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# The role of a professional body in professionalisation: The South African public relations case.

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## **Abstract**

*Professionalisation has been a much-debated topic and frequent goal for public relations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, although it has not been successfully accomplished in various instances. The main purpose of this study is to explore and describe the opinions of practitioners in industry, organisations and consultancies about the possible role of a public relations professional body in the process of professionalisation in the context of a developing country such as South Africa. A qualitative research paradigm focusing on exploratory, descriptive and contextual data was selected. A mixed methods approach was adopted. The findings reveal that most public relations practitioners are in favour of professionalising the field. One of the main considerations of practitioners is that more rigorous benchmarks be devised for the purpose of defining professionalism. This refining of benchmarks might well be one of the most pivotal roles that a professional body can play in its efforts to professionalise the field of public relations. What also emerged was that an overwhelming majority of practitioners were strongly in favour of reorganising the current professional body so that it would have sufficient authority, power and legitimacy to legislate rules and regulations on behalf of practitioners and perform the functions necessary to promote and protect the wellbeing and reputation of the profession. The contribution of this study is important, as little empirical evidence exists with regard to professionalisation of public relations, particularly pertaining to the role of a professional body during such a process.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Discussions about professionalisation (and de-professionalisation) began in the 1970s. This was a result of observations concerning the growing power of bureaucratic management, process-driven working methods and de-skilling of middle class labour. These issues, according to Elmer (2007) belong in the past. On the other hand, professionalisation has been a goal of public relations practice since the turn of the 20th century. There have been consistent efforts over the years by public relations associations to both legitimise and professionalise practice by augmenting the profession's body of knowledge, improving its reputation and ethical standards, and refining its certification processes. Among those who have contributed to these efforts are Hunt and Grunig (1994); Wylie (1994); Cutlip, Centre and Broom, 2006; Heath and Coombs, 2006; L'Etang and Pieczka (in 2006), mentioned in Pratt and Adamolekun (2008, p. 30), and Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008).

The "licencing" of the public relations profession was also the lifelong concern and obsession of the late Edward Bernays, who believed that the profession to which he had contributed so much could only establish a reputation for credibility, efficiency and authority through professionalisation (Valin, 2005). In a study undertaken in 2001, Verčič, van Ruler, Butschi, and Flodin found that although public relations should be accorded the status of a profession, it currently lacks an image of professionalism. The term professionalisation is often used in the public relations field to refer to practices that are

based on the scientific research and the construction of theories that emanate from studies that have been undertaken in universities. A number of researchers and authors agree that until public relations practitioners achieve professional status, neither society nor their clients will accord them the degree of respect and confidence that they give as a matter of course to members of other well-established professional bodies (Brody 1992; Hogg & Doolan, 1999; Lages & Simkin, 2003; Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998). This study contributes to this debate as it adds empirical evidence of the expectations practitioners hold of their professional body's role during professionalisation in public relations.

One such professional body is the Global Alliance, which is a framework for collaboration with a mission to enhance the public relations profession and its practitioners throughout the world. It aims to provide a forum to share ideas and best practice, seek common interests and standards, and provide a better understanding of the unique aspects of each culture in which practitioners operate (Global Alliance, 2008). The Global Alliance undertook an extensive survey in 2003 of existing professionalisation regimes to determine whether or not it might be feasible to devise standards that could be uniformly applied in all member countries. **Table 1** (below) outlines our own interpretation of the findings of that survey.

**Table 1: Summary of professional bodies and status**

| Professional body and country      | Status  |
|------------------------------------|---|
| PRSA                               | Key member of the North American Public Relations Council which regroups a dozen American organisations. Has created the Universal Accreditation Board. Designation is APR.   |
| IABC                               | Administers an examination process that leads to the ABC designation, almost identical to the APR examination. It is a voluntary process.   |
| CIPR (UK)                          | In February 2005 won the accolade of a Royal Charter, regulates standards by requiring high education levels and other experience for admission to various levels of membership. Full members are encouraged to subscribe to a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme which leads to Accredited Practitioner status. |
| PRIA (Australia)                   | Has accreditation scheme  |
| ZIPR (Zimbabwe)                    | Has accreditation scheme  |
| Ghana                              | Has accreditation scheme  |
| CPRS (Canada)                      | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |
| PRISA (Southern Africa)            | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |
| Cyprus PR Professional Association | Uses the term 'accreditation' of members but does not use the acronym APR   |
| PRINZ (New Zealand)                | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |
| PRSA (North America)               | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |
| IPRS (Singapore)                   | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |
| ARPPR (Puerto Rico)                | Has formal registration process for accreditation and uses the acronym APR  |

The aim of this study, therefore, is to drill down into the issue canvassed by the Global Alliance by exploring and describing the opinions of practitioners in industry, organisations and consultancies about the possible role of a public relations professional body in the process of professionalisation in South Africa. This article has five parts. First it overviews the issue of professionalisation, including identified barriers and processes both broadly and specifically for public relations. Then it describes the South African public relations context. This is followed by a description of the research methods and procedures used in the study. Fourthly, the results of the enquiry are presented. Finally, conclusions and implications of this research are offered.

### **The evolution of professions**

Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) made the first comprehensive attempt to analyse professions, and their work has since come to be regarded as a standard history of professions. A great deal of additional research into the history, dynamics and evolution of various professions has been undertaken subsequently by sociologists, especially since the 1960s. One of the salient features to emerge from this body of research is that professions have evolved differently in different parts of the world. These differences are evidently mainly attributable to the effects exerted on professions by the various historical, political, economic, geographical, demographical and cultural circumstances that prevail in different countries (Morgan, 1998). The evolution of professions is affected by local and global changes that in turn affect the activities and working conditions of professionals.

A key difference that Morgan (1998) detected is that some professions evolved as more or less independent self-regulating bodies, while others evolved as the result of statutory law. These developments raise several questions that need to be answered by professional associations. One involves the phases through which aspirant professional associations should pass as they move towards full professionalisation. Specifically, public relations associations need to determine whether it is more desirable to aspire towards

self-regulation or state-regulation—or whether they should eschew any kind of externally imposed regulation whatsoever.

### **Changing environment**

There are a number of evolving conditions in the modern world that, although not directly derived from the conditions under which professional practitioners operate, exert a strong influence on the ways in which professionals are obliged to conduct their affairs in contemporary society (Gold, Rodgers & Smith, 2002). Such conditions may include:

1. Advances in technology.
2. Deregulation and increasing competition in the context of globalisation.
3. Increasing cynicism among members and distrust of the motives and behaviour of the administrators of professional bodies. (Gold et al., 2002).

In order to achieve a proper understanding of the role of a professional body in the professionalisation process, it is necessary to understand what professional bodies are doing amidst the changing environment as well as the responses of professionals themselves.

### **The responses of professional bodies to these challenges**

According to research conducted by Gold et al. (2002), professional associations or bodies are attempting in varying degrees to meet these challenges by devising and implementing a variety of methods, long-term strategies, plans and activities. One of the greatest disadvantages of professional associations is that most professionals do not become members of their professional body. It has been estimated that only 10% of potential members actually apply for membership, and that even fewer of these are accredited (Valin, 2005). Within the public relations context, it seems that many professional bodies have been unable to enhance the image of public relations as a profession in the eyes of the public at large. While it is obviously important to expect public relations practitioners to register as members of

their professional bodies, practitioners will ultimately be judged by society and by individuals in terms of the excellence or otherwise of the work they deliver (Lewis, Harrison, Morley, Rawel & Finucane, 2003).

One of the key findings in a recent study by Abdullah and Threadgold (2007) was that the formation of independent professional associations for public relations practitioners is indispensable for the continued health and vitality of the profession throughout the world. Abdullah and Threadgold (2007, p. 21) maintain that a properly constituted professional association should meet the following requirements:

1. Keep members well-informed and knowledgeable about the latest elements and operational procedures of the best professional projects and strategic plans being implemented throughout the world.
2. Apply standardised and universal procedures for individual and corporate accreditation (registration).
3. Adhere to whatever benchmarks for standards are accepted by the best practitioners in the world.
4. Develop, maintain and foster international relations between professional associations with the same aims and standards.
5. Encourage programmes to implement the continuous professional development of existing members.
6. Devise, enforce and administer a comprehensive code of ethical standards and procedures.
7. Make a range of considered benefits available to all accredited members.
8. Oversee the development of training programmes and the certification of professional qualifications.

Further to the response of professional bodies to the changing environment, it is important to include a brief discussion around the responses of public relations professionals themselves.

### **Responses from professionals themselves**

Lewis (in Lewis et al., 2003) expresses deep concern about the critical eye with which the general public regard public relations professionals and the implicit reputation of the profession as a whole. Lewis argues that while it is important for public relations professionals to address the problems that beset efficient professionalisation, it is far more important to address issues of value, integrity, consistency, and continuing education.

Gold et al. (2002) suggest that the future of professions and professionals is mainly the responsibility of professionals themselves. These authors argue that the public will judge professionals by the quality of the values that they ascribe to, by their commitment to solid ethical values and integrity in relationships, the extent to which they are prepared to take responsibility for what they do, and the passion, courage and creativity with which they deal with problematic and challenging situations. Furthermore, Macnamara (2006) asserts that public relations practitioners will only achieve the prestige and recognition they aspire to if they commit themselves corporately and individually to a dedicated and continuous programme of the kind of high-level and self-directed learning that is required of well-established professionals such as accountants, doctors and lawyers (to name but a few). Without such continuous and dedicated professional supplementation, public relations practitioners will remain ignorant of important developments in their field.

### **Barriers to professionalisation of public relations**

Pratt and Adamolekun (2008) argue that part of the reality of the modern world is that the best interests of professionals are constantly being undermined by innovations in procedure and revolutions in technology. While most such innovations may be harmless and even

beneficial, some have a distinct capacity to undermine the security and stability of professional practice (Gold et al., 2002). The practice of public relations is no different. It is beset by a variety of fundamental difficulties and problems that are being aggravated by the tremendous growth of the profession and its extension into new areas resulting from the exponential growth of internationalisation through globalisation (Kruckeberg, 1998). Kruckeberg notes that the most obvious problems characterising the study and practice of the profession include:

1. General lack of agreement in the profession about the fundamental purpose and scope of the central functions and responsibilities of the profession itself.
2. The profession is not highly regarded as an area of scientific study and there is a feeling among practitioners that the professionalism of many practitioners leaves a lot to be desired.
3. Low recognition within business and industry of the nature of the field and practice of public relations. (1998, p. 45)

Given these barriers facing the profession, professional bodies in respective countries will need to actively drive the process in order for public relations to professionalise. For example, the United Kingdom's Institute for Public Relations (CIPR) applied for a Royal Charter, which confers legitimacy on the practice of public relations as an accepted profession in the United Kingdom (Tobin, 2005). Public relations has been a licensed profession in Spain since 1966 (Pratt & Adamolekum, 2008), Brazil since 1967 (Molleda & Athaydes, 2003), Panama since 1980, and Nigeria since 1990 (Pratt & Adamolekum, 2008). In Brazil, federal and regional councils enforce the various legal requirements that govern the profession, and censure and penalise those who fail to comply with legislation. All public relations

professionals in Brazil must possess a valid public relations degree and be licensed by the regional council in their state before they can practise (Molleda & Athaydes, 2003). The next section of this article describes the South African public relations context and the focus of the South African professional association.

### **The South African public relations context**

The South African public relations industry creates revenue in excess of four billion rand (ZAR) and employs an estimated 10,000 people (Global Alliance, 2008). However, membership of the industry's professional body, PRISA (Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa), is voluntary (O'Connor & Falconi, 2003) and the body administers its own Code of Professional Standards/Conduct. PRISA currently has about 900 registered practitioners (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008) and has set out its accreditation framework in line with South Africa's national qualification framework (Rawel, 2002). It focuses on registering practitioners and students, maintaining standards and ethics, providing continuing professional development, and endorsing education and training providers and certification services (PRISA, 2008). This organisation also enforces the disciplinary code to which all its members have bound themselves by voluntary agreement. The PRCC (Public Relations Consultants Chapter), which is a subdivision of PRISA, was especially created to accommodate the more specialised interests of consultants. Membership of this association is also voluntary (O'Connor & Falconi, 2003).

The Federation of African Public Relations Associations (FAPRA) is the umbrella body to which all national public relations associations in Africa belong. This organisation also acts in a consultative capacity for African governments and for the African Union. In 2008, FAPRA launched a five-year action plan to improve the status and social relevance of public relations practice in Africa, largely through the enhancement of its efforts to professionalise the field (Pratt & Adamolekun, 2008). Because a smattering of institutes, associations, societies, and organisations have a collective interest to

enhance the status of public relations on a historically troubled continent, Pratt and Adamolekun (2008) argue that FAPRA is best positioned to coordinate the disparate national programmes geared to improving communicators' professionalism.

Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) state that South Africa has a long history of public relations education. Today universities and technikons ('universities of technology') offer courses on public relations, but from different points of view. Public relations courses at South African universities tend to follow the more theoretically inclined European model, whereas training at South African universities of technology and technical colleges tends towards the American, more skill-based, model. Verwey (2000) points out that in view of the fact that an outcome-based approach to public relations education necessitates both foundational knowledge and skills in order to foster reflective public relations practice, the time has come to seriously reconsider this split in public relations training and education at South African tertiary education institutions. This issue has been addressed to an extent through the government's approach of merging tertiary education institutions in South Africa to create the so-called 'comprehensive' institutions, which offer courses from certificate level up to PhD. Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) contend that this blending of the theoretical and the practical will hopefully bring about an improvement in the professional standing of public relations in South Africa.

### **Research problem**

After considering the extent and complexity of the literature about public relations and professionalism, as well as the scarcity of rigorous research into the problems of public relations professionalism and practice in South Africa, the following research problem was defined: What are the opinions of public relations professionals as to the role of a professional body in public relations professionalism in a developing country such as South Africa?

### **Conceptual framework**

The public relations literature discusses the public relations industry and the practice of public relations from three different points of view: from the point of view of the industry as a whole, from the point of view of the organisation, and from the point of view of the individual practitioner (Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore, 1997; Dozier, 1992; Hunt & Grunig, 1994; Kitchen, 1997; Pasadeos, Renfro & Hanily, 1999). For the purpose of this study, these three different points of view or levels are interpreted in the following way. Firstly, matters that affect the industry as a whole are referred to as operating on the institutional level because they affect everyone connected with the industry through the activities and policies of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). Secondly, matters that affect individual public relations practitioners in their working context in organisations and corporations are referred to as matters that operate on the organisational level. Thirdly, matters that affect practitioners as individuals are referred to as matters that exist on the consultancy level (which is the level of individual practice).

### **Research questions**

The following research questions were devised on the basis of the conceptual framework presented above:

*RQ1:* What are the opinions of South African public relations professionals with regard to the professionalisation of the field of public relations?

*RQ2:* What barriers or obstacles in the way of professionalisation do South African public relations professionals anticipate in the field of public relations?

*RQ3:* What opinions do South African public relations professionals have about the extent to which a professional body should: (a) professionalise the field by establishing a certified body of knowledge; (b) advise, control and administer standardised courses of study, and; (c) exercise disciplinary powers over public relations professionals in a developing country?

## Research design

A qualitative research paradigm focusing on exploratory, descriptive and contextual data was adopted for the purposes of this study. Exploratory research is based on an inductive approach and aims to arrive at a dense description of the phenomena under inquiry. Furthermore, descriptive research aims at

unfolding situations or events and it implies that the representation of reality of participants should be clearly related. Lastly, contextual research is based on the attempt to understand events, actions and processes in participants' contexts instead of generalising results (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). **Table 2**, below, outlines the research design used in this study.

**Table 2: Research design**

| Paradigm                | Qualitative<br>Exploratory, descriptive and contextual   |
|-------------------------|--|
| Population and Sampling | The population included public relations practitioners in the Johannesburg region in South Africa. The sampling method used was snowball, convenience sampling. Data were gathered from respondents on three occasions. Firstly, questionnaires were completed by public relations practitioners attending the "PR and Corporate Communication Excellence Conference" in Johannesburg. Secondly, questionnaires were emailed to all public relations agencies in Johannesburg, as listed on the "bizcommunity" website. (Bizcommunity is regarded as South Africa's leading daily advertising, marketing and media news resource for the industry.) Thirdly, the questionnaire was emailed to 900 registered members of PRISA. In total 1213 professionals were contacted: 46 responses were received. |
| Method                  | Mixed methods approach. Quantitative methods were used to obtain participant demographics and a qualitative method using a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to obtain descriptive data.  |
| Instrument              | The instrument was a self-administered, semi-structured questionnaire with a demographic component and open-ended questions that were designed to elicit useful data for answering the research questions of the study.  |
| Data collection         | Self-administered questionnaire to the population of public relations professionals in the Johannesburg region by e-mail. Participants were asked to return the completed questionnaire to the researchers by e-mail or fax.   |
| Data analysis           | The quantitative section of the questionnaire (which determined the demographic profile of participants) was analysed by a statistics service at the University of Johannesburg. The qualitative section of the questionnaire was analysed using the Morse and Field approach (De Vos, 1998).  |
| Limitations             | From the sample of 1213 participants, only 46 responses were received, a response rate of 3.79%. This in itself may be regarded as symptomatic of public relations practitioners' opinions regarding the importance of such research as contributing to a body of South African scholarly public relations knowledge, and also to the professionalism debate. Another limitation might be the fact that PRISA's viewpoints on professionalisation were not taken into consideration.   |

## Findings and interpretation

It is clear from the demographics presented in **Table 3** (below) that the majority of respondents were females between the ages of 30 and 49, and that the majority of these possessed a four-year degree, an honours degree or a postgraduate diploma. Many of the respondents (37%) possessed a three-year diploma or degree, and 25% possessed a master's degree. None of the respondents

possessed a doctoral degree. An interesting finding with regard to respondents' professional details (see **Table 4**, below) is that the years of experience of the respondents varied from between 0 and 20 years, with the majority of the respondents having between 11 and 20 years of working experience in the field of public relations. Only 4% of the respondents had been employed in the field of public relations for 31 or more years. Sixty-five percent of the respondents were PRISA

members. Of these, the majority (40%) were registered as Associates. It is important to note that 33% of respondents were

registered at the APR level (which is the highest possible level of registration), while 24% were registered at the CPRP level.

**Table 3: Demographic analysis of respondents**

| Gender |          | Age       |          | Qualification  |          |
|--------|----------|-----------|----------|--|----------|
| Male   | 21 / 46% | 20-29     | 3 / 6%   | Grade 12   | 5 / 11%  |
| Female | 29 / 64% | 30-39     | 15 / 33% | 3 year diploma/ degree                               | 12 / 27% |
|        |          | 40-49     | 16 / 35% | 4 year degree/ honours degree/ Post-graduate diploma | 18 / 37% |
|        |          | 50-59     | 8 / 18%  | Masters  | 11 / 25% |
|        |          | 60 and up | 4 / 8%   | Doctoral   | 0 / 0%   |

**Table 4: Professional details of respondents**

| Years experience |          | Registration with PRISA |          | Levels of registration |          |
|------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|------------------------|----------|
| 0 – 5            | 11 / 25% | Yes                     | 30 / 65% | Student                | 0 / 0%   |
| 6 – 10           | 12 / 27% | No                      | 16 / 35% | Associate              | 19 / 40% |
| 11 – 20          | 14 / 29% |                         |          | PRPR                   | 1 / 3%   |
| 21 - 30          | 7 / 15%  |                         |          | CPRP                   | 11 / 24% |
| 31 and more      | 2 / 4%   |                         |          | APR                    | 15 / 33% |

**The working context of the respondents**

Three distinct contexts were able to be identified from the responses which the participants returned. These were: (1) public relations agencies or consultancies, (2)

marketing agencies or consultancies, and (3) consultancies and organisations in which the respondents were responsible for public relations and marketing.

**Table 5: Contexts of work of respondents**

| Public relations Agency / Consultancy | Marketing Agency / Consultancy | Organisation (dealing with public relations / marketing) | Other    |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|----------|
| 15 / 33%                              | 3 / 6%                         | 8 / 18%  | 20 / 43% |

**Table 5** indicates that the majority of the respondents worked for a public relations agency or consultancy (33%). A large number of respondents (18%) also worked in organisations that dealt with public relations

and marketing. The largest number of respondents (43%) could not be categorised according in any of the above-mentioned three categories. These respondents described their work as freelancing, working for government

departments, agencies or individuals, the monitoring of media, working in organisations specialising in marketing or public relations, and working as owners of their own businesses in the field of public relations and communication. Future work in this area will obviously need to expand the work-type options to capture a more accurate picture of the predominant roles and work contexts.

### **Themes identified from data**

From the data collected seven themes were identified:

#### *1. Need to professionalise public relations*

The majority of respondents (97%)<sup>2</sup> felt that the public relations industry needs to be professionalised and noted that if the worth and value of the profession were more secure, the confidence of the public would be assured and the profession would come to be regarded as indispensable to the welfare, efficiency, vitality and reputation of all major organisations. A large portion (87%) of respondents felt that both standardisation and regulation of the field are necessary to ensure consistency in the quality of service offered by professionals. Public relations professionals, for their part, would also need to bind themselves (as do other professions) to appropriate standards of professional behaviour. Professionalisation would enable employers to entertain realistic expectations about what it is that public relations professionals offer, because it would regulate the remuneration that professionals received for the services they delivered.

#### *2. Education and training*

A few respondents (7%) contended that the number of unqualified and inexperienced practitioners currently operating in the field of public relations was a barrier to professionalisation in South Africa. Some respondents (9%) also observed that many journalists perform the same activities as public relations professionals because of their writing abilities and other activities. They also noted that the poor writing skills of many public relations professionals, their inadequate command of the English language, their

inability to think strategically, and the inadequacy of their understanding of areas of knowledge that are vital to the effective practice of public relations as a profession, were characterised as barriers or obstacles on the road to professionalisation. It was observed that many public relations practitioners still in fact regard media liaison as the predominant function of public relations.

Some respondents (7%) further noted that new graduates entering the profession were often distinctly deficient in practical, hands-on skills, and that they frequently displayed an astounding ignorance of the media. Such a situation is only possible because of the absence of regulated benchmarks and standards to which public relations practitioners need to conform. It was also noted by respondents that the expenses associated with proper training might well be another hindrance to professionalisation.

The multiplicity of qualifications that are accepted in the industry was also noted by respondents (13%). The result of this is that many smaller providers do not have the capabilities or resources to run proper training programmes or keep practitioners abreast with the latest developments in the field. As part of the education and training programmes offered, respondents were of the opinion that some kind of internship should form an integral part of the professionalisation process. Furthermore, respondents felt that it would be better for each individual educational institution to create and maintain its own standards, but that it would be useful for these standards to be monitored and moderated externally.

One of the respondents went so far as to say that “public relations is a strategic communication tool and the lack of experience and knowledge demonstrated by some practitioners prevents the industry from positioning itself in the marketplace as a serious, strategic and management tool”.

#### *3. Entry requirement to the profession*

Many respondents (80%) were of the opinion that if stringent entry criteria were set for those who aspired to enter the profession, one could expect improvements in service

delivery and the quality of practising professionals in the field as well as the standard of the work that they deliver. Attention was drawn to the anomaly that while some public relations practitioners have vast experience in the field and widely recognised skills and abilities, they possess no basic formal qualifications. Any authoritative body would have to create special concessions to accommodate practitioners of this kind.

One respondent mentioned that “it is obvious that there are currently too many non-qualified and inexperienced people entering the industry who give the industry a bad name”.

#### 4. *Role of the industry*

Some respondents (4%) were of the opinion that the industry itself should be responsible for facilitating some kind of internship as an integral part of the professionalisation process through education and training. They further placed focus on the industry beginning to place a greater emphasis on working cooperatively with educational providers on the achievement of high standards, and on defining precise benchmarks for the attainment of professional standards.

#### 5. *Need for a professional organisation*

Most respondents (85%) emphasised that a properly authorised professional organisation was indispensable for legislating conditions for the profession and for controlling and administering the affairs and concerns of constituent members and the professional organisation which would give effect to these requirements. One of the respondents states that “what the profession currently needs is not only professionalisation, but also the public prestige and reputation that will be the consequence of the proper application of professional standards through the mediation of a professional public relations body”. Respondents felt that this was exactly what the role of a professional body was. Many of the respondents felt that examinations should be standardised and that certification should be regulated and controlled by the profession itself. They noted that such procedures already operate successfully in a

number of other professions such as accountancy, the law and medicine.

The prime objective of the envisaged professional body should be the identification, moderation, collection and publication of effective case history data across a broad spectrum of the South African economy. There is an urgent need for formal public relations research in the context of tertiary institutions as well as the need for capacity-building, the continuous review and updating of training programmes, as well as state support in the form of grants for companies and organisations (such as the Sector Education & Training Authorities) that are committed to the formal training and in-service augmentation of the skills of practising professionals.

One area that received a lot of attention was the certification and/or endorsement of university and other qualifications of students who aspire to membership of a professional body. On the one hand respondents felt that if a professional body takes responsibility for standardising the course of public relations studies, it will not be the sole responsibility of the degree-conferring institution to determine the content, methods and standards of the professional qualification. The importance of the endorsement of a standardised qualification was once again noted in this context. A number of respondents expressed the opinion that a course of studies that is officially approved, certified and authorised by a professional body will not only enhance the credibility of the profession, but will send a signal to employers and to the public in general that the profession is seriously concerned with the maintenance of professional standards that compare with the best in the world. This should form part of the responsibility of the professional body to accredit universities and colleges to teach the approved courses and to award professional qualifications on behalf of the professional body. While PRISA was mentioned as an organisation that possesses sufficient experience, knowledge and resources to perform this function, other respondents felt that PRISA should not be burdened with this responsibility because their main function is to protect the more narrow interest of the industry

rather than involve themselves in the establishment of practical and academic standards and the mechanisms involved in industry-wide certification.

On the other hand, a few respondents (4%) were of the opinion that while it is the responsibility of tertiary institutions to provide assurances about what constitutes academic excellence, it should be the responsibility of professional bodies to provide assurances about the validity of the skills and experience of their members. Respondents noted that the current professional body needed to re-evaluate itself and redefine the role that it envisaged for itself on behalf of the public relations industry in the country as a whole.

#### 6. *Incomprehension, ignorance and apathy of public relations*

Several respondents (33%) identified the incomprehension, ignorance and apathy of employers, the general public and public relations professionals about the various functions, services and disciplines in the public relations sector as a major barrier to professionalisation. They also noted that there is generally a lack of understanding of the beneficial effect that the profession can exert on many of the most pressing fundamental social issues of the day, and that some employers are still under the illusion that all a public relations practitioners can do is handle the public relations function. Public relations is still regarded by some ill-informed observers as a 'soft' profession that can add little value to the core functions or profitability of an organisation. Of greater concern though is the general state of apathy among practitioners that might well account for the widespread lack of interest in a professional body. That same state of mind might well be the cause of the very low rate of membership of the existing professional body in South Africa.

#### 7. *No need to professionalise*

In contrast with the majority support for professionalising public relations in South Africa, one (2%) of the respondents felt that nothing more should be necessary than to rely upon the changing attitudes and opinions

among the general public and employers of practitioners. These respondents felt that state regulation or control should be avoided because it would constitute an undemocratic and unwarranted interference in the activities of professionals, and that it should be left solely to the market itself to judge the skills and effectiveness of individual practitioners and agencies. They were of the opinion that professionalism is a function of the integrity of individual practitioners, and that it cannot be guaranteed by the oversight or activities of a nationally recognised professional organisation.

### **Implications**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the opinions of practitioners in the industry, organisations and consultancies about the possible role of a public relations professional body in the process of professionalisation in the context of a developing country such as South Africa. On the one hand overwhelming support exists for the professionalisation of the field of public relations in South Africa because, among many other benefits, professionalisation is seen as enhancing the value and prestige of the public relations industry. This is one of the aspects that the professional body, PRISA needs to address, as one of the perceived barriers was the current absence of a respected and prestigious governing body for public relations in South Africa. On the other hand, some public relations professional are of the opinion that it is sufficient merely to enhance the image of the profession in the eyes of the public and thereby effect changes in attitudes and opinions.

The professional body, PRISA, is perceived as needing to apply more rigour to the specific entry requirements necessary for joining the profession. It is also perceived that the industry, lead by the professional body, should devote special attention to working cooperatively with other institutions and individuals to raise the standards of the profession and set clear benchmarks for acceptable professional performance.

Public relations education and training, and the issue of who is responsible for ensuring quality in setting standards and maintaining

consistency in this regard, are perceived as an extremely high priority in South Africa. This is attributed to the fact that there are a number of unqualified and inexperienced practitioners who currently work in the field, as well as the number of qualified and unqualified journalists who work as public relations professionals. Two schools of thought emerged here, with one believing that institutions of higher education should be responsible for quality and standards, with a professional body only in the role of endorsing such education and training. The other school of thought believes that it is the responsibility of the professional body to ensure quality and standards in education and training.

The expectations of the professional body (PRISA) are that it should be able to identify, moderate, collect and publish case history data, endorse qualifications, standardise courses of study, examine candidates, certify results, and authorise the practice of professionals. It is also perceived as essential for the professional body in South Africa (PRISA) to raise expectations about the economic (and other) value of public relations as a profession.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge in public relations as well as the practice, as it provides empirical evidence with regards to professionalisation of public relations, specifically pertaining to practitioners' perceptions of the role of a professional body during the process of professionalisation in South Africa. An understanding of the professionalisation-related attitudes and issues in one country, while not generalisable to the global context, ultimately complements and contributes to the wider assemblage of knowledge about professionalisation being driven by such bodies as the Global Alliance, and may therefore help take us one step closer to a set of global standards and procedures for the professional practice of public relations.

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<sup>2</sup> The theme data are qualitative, meaning numerical interpretation is not statistically valid. However, in order to give some comparative signal of how many respondents made comments that fit into each theme, percentages are provided. These percentages are indicative of general proportions only, not quantitatively reliable.