executives ranked journalism as the most important component, business the second-most important component, and ethics the third-most important component.

In Thailand, Kuntida Thamwipat (1999) conducted the research "Public relations professionalism and public relations role and practices" by in-depth interviewing 15 public relations practitioners and a survey of 549 public relations practitioners from 87 organizations in Thailand. The result showed that there are common 20 qualified characteristics of good PR experts. These characteristics are in the areas of knowledge, thinking and practicing, and skills.

In fact, there are some studies that present the requirements from both educators and practitioners. There is also a significant agreement between educators and practitioners on what a public relations undergraduate student should learn and prepare to be able to work as a practitioner at an entry level.

The 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education Report chartered by the public relations Society of America, namely "Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A port of Entry" stated the knowledge and skills that should be taught in an undergraduate public relations curriculum. This recommendation came from the four-day conference among 100 academicians and practitioners who made decision based on the findings of the largest and most comprehensive survey ever undertaken on public relations education. Those knowledge and skill was confirmed in the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education 2006 as "The professional Bond-Public Relations education and the practice". However, this report suggests that professional success requires not only the right knowledge and skills, but also appropriate personal traits such as being responsible, flexible and professionally oriented self-managers,

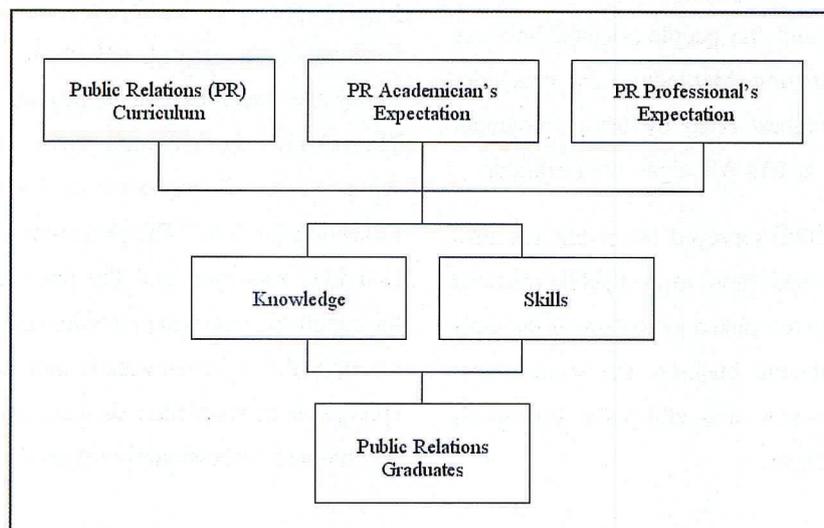
being able to respond and adapt to new and changing situations and to feel comfortable in having to make such adjustments without giving up personal identity, having intellectual curiosity and being able to think conceptually and so on.

As such, the great challenge for public relations offered by universities would be to balance between PR education and requirements of PR professionals. In the international level, educators and professionals have worked together to close these gaps on one of the most comprehensive studies of public relations education that was done in 1999 by the commission on Public Relations Education, chartered by the public relations Society of America, namely "Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A port of Entry". This report provided the recommendation about the knowledge, skills and courses that should be included in the public relations curriculum. This suggestion was repeated as recommendation in the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education 2006, with the title "The professional Bond-Public Relations education and the practice".

Nevertheless, the problem still occurred in practice. The study of Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) found that both educators and professionals felt that not all of the subjects they considered important (including in the commission 1999 report) were currently being taught in all public relations programs. Also, the percentage of professionals who felt that graduates were prepared to enter the public relations profession was considerably lower than educators.

Then, there is still doubts that whether the Public Relations Curriculum in Thailand can balance the needs of PR education and the needs of PR professionals. Therefore, this research aims to take a closer look at the junction where education and practice in public relations first meet at the entry-level position. The study of knowledge and skills provided by the curriculum of public relations program, from the view of public relations academicians as well as the requirement the public relations professionals who are the graduates' employers should be done.

### The Conceptual Framework



The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge and skills provided by the offering courses of the Public Relations curriculum in undergraduate level, to know the expectation of public relations academicians and the expectation of public relations professionals towards the knowledge and skills of the public relations graduates and also to explore the similarities or differences between the knowledge and skills provided by the Public Relations program in undergraduate level and how they are expected by public relations academicians and public relations professionals.

## Methodology

The undergraduate public relations curriculum offered by six universities, namely: Assumption University (AU), Bangkok University (BU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Rangsit University

(RU), Sripatum University (SPU) and Thammasart University (TU) were studied (See Table 1) along with the interview with the research key informants which were 14 public Relations Academicians and 19 Public Relations Professionals. After the interview session, the list of knowledge and skills of public relations graduates were presented to the key informants. Key informants were asked to rate their requirements of each knowledge and skills on 5-points scale.

The data analysis began by using the constant comparison and analytic method to identify emerging common themes across the respondents (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). The coding systems were created by selecting common theme from interview transcriptions. Qualitative statistics such as frequency and percentage was used to analyze the coding.

**Table 1 Public relations curriculum structure of Assumption University (AU), Bangkok University (BU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Rangsit University (RU), Sripatum University (SPU) and Thammasart University (TU)**

	AU	BU	CU	RU	SPU	TU	
I. General Education Courses	40	30	51	30	30	30	Credits
II. Professional Courses							
- Core Courses	39	36	32	36	45	54	Credits
- Major Required Courses	42	30	20	48	30	18	Credits
- Major Elective Courses or Minor Elective Courses	18	30	30	15	24	30	Credits
III. Free Electives	6	9	6	6	6	6	Credits
Total	145	135	139	135	135	138	Credits

For estimating the inter-coder reliability in this qualitative content analysis, three reviewers were trained to be coders and repeat the coding process from the codebook. This is for checking the reliability which occurs when there are agreements

among each coder who code the same content using the same coding instruction (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003; Busch, Maret, et al., 2005). After the analysis, the results were reported in the form of table and explanation.

## Research Findings

For this part, the knowledge and skills provided by the Public Relations program in undergraduate level and what required by public relations academicians and public relations professionals are presented.

From Table 2, the research shows that there are three knowledge components that can be found in public relations curriculum, academicians' expectation and professional's expectation while some of them differ from each other.

The similarities among three perspectives are communication theories, concepts and strategies, public relations theories, concepts and strategies and ethical issues. Curriculum perspective and professionals agree on persuasion concepts and strategies. Only academicians and professionals agree on societal trends.

The differences are marketing which is provided by only curriculum, where as principle of business and business case study are the expectation of only academicians.

**Table 2 The knowledge provided by the Public Relations program in undergraduate level and the knowledge required by public relations academicians and public relations professionals**

Curriculum	Academicians	Professionals
Communication theories, concepts and strategies	Public relations Theories, concepts and strategies	Societal trends
Public relations theories, concepts and strategies	Ethical issues	Communication theories, concepts and strategies
Ethical issues	Principle of business, and business case study	Persuasion concepts and strategies
Marketing	Societal trends	Ethical issues
Persuasion concepts and strategies	Communication theories, concepts and strategies	Public relations Theories, concepts and strategies

From table 3 -the research finds that all curriculum, academicians and professionals agree on the mastery of language in written and oral communication as the highest expected skill for public relations graduates. The second similarity among their expectation is informative and persuasive writing.

Both curriculum and professionals agree on research methods and analysis while both academicians and professionals expect to see public relations graduates fluent in a foreign language.

Even though there are some differences between their expectations, the curriculum puts its effort to train the public relations graduates in terms of media selection and usage and Strategic planning. The academicians expect to see the public relations graduates have the computer literacy and photography literacy whereas professionals give their expectations on issues and crisis management as well as public speaking and presentation.

**Table 3 The skills provided by the Public Relations curriculum in undergraduate level and the skills required by public relations academicians and public relations professionals**

Curriculum	Academicians	Professionals
Mastery of language in written and oral communication	Mastery of language in written and oral communication	Mastery of language in written and oral communication
Media selection and usage	Computer Literacy	Informative and persuasive writing
Research methods and analysis	Fluency in a foreign language	Issues and crisis management
Strategic planning	Informative and persuasive writing	Research methods and analysis
Informative and persuasive writing	Photography Literacy	Public speaking and presentation
		Fluency in a foreign language

Furthermore, the similarity among public relations academicians and public relations professionals can be found from their expectation

towards the personality traits of the public relations graduates (see Table 4).

**Table 4 The personality traits required by public relations academicians and public relations professionals**

Academicians	Professionals
Be confident	Be patient. Have a strong work ethic and high energy.
Have a good personality	Have people skills and have communication skills.
Have a well-dressed	Be generous
Have curiosity and be a self-starter.	Be on time (Be able to make decisions on deadline. Have good time management)
Have people skills and have communication skills.	Have a passion for public relations.

The public relations academicians expect that the most common personality traits for their public relations graduates should be confidence. In contrast, the public relations professionals expect that outstanding components that the public relations graduates should have is being patient or a strong work ethic and high energy.

For other personality traits, academicians put more focuses on the characteristics of public relations graduates who should have a good personality, have a well-dressed, have curiosity and be a self-starter, and have people skills. Whereas, public relations practitioners give more importance on people skills, generosity, being on time (punctuality) and a passion for public relations.

The overall research results indicate that the contents provided by public relations curriculum, the expectations of public relations academicians and the expectations of practitioners in Thailand do not differ greatly. There is a clear consensus among educators and practitioners about the importance of knowledge components, skill components, and personality traits. As such, the differences normally occur by the rank of the importance of each component.

In conclusion, knowledge, skills, and personality traits of the first entry level of Public relations graduates that the students who are taking Public Relations courses should be aware of are as follow;

**Table 5 The knowledge, skills, and personality traits of the first entry level of Public relations graduates**

Knowledge	Skills	Personality Traits
Communication theories, concepts and strategies	Fluency in a foreign language	Be confident
Ethical issues	Informative and persuasive writing	Be generous
Marketing	Informative and persuasive speaking communication	Be on time
Persuasion concepts and strategies	Strategic planning	Have a strong work ethic
Principle of business, and business case study	Research methods and analysis	Have a high energy and have a passion for public relations.
Public relations Theories, concepts and strategies	Issues and crisis management	Have a good personality and have a well-dressed
Societal trends	Media selection and usage	Have curiosity and be a self-starter.
	Photography Literacy	Have people skills
	Computer Literacy	

## Discussion

All curriculums being studied in this research provide almost the same curriculum structure. This is because all universities are required to follow the curriculum development guideline of the Ministry of Education of Thailand. Interestingly, Chulalongkorn University provides only 20 credits for major required courses with 9 different areas of contents. The idea of small credits per course may provide more opportunities for public relations graduates to study various areas of public relations knowledge and skills.

When study the courses offered by the Public Relations curriculum in undergraduate level, especially the mandatory professional courses which cover the core courses and major required courses of each public relations curriculum, the result finds that all curriculums provide the courses in the same direction of suggestion from “Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A port of Entry” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999)

and “The professional Bond-Public Relations education and the practice” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). These research results correspond with the study of Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) which found the agreement among educators and practitioners about the subjects that should be taught in undergraduate public relations programs, including the knowledge and skills recommended by the Commission for Public Relations Education.

For example, the top knowledge provided by the public relations mandatory professional course are communication theories, concepts and strategies, public relations theories, concepts and strategies, ethical issues, marketing and persuasion concepts and strategies. This comes in the same direction suggested by an ideal undergraduate major in public relations courses which are Introduction to public relations (including theory, origin and principles), case studies in public relations that review the professional practice, public relations research,

measurement and evaluation, public relations law and ethics, public relations writing and production, public relations planning and management, and public relations campaigns

Considering the expectation score by both public relations academicians and practitioners towards the knowledge and skills, the overall research finds that they gave the high score (higher than 3.5) for all knowledge and skills based on the framework of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999 and 2006. This means that the suggestion of the Commission on Public Relations Education for the necessary courses for teaching public relations curriculum was also confirmed by this research result.

Overall, the research results help identify the knowledge, skills, and personality traits that public relations academicians and practitioners consider important for public relations graduates or those who just enter to the public relations career.

The similarities among three perspectives are communication theories, concepts and strategies, public relations theories, concepts and strategies. This is as Guiniven (1998), Hazleton & Long (1988), Heath (1991) mentioned that theory is one of the popular recommendations that should be taught in undergraduate public relations, and it should be used as a basis for all courses.

Ethics in the public relations curriculum was another commonly mentioned recommendation given by the contents provided by the curriculum, academicians, and practitioners. This is in the same line with the study of many authors such as Gibson (1992-1993), J. Grunig (1989), Guiniven (1998), Harrison (1990), and Heath (1991).

The finding shows that writing was commonly viewed as one of the most important skills to be taught to public relations students. This result shows the same thing as Harrison (1989) suggested that writing is a major condition for the future success of public relations graduates, and that public relations person must know and master a wide range of writing skills.

The social trend is one of the knowledge that should be noted as academicians and professionals expect to see the public relations graduates strong in this area while it is missing from the current public relations curriculum.

The results indicate that the expectation of educators and practitioners do not differ significantly. There is a consensus among educators and practitioners about the importance of knowledge components, skill components, and also the personality traits.

However, the obvious differences come in form of the weight of importance that curriculum, academicians and practitioners allocate for each component of knowledge, skills and personality traits. Noticeably, in part of personality traits, the public relations academicians expect that their public relations graduates should be confident. Quite the opposite, the public relations professionals expect that great component that the public relations graduates should have is being patient or have a strong work ethic and high energy.

The missing parts should also be observed. The direction suggested by "Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A port of Entry" (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999) and "The professional Bond-Public

Relations education and the practice” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006) also agree to put the knowledge “Multicultural and global issues” and skill “Applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity” onto the curriculum. Nevertheless, neither the public relations academicians nor the public relations professionals give the high importance towards these areas. This is as Sriramesh (2004) mentioned that although many public relations textbooks make references to the need for multicultural perspectives in public relations, there are still lacks of multicultural focus on content of public relations education around the world.

The missing parts are also noticed from how the Commission’s recommendation ranks the knowledge and skills on its list which show the least priority of the knowledge “Multicultural and global issues” and skill “Applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity”. This can be seen by these knowledge and skills appeared at the end of the list. The lack of importance to multiculturalism are affirmed in this research result.

By then, in Thailand, the needs for “fluency in a foreign language” found from both academicians and professional should be considered if the university’s curriculum would like to move forward to focus more on international public relations or contribute to enhancing multiculturalism in public relations education. The vision/mission or philosophy of each university curriculum should be apprehensive.

For example, the Assumption University (AU) states one of its vision clearly that AU envisions itself as an international community of scholars. Repeatedly, its Faculty of Communication Art’s

gives its vision as “the Communication Arts Graduates meeting local and international standards, capable of coping with the rapidly changing environment with broad knowledge base in various business aspects and procedures of communication arts” ([www.au.edu](http://www.au.edu)). As such, the AU public relations academicians should review and revise its curriculum to fit with this direction. In the same way, Bangkok University may need to interpret its aims as “... preparing students to meet new challenges and demands in the fast changing communication world ...” ([http://admission2.bu.ac.th/buic\\_programs\\_offered\\_communication\\_arts.htm](http://admission2.bu.ac.th/buic_programs_offered_communication_arts.htm)) towards the integration of multiculturalism in its public relations program.

In addition to the missing parts as multiculturalism in the curriculum and students’ knowledge and skills, both academicians and professionals require the public relations graduates to know and be able to produce public relations materials. They all give an importance to photo taking and computer/IT literacy, but no one specifically puts the concerns on preparing the students to be ready to adapt the technology or new media to be a part of their future work. This is contradicting with the trend that most PR professionals have embraced new technology to enhance the PR process (Vocus White Paper, 2009).

The last point, even though the research results identify the direction of expectations of curriculum, academicians, and professionals towards the development of public relations students, we should keep in mind that these expectations could be broader to prepare the students not only to serve the current work position, but also to step forward to the development of public relations as a professionalism in the future as well.

## Implications

The research results can provide a great framework for developing public relations curriculum as well as a guideline for conducting the theoretical research that can benefit public relations practitioners. Also, the research results can provide the framework for developing public relations curriculum especially, regarding to Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education: TQF: HEd which is designed to support the implementation of the educational guidelines set out in the National Education Act.

The knowledge and skills expected by the practitioners can be the recommendation for public relations curriculum development. The knowledge and skills of public relations graduates provided by the curriculum seem to be sufficient when compared to the expectation of academicians and practitioners. However, the analysis is conducted by comparing the average information of all curriculums so each university may compare its curriculum to the expectation of the public relations

practitioners to gain more specific information for the benefit of each university. In addition, the different expectation of personality traits among academicians and practitioners should be closed or combined in the teaching and learning process. The curriculum revision may be needed not only to fulfill the expectations, but to also be ready for the new education requirement from the national quality frameworks.

Internship program should be the requirement for all public relations students to be a great opportunity for them to apply their knowledge and skills to the actual situation and absorb the required personality traits from the public relations professionals in the real working situation.

Importantly, to help improve public relations education in Thailand, more research could be done to determine the impact of the changing environment or the trend of public relations works, as well as the trend of public relations to lead the development of public relations for the future era.

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