**Reimagining Australian public relations practice: A capability approach**

Public relations as an industry is well developed in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 25,700 professionals are currently employed in the PR industry and a strong growth is predicted for the future of the sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2018). Dedicated public relations education in Australia dates back to 1964, when RMIT introduced a three-year part-time certificate (Gleeson, 2014). However, despite its long standing history, the Australian Government's Business Skills Council continues to code public relations as a sub-section of marketing (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017). The desire of Australian public relations professionals and educators to be recognised as a stand-alone discipline in its own right requires further reflection on unique knowledge and skills sets. Moreover, some consensus regarding the influence and identity of the public relations practitioner of the future is necessary.

Over the past two years, public relations researchers from around the world have been conceptually exploring if the knowledge and behavioural items in public relations practice can be expanded into a global capabilities framework that allows for local context adaptation. This framework is envisaged to guide individual practitioners and educators to raise the standards of future public relations practice. Until then, the focus had been very much on professional competencies, captured in a number of projects, such as the Global Alliance's Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK) Project (The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2015) and the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) Professional Framework (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Here the focus is on identifying levels of practice (e.g. early, mid-career and senior practitioner) and to categorise associated knowledge, skills, attributes and behaviours, thereby essentially providing broad descriptors for areas of practice.

In contrast, a capability approach sets out to capture the scope and priorities of a profession – both currently and into the future (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999). Capabilities are not about tasks or seniority, nor do they describe particular functions. Whereas competences may refer to specific skills and abilities, capabilities refer to the core practices of a profession and capture culture, values, resources and potential. This approach reflects recent developments in professionalism studies, where a more generic, fluid and future looking approach is being adopted towards the capturing of the cope and priorities of a profession (Lester, 2014).

According to Sen (1993), capabilities represent "a person's ability to do valuable act or reach valuable states of being" (p.37). It represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be and requires recognition as well as appreciation by the group – or professional peers – instead of being solely determined by an individual's desire. From a public relations perspective, a capabilities approach captures key competencies and aptitudes of its practitioners, as well as enables predictions in regard to abilities and priorities of the communicator of the future.

Nine countries participated in the first stage of the Global Capability Framework project, led by the University of Huddersfield for the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. This paper focuses on the insights gained within the Australian context. The Australian study was undertaken between March 2017 and January 2018. The three-stage research project, which included a Delphi study, an online survey and focus group discussions, involved public relations and communication practitioners, employers and educators from around the country.

This paper discusses the research process and findings at each stage of the Australian project, resulting in a list of ten core capabilities. These will be further explored, in particular within the context of the global findings (Fawkes et al., 2018).

The global research partners agreed on eleven capabilities, grouped in three categories: communication, organisational and professional capabilities. However, the global framework recognises that despite commonalities, each country has its own framework. Australia-specific observations included the challenging of the appropriateness of the "public relations" label, a focus on 'social context' and recognition of the country's multicultural and diverse society.

This paper sets out to challenge the status quo, pose questions and encourage discussion related to the future of public relations in Australia and development of its unique interpretation of global PR capabilities.

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