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The Other Side of the Coin: An Analysis by Turkish Public Relations Professionals on the Qualifications of Public Relations Academics and Curricula

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the opinions and perceptions of senior Turkish public relations practitioners on the knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes of public relations academics and public relations curriculums. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with public relations practitioners working in corporations or consultancies. Results show that the top knowledge areas for public relations practitioners include sociology, psychology, and communication, the most prominent skills include communication skills, IT skills, and visioning, the most important personal attributes include good image, sensitivity/humanity, and life-long learner, and the top competencies are performing and creating. Practical knowledge is as important as theoretical knowledge. Public relations professionals have respect for public relations academics, appreciate their input, but they suggest that the public relations curriculum should be improved and that the graduates should be better informed. This paper also reveals how a dialogue can be established between Turkish public relations academics and professionals. The collected data were analyzed under the guidance of Wengers' communities of practice framework, and suggestions for forming communities of practice were proposed by taking the dimensions of events, leadership, connectivity, membership, learning projects, and artifacts into account. By providing data from Turkey, the findings of this work can help us improve industry-academia ties and subsequently contribute to the professionalization of public relations.

Keywords: Public relations profession, public relations professionals, public relations academics, qualifications

1. Introduction

To achieve a professional status, public relations need to satisfy several requirements, including building a code of ethics, serving the public interest, and ensuring that relevant practitioners possess specialized technical skills and standardized education (Chung & Choi,

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2012). Professions and qualifications are being discussed as the main and foundations of professionalization (Hajoš, 2019). L'Etang (2008, 1999) argues that education provides a cognitive structure and knowledge and thus has a vital role in professionalization. Education also adds to the legitimizing process and helps define its expertise area and scope of work. Theoretical frameworks are built through education, whereas standards of the profession are established through ethics. Therefore, public relations education and professionalization are linked as education provides the necessary knowledge and skills for accomplishing the tasks and responsibilities in public relations (Ehling, 1992). Hatherell and Bartlett (2006) state that while the admission of public relations to academia has mainly been successful, its process of professionalization and academization remain problematic. For example, in Australia, public relations education shifted from a teaching-focused and practitioners-as-teachers stance to a more research-based discipline with educators coming from more traditional academic paths. Moreover, despite its strong ties with communication, public relations academics keep themselves independent from the communication discipline.

The qualifications, knowledge, competencies, and skills of public relations practitioners have been studied widely by researchers, and suggestions have been made on what makes an ideal public relations professional. However, research on the qualifications, knowledge, competencies, and skills of public relations academics is almost nonexistent. Public relations graduates reflect their education and define how their profession will be perceived in the future. Therefore, a public relations program and curriculum that integrates the needs of the industry and the current trends will be beneficial. The profession of public relations is developing rapidly and continuously. Like public relations practitioners, academics need to keep up with the changes in this field. Otherwise, students who fail to meet the expectations of their target industry and are not equipped with modern requirements will face challenges in their professional life.

The purpose of the study is to explore the opinions of senior Turkish public relations professionals on the knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes of public relations academics and public relations curriculums. Academics carry an important role in the professionalization of any occupation and its image. As stated by Healey (2008, p. 861), "academics and the university have traditionally been associated with systematized, logical, and empirically grounded 'knowledge'". As in any profession, a clear link can be observed between academics and practitioners in the field of public relations. This relationship concerns the preparation of professionals for their future careers (Jugo et al., 2017). The professionalization of any profession is seen as an interaction between two parties, with practitioners, professional associations, and clients, on the one side, and academics, on the other (van Ruler, 2005). However, little is known in Turkey about the interaction of the two parties, the Turkish public relations academics and public relations professionals, and how they perceive each other. The public relations academia has been continuously developing, since it is a new profession, and this development can take place with the input of practice. According to Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006), many scholars, educators, and practitioners have agreed that public relations education has a great potential to contribute to the establishment of public relations as a profession. The study will contribute to the discussions of an ideal public relations curriculum for undergraduate programs in Turkey. The research evaluation of the senior public relations on the qualifications, knowledge, competencies, and skills of public relations educators is expected to stimulate discussion and dialogue between the two parties. A desired outcome is two-way communication between them, which can benefit both the

public relations undergraduate programs and the public relations industry. Academization of public relations in Turkey is not a researched topic. This study seeks to shed light on the structuring of public relations programs, which could be useful to the accreditation of public relations programs (and other communication programs).

2. Literature review

This section covers four aspects related to the issue under investigation. This study focuses on knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes expected and perceived from public relations academics by senior public relations professionals; therefore, two critical parts of the literature review are on knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes; and public relations academics and practitioners. The research is conducted in Turkey, and public relations development in academia and the professional sector is highlighted as well. The literature review covers the need for public relations education, its specificities, and issues.

2.1. Public relations education and curricula

Higher education has undergone significant changes in most parts of the world; this field is expanding, and it becomes more established and more internationalized and less organized around disciplines (Locke, 2007). According to Harley et al. (2004, p. 330), “the purpose of the university is the production and dissemination of knowledge, and to this end its workers carry out teaching, research, and administration.” Archer (2008) states that higher education is constantly transforming, developing, and changing and adds that being an academic and the parts involved in academic work always comprise a process. Like other professions, the academic profession is constantly changing. Although national traditions and socio-economic conditions play important roles, the international dimension and global trends become more important in shaping the academic life (Pekkola et al., 2018). Harding (2012) states that the academic context in the UK and around the world affects the change and structure of academic roles, hence requiring academic staff to improve the quality of their work and contribute to a larger portfolio of activities. The functions of the academic profession become more important for the “scientification” of the society and for increasing the number of highly qualified workforce. Paradoxically, this increasing importance is accompanied by the downgrading of the academic profession, increasing financial constraints faced by higher educational institutions, increasing pressures on accountability, and relative loss in the reputation and privileged position of academics (Enders & Teichler, 1997).

The introduction of public relations to higher education needs to be evaluated within the context of higher education and academization. The intellectual field of public relations is a specialized field of behavioral and social sciences that operates at multiple levels of analysis around public relations practice, practitioners, and organizations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). Professional programs aim to prepare students for lifetime careers by offering them managerial positions, technical skills, and knowledge. Preparing students for entry-level positions is insufficient (Turk, 1989). As other areas of education, public relations education is based on two main pillars. This type of knowledge is comprehensive and is created and provided by a pool of qualified educators (Sriramesh, 2002).

Public relations education is expected to provide more strategic and international education involving ethics, research training, and leadership. As the most important forces behind this change, new communication technologies and globalization affect the role of public relations and more is expected from public relations professionals as strategic planners and consultants (DiStaso et al., 2009). Technological advancements and globalization affect the development of public relations programs that prepare future professionals for the industry (Jugo et al., 2017). Kim and Johnson (2009) note that many academic majors, such as engineering, business, journalism, and public relations that train industry professionals, attempt to reflect these changes in their curricula.

Grunig (1989) identifies four elements of the educational process, namely, decision making on the desired outcomes, development of the curriculum to deliver the outcomes, use of pedagogy, and assessment of learning (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999). A gap can be observed between the public relations education received from a university and the expectations of public relations practitioners. Those who want to become doctors must go to a medical school, and those who want to become lawyers must finish law school. The same is true for other professions, such as engineers, nurses, and accountants. However, having a degree in public relations is an exception (Wright & Turk, 2009).

Public relations professionals agree that public relations students should be able to take on the roles of communication strategists and consultants for their organizations (Gleason & Violette, 2012). The educational structure is relatively static, but external factors make decision makers respond to changes and consider new strategic initiatives (Beaudoin, 2002). Given that the public relations field is concrete and not abstract, students should be prepared for the marketplace and the dynamics of the business world with real practice (Gleason & Violette, 2012). Cooley et al. (2014) remark that public relations academics prepare their students sufficiently on the importance of good management skills, but the curriculum needs to focus on students' theoretical understanding of leadership and practice in public relations.

On the one hand, educators believe that the knowledge and skills required for effective public relations practices are gained through public relations curricula and teaching (Gower & Reber, 2006). On the other hand, many practitioners consider the formal education of public relations and professional development programs unsatisfactory (Erzikova & Berger, 2012). Practical experience is preferred for a public relations academic position (Hocke-Mirzashvili & Hickerson, 2014).

A worrying number of public relations professionals reports that public relations graduates lack the necessary writing skills, which needs to be resolved by university administrators and educators (Hines & Basso, 2009). The structure of the public relations curriculum in higher education requires that students possess and apply the necessary knowledge (Gleason & Violette, 2012). Chung and Choi (2012) conclude that public relations education in the United States balances theoretical, skill-based, and practical content, schools in the UK offer more theoretical content, and public relations in South Korean schools is generally skill based and practical. Gleason and Violette (2012) state that students benefit from the rigorous academic dimension of public relations concepts and theories and from the real-world application of such knowledge. Students will develop their professional skills, and organizations will benefit from their development. Practitioners criticize educators for not rapidly updating their public relations programs and for not teaching their students how to use new technologies (Todd, 2009). Swanson (2008) comments that the industry demands a broader

curriculum that offers many competencies but does not understand why such demand is not being realized quickly and what are the difficulties encountered by educators in this respect.

Field developments require public relations to add new theories and skills into its curricula to meet the demands of their communities (Alexander, 2004). Various departments should follow these developments, include them in their curricula, and ensure that the public relations education is scientifically qualified (Özgen et al., 2021, p. 128). People responsible for preparing the curricula and courses for effective public relations practices need to understand the trends that will prepare students to meet the demands of the new age and to offer a wider range of academic opportunities (Alexander, 2004).

The gap between what public relations practitioners demand from universities and what academics deliver is an increasingly serious problem. Such disconnect can be ascribed to the fact that educators and practitioners are seldom engaged in a dialogue about curriculum issues; when such exchanges occur, they only involve a small number of practitioners (Wright & Turk, 2009, p. 575). Having a centralized curriculum consolidates professional knowledge across institutions and ensures that the best public relations practices are being introduced to all practitioners (Molleda et al., 2017, p. 1086). Stacks et al. (1999) remark that educators and practitioners agree on how public relations education should be structured and that they share significant similarities in their preferred teaching methods and techniques. Bowen (2009, p. 402) finds out that top universities are still confused about public relations as “marketing or promotion, spinning the truth, image, and public relations as a career choice,” hence leading to a significant lack of transparency in this field. Moreover, the credibility of public relations is negatively affected by the failure to communicate the functions and core competencies of this field.

2.2. Public relations academics and practitioners: Who are they?

Academics in higher education assume a wide range of roles and responsibilities, which conventionally include teaching, research, and administration. In addition, many academics serve the society by engaging in community service and other types of external services related to their posts in universities (Kyvik, 2013). However, changes in higher education, such as budgeting, competition among universities, increased use of technology, and transition to student-based learning have altered the roles of both universities and academics (Briggs, 2005). Moreover, “academic roles are performed in various disciplinary settings with different cognitive bases, different norms and value systems, and different research traditions” (Kyvik, 2013, p. 527). Educators play a key role in the preparation of future generations that aim at high standards and ensure that the profession earns its desired and warranted respect (Sallot et al., 1997). Educators can reduce workplace tensions by teaching students about the current job performances and by creating a learning community that comprises students (Todd, 2014). In the academia, promotions occur through the publications of academic work and the evaluation of learning outcomes. By contrast, in practical settings, promotions are achieved by solving the short- and long-term problems of clients and by generating income (Cheng & de Gregorio, 2008).

In a young public relations profession, academic research serves to nurture professional public relations practices (Sallot et al., 1997). However, academics and professionals continue to discuss how educators can better serve the profession and how professionals can profit from the ideas produced in academic research (Grunig, 1979). For example, public relations

practitioners and academics have different perspectives about the need for teaching, research, writing, and critical skills (Geyer-Semple, 2012). Byrne (2008) observes a significant variance in the academic roles put forward by practitioners and academics. While the functions of academics are perceived by professionals as “teachers, researchers, credibility builders, practitioner problem solvers, facilitators, and industry advocates” (Byrne, 2008, p. 31), most academics do not perceive their roles as broadly as practitioners do. “The definition of the academic profession in a broad sense refers to all persons who teach or conduct research, or produce publications based on scholarly research at higher education institutions or research institutes inside or outside colleges or universities” (Huang, 2007, p. 81). Grunig (2006) argues that public relations academics need to develop positive and normative theories for the organizations, publics, and society to realize a better understanding and development of the practice. Given that academics contribute to the development of theory, scholars and researchers act as the core blocks needed by practitioners (Repper, 1992).

van Ruler et al. (2004) define a public relations professional as “a person with a good network, has good communication skills, knows how to use (or how to advise on) information, establishes dialogue, and is sensitive to trends” (van Ruler et al., 2004, p. 44). Research involving public relations and marketing professionals highlights the dominant perception that academic research is not generally applicable to the industry and that useful studies are relatively scarce, hence preventing practitioners from making relevant decisions and producing definitive findings. At the same time, academics criticize the content and knowledge obtained from their academic research (Cheng & de Gregorio, 2008).

Practitioners often think that academics have limited industry experience (Cheng & de Gregorio, 2008). By contrast, empirical data show that the academics may not be as “out of touch” as many practitioners think. Most academics are aware of the work pressures faced by practitioners and have a first-hand view of the public relations industry. Moreover, the similarities in the research areas of practitioners and academics indicate that academics are also interested in the former’s practice (Byrne, 2008).

The above studies underscore the discrepancy and disconnection between academics and professionals, a criticism that is mainly raised by practitioners. Within the context of Turkey, there are few studies that examine what public relations professionals think of public relations graduates and public relations education (TUHID-IDA 2006, 2009), but not what they think of each other. This study will analyze public relations professionals’ expectations of public relations academics in terms of knowledge, personal attributes, skills, and competencies and how they perceive their competencies. The expectancies are linked to the education of public relations. Understanding how public relations academics are, in terms of knowledge, personal attributes, skills, and competencies and how they should be is important in the sense that the analysis of senior practitioners will inform and shape public relations education. Educators and scholars need to be equipped with the “right” knowledge and skills for developing this field.

2.3. Knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes

Gregory (2008, p. 216) claims that practitioners need to be equipped with a range of knowledge and skills to carry out the activities and tasks that their roles demand. The communication management practice involves different and versatile tasks taking place in a very dynamic environment (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011). According to Tench and Moreno (2015, p. 40), “dis-

secting the role of practitioners is critical to understanding the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to be an effective PR practitioner.”

Gregory (2008) shares the definition proposed by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) (1999, 2006) for knowledge and skills. Specifically, “knowledge is what practitioners *need* to know in order to take their role competently,” whereas skills are “what practitioners need to be able to do to undertake their role competently” (Gregory, 2008, p. 216). Knowledge has been discussed in public relations education, both in undergraduate and graduate curricula, but an analysis shows that the knowledge areas of European practitioners remain largely unknown (Tench & Moreno, 2015). Flynn (2014, p. 363) states that the most prominent discrepancy is linked to the definitions of skill and competency. Gregory (2008, p. 216) defines competencies as “behavioral repertoires or sets of behaviors” that support the attainment of organizational objectives.

The PRSA identified 10 areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) for ensuring success in public relations, namely, “business literacy, communication models and theories, researching, planning, implementing and evaluating programs, media relations, ethics and law, management skills and issues, crisis communication management, using information technology efficiently, history of and current issues in public relations, advanced communication skills” (The Public Relations Professional in 2015, p. 9). According to the European Communication Monitor 2019, the most important strategic issues in communication management in 2022 include building and maintaining trust, dealing with the speed and volume of information flow, exploring new ways of creating and distributing content, matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources, and coping with the digital evolution and the social web. The European Communication Monitor 2012 also identified the top 3 skills and knowledge that need to be developed, namely, “management skills, management knowledge and business knowledge.”

According to CIPR’s State of the Profession 2020 Report (CIPR, 2020), the strongest specialist knowledge includes research, planning, implementation, and evaluation, media and social channels, use of technology, crisis communications management, business acumen, and communication models and theories. The same report also listed top five skills and experiences, namely, copywriting and editing, media relations, public relations programs/campaigns, crisis/issues management, and strategic planning.

The Professional Bond (2006) reports that the top-rated competencies sought in hiring entry-level practitioners include writing skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, good attitude, ability to communicate publicly, and initiative. For practitioners at a more advanced level, the most prized characteristics include research skills, ability to handle the media professionally, work experience in public relations, knowledge of the role of public relations in the management team, and knowledge on issues management.

The Global Alliance mentions that public relations are not practiced in the same way across the globe, thereby resulting in variations in the knowledge, skills, and abilities involved in the practice (2016, p. 4).

Several studies show that while the terms “skills” and “competencies” are being used interchangeably, some differences need to be noted. Several scholars have defined competencies as “the sets of behaviors a person can perform” (Tench et al., 2013a, p. 113), “measurable human capabilities that are required for effective work performance demands” (Marrelli, 1998, p. 8), and “those characteristics³/knowledge, skills, mindsets, thought patterns, and the like⁴that, when used either singularly or in various combinations, result in successful per-

formance” (Dubois, 1998, p. V). Batram (2005) mentions eight competencies that managers consider when evaluating performance (Gregory, 2008, p. 218), namely, leading and deciding, supporting and cooperating, interacting and presenting, analyzing and interpreting, creating and conceptualizing, organizing and executing, adapting and coping, and enterprising and performing.

Personal attributes differ from competencies yet serve important roles in determining how well a competency is performed (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011 cited in Tench & Moreno, 2015, p. 43). Personal attributes are also known as “soft” or “employability skills” (Tench et al., 2013b, p. 15).

Table 1. The range of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes identified in the European literature

Skills	Knowledge	Personal attributes
Writing and oral communication	Business knowledge	Handling pressure
Project planning and management	Current awareness	Leadership
Critical thinking	Theoretical knowledge	Integrity/honesty/ethical
Problem solving	Knowledge of PR history	Objectivity
Persuasion	Knowledge of other cultures	Listening
Strategic thinking	Knowledge of communication models	Confidence/ambition
Mentoring and coaching	Knowledge of applying PR theory	Team player
Advanced communication skills		Energy/motivation
IT skills		Discipline
Crisis management		Intelligence
Reading comprehension		Ability to get on with others/interpersonal skills
Community relations		Wide interests
Consumer relations		Intellectual curiosity
Employee relations		Creativity
Professional service skills		Flexibility
Social responsibility		Judgement and decision making
PR ethics		Time management
		Respect for hierarchy
		Follows organizational rules
		Honesty
		Adaptability
		Integrity
		Ambition
		Reliable attendance
		Willingness to accept assignments
		Completes work on time

Source: Tench & Moreno, 2015, pp. 47-50, 51; Tench et al., 2013b, pp. 25-26.

According to CIPR's State of the Profession 2020, the strongest attributes include strategic thinking, writing ability, emotional intelligence, problem solving, and creativity.

2.4. Public relations education in Turkey

Public relations courses in Turkey were first offered by Ankara University in 1966 and then by Istanbul University (Öksüz & Görpe, 2013). Specifically, these courses were first offered by the journalism vocational schools managed by the Faculty of Political Science of Ankara University in Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara until these schools were transformed into communication faculties offering separate departments for public relations, journalism, and radio-television, in 1992 (Peltekoğlu, 2001). Journalism education started in Turkey in 1950 following the establishment of the Journalism Institute of the Faculty of Economics of Istanbul University. This institute was later renamed to "Journalism and Public Relations Institute," which awards its graduates the "Journalism and Public Relations Diploma" (Istanbul University Communication Faculty Booklet). In 1982, vocational schools from Ankara University, Gazi University, Marmara University, Ege University, and Istanbul University began to formulate similar curricula based on that of Ankara University, and these curricula were linked together by their universities' rectorships. In 1992, the above vocational schools were transformed into communication faculties, and Anadolu University and Selçuk University established their own communication faculties (Yengin, 2004).

Initially, public relations academics were not trained in the specific subject area of public relations. The early academics who later became public relations academics were specializing in the language, sociology, and psychology disciplines. However, following the institutionalization of this field, academics in public relations mostly came from this specialization or from various communication fields.

According to 2020 data from the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK]), Turkey has 129 state universities, 74 foundation universities, and 4 foundation vocational schools. Undergraduate education in public relations is offered at 68 universities and in 77 programs. Among these programs, 45 are offered at state universities, and 32 are offered at foundation universities. Only nine of these programs are offered in English. In addition, 54 of these programs are offered in communication faculties, and 23 are taught in colleges, such as the College of Economic and Administrative Sciences, the Faculty of Social Humanities, and the College of Business. A total of 15 public relations programs are also offered in the evening education. These departments or programs are called "public relations," "public relations and advertising," or "public relations and publicity."

Table 2 below lists the number of public relations academics in Turkey according to rank and gender as of 2020. After receiving a doctoral degree, a public relations academic assumes the title of an assistant professor, then advances to an associate professor, and eventually to a professor after meeting the relevant requirements. The programs can employ part-time lecturers with extensive practical experience as lecturers or full-time professionals.

Table 2. Number of public relations academics in Turkey by gender and rank

Professor		Associate Professor		Assistant Professor		Lecturer		Research Assistant	
F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
66	48	62	36	123	80	16	10	95	86

Source: <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr>, 2020.

According to YÖK data (2020), among the 622 public relations academics, in 2020, 362 are female and 260 are male. Among these academics, 114 are professors, 98 are associate professors, 203 are assistant professors, 26 are lecturers, and 181 are research assistants.

The programs being offered in communication colleges are accredited by a national accreditation body called the Evaluation and Accreditation Board for Communication Education Turkey (ÝLEDAK). The Higher Education Quality Council Turkey authorized the Communication Research Association to accredit higher education programs in communication (<http://iledak.ilad.org.tr/en>). While this accreditation is optional, YOK endorses only accredited programs.

In 2018 and 2019, ÝLEDAK granted accreditation to 9 programs with the titles of Public Relations, Public Relations and Publicity, and Public Relations and Advertising (A. Aziz, personal communication, August 18, 2020).

The above figures show that the number of public relations programs in Turkey has increased within a short period. This study then explores what triggered such rapid growth by sharing facts and figures rather than commenting on the current status of public relations education in the country. This growth is particularly interesting given the globalization and changes in the higher education system. This study then discusses higher education, the role and function of an academic, and public relations education.

This research aims to examine whether Turkish public relations academics require any specific knowledge, personal attributes, skills, and competencies according to the opinions/perceptions of senior professionals. While previous studies have identified the requirements for public relations and communication managers, investigating the requirements for public relations academics will help further advance or develop public relations in the academia. The study was informed by three research questions:

RQ1: What are Turkish senior public relations professionals' expectations from public relations academics in terms of knowledge, personal attributes, skills, and competencies?

RQ2: How do Turkish senior public relations professionals assess the competencies of Turkish public relations academics?

RQ3: How do Turkish senior public relations professionals evaluate public relations education in Turkey?

3. Method

Semi-structured interviews with 20 Turkish public relations professionals were conducted between May and July 2020. In semi-structured interviews, participants are encouraged to describe their experiences through open-ended questions (Dearnley, 2005). Interviews are

a flexible and powerful tool for making sense of people's experiences and capturing voices (Rabionet, 2011, p. 563). Semi-structured interviews, which are both versatile and flexible methods (Kallio et al., 2016), provide the opportunity to ask the same questions in a flexible way (Dearnley, 2005). The participants were selected according to their experience in the public relations/communications industry in Turkey. The criteria for inclusion included a minimum of 10 years of work experience in the industry. Invites were emailed to the potential participants, and follow-up emails were sent to arrange the Zoom interviews. Interviews took place through Zoom except for one written exchange. The interviews lasted for at least 40 minutes, with the longest interview taking 100 minutes. All interviews were transcribed.

3.1 Interview guide

The quality of the interview guide directly affects the results of the study (Kallio et al., 2016). For this study, a 13-item interview guide was developed. The questions were divided into 3 sets. The first set aimed to solicit information about the perspectives of academics and public relations academics, the perceived differences and similarities between Turkish and international public relations, and the strengths and weaknesses of public relations academics. The second set aimed to collect information about the education, knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes of public relations academics. The third set, which included questions addressed to senior public relations professionals, aimed to identify those areas that public relations academics should develop themselves, the differences between public relations professionals and academics, the role of public relations academics in the industry and society, and the expectations of public relations professionals. The recommendations made by senior public relations professionals to future public relations academics were also collected.

3.2. Participants

Table 3 summarizes the participants' location, gender, name, age, and work experience in Turkey. Among the 20 senior public relations professionals, 17 were female and 3 were males. In terms of work experience, 5 participants had 26 and more years, 4 participants had 21 to 25 years, 3 participants had 16 to 20 years, and 8 participants had 10 to 15 years. All participants, except for two, came from the private sector. All private sector participants were working in corporations, except for three participants who were working in public relations agencies. The participants' work background reflected a mixture of different work experiences in public relations.

Table 3. Summary of the participants' location, gender, age, and work experience

Location	Gender	Name	Age 30–40	Age 41–50	Age 51+	Work expe- rience 10–15	Work expe- rience 16–20	Work expe- rience 21–25	Work expe- rience 26+
Is	F	Sedef	+			+			
Is	F	Duygu		+					+
Is	F	Aylin			+				+
Is	F	Nese			+				+
Is	F	Ece		+				+	
Iz	F	Deniz	+				+		
Iz	M	Umut	+			+			
Iz	F	Idil	+			+			
Iz	F	Tulin	+				+		
Is	F	Ebru	+			+			
Is	F	Nuray		+					+
Is	M	Hakan		+			+		
Iz	F	Ozlem		+				+	
Iz	F	Fatma	+			+			
Iz	F	Nur	+			+			
Iz	F	Ezgi		+				+	
Is	F	Nihal			+				+
Iz	F	Sevgi			+				+
Is	M	Batu	+			+			
Iz	F	Asu	+			+			

Note: Istanbul (Is) and Izmir (Iz) are among the largest cities in Turkey. The participants are given made-up names, and their work experience ranged from 10 to 33 years

3.3. Data analysis

A qualitative research design was adopted to identify the perspectives of senior Turkish public relations professionals toward public relations academics. This research design was deemed appropriate for this work as this approach aims “to get the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover and test variables (Strauss, 2008, p. 12 cited in Killingsworth & Flynn, 2016, p. 183). Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data and to find key emergent themes that are relevant to

the research topic. Thematic analysis is a method to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviors within a data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), thematic analysis “minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail.” Thematic analysis “is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, s. 57). Concept generation is one of the most mentioned aspects of qualitative data analysis (Bryman & Burgess, 2002, p. 6). The data in this research is analyzed in this way: codes have been generated after the researchers got familiar with the data. Themes are searched within the text and are reviewed. Then themes have been named and findings are organized under these themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis not only makes the elements for qualitative analysis more visible but also helps to understand how these elements are interconnected (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis is a tool that can make rich data evaluations when it comes to details and even complexity (Javadi & Zarea, 2016, p. 35).

4. Results

The findings are categorized under the following themes: *education/knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and competencies of public relations academics*.

4.1. Education/knowledge of public relations academics

Members of the public relations industry have not yet reached a consensus regarding the definitions of knowledge, skills, and competencies (Flynn, 2014, p. 365, cited in Killingsworth & Flynn, 2015, p. 179). Gregory (2008, p. 216) states that the literature shows a lack of exactness on these terms. To avoid confusion about the highly debated concepts discussed in the literature review (i.e., knowledge, personal attributes, skills, and competencies), the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) research project results classification (Tench & Moreno, 2015) for senior communication practitioners was used to guide the categorization of public relations academics.

All participants agreed that public relations academics should have a liberal arts background. When these participants were asked about their scientific knowledge, the disciplines that frequently came up included sociology, psychology, and communication. “Our job is to affect people. Communication education, sociology, psychology...” (Deniz).

...academics in the field of public relations have to be aware of many disciplines, such as marketing, psychology, and sociology, as well as other fields of communication... I believe that there needs to be a multidimensional specialization, ranging from corporate communication, image management, international public relations to public diplomacy. (Nihal).

For professionals, having an interdisciplinary education can benefit academics because the core aspect of their profession is related to communication, understanding people and the society at large, and being able to interpret what is happening. “...Supposed to be a complete athlete” (Nese).

The participants mentioned that public relations academics should develop themselves in other sub-disciplines. In addition to sociology, psychology, and communication, the other sub-disciplines mentioned in the interviews included business and marketing. “All these three

should be in the basket: communication sciences, business management, and marketing” (Ece). “There must be a tie with marketing. Must be close to human resources. Must be close to sociology and has to have a direct link with management” (Sedef). The participants highlighted other reasons for having business knowledge. For instance, having such knowledge adds value and credibility to public relations practices and can help professionals impress CEOs. Senior public relations professionals deal with various groups of people having different specializations and constantly communicate/explain matters to them. Therefore, having knowledge in other disciplines is a must for public relations academics.

In addition to having interdisciplinary knowledge, public relations academics should have expertise in various public relations topics. “Maybe not an expert on each topic but knows public relations as a whole and shares his opinions and uses his pen in different platforms” (Didem). The importance of having both theoretical knowledge in public relations and international knowledge related to this field has been highlighted by the participants.

The participants also suggested that public relations academics should attend congresses and conferences related to their professional development and follow professional periodicals. They mentioned that public relations academics should not only have professional experience but also share such experience with their students. Therefore, public relations academics should be endowed with practical knowledge. One participant mentioned, “The universities do not teach us the job; whatever an academic tells us is theoretical knowledge, which is very important yet not sufficient for us to understand our profession” (Ebru).

In terms of education/knowledge, the participants mentioned that public relations academics should continuously update their knowledge. A participant mentioned, “I cannot say anything about the academic formation of public relations academics, but they have to be more social, they have to follow the people in the industry, and they have to be more active. They have to keep up with the trends. If they do not do this, what would their students do? Our life is not a normal book. Academics should be different” (Aylin).

Being aware of the current issues, trends, and agenda is also important for public relations academics. The participants believed that these academics should be life-long learners. For example, few participants mentioned that public relations academics should be knowledgeable in new technologies. Public relations professionals expect academics to follow the latest trends and developments continuously, adapt to them quickly, and integrate them into their courses/teachings. “You cannot say I am over with it; I am mature in any profession. We are learning something new every day [sic]. We learned even during COVID. I wonder if the educators take lessons from this experience. Will they look at it in this way?” (Aylin).

The participants also mentioned the importance of having knowledge in statistics, research, law, and foreign and native languages. “[Public relations academics] have to be competent in languages. To know Turkish gives quality to the meaning. Grammar [sic] knowledge. Has to know foreign languages.” (Duygu).

Given the nature of their industry and experiences, public relations professionals expect academics to be well-informed in many fields apart from public relations. They also underscore the importance of professional development, which academics in Turkey are severely lacking. Given that public relations are a constantly changing field, academics need to adapt themselves to these changes.

4.2. Skills

In terms of skills, the participants mentioned that public relations academics should have a mixture of soft and hard skills. Communication was singled out as a very important skill, especially in the modern world. Moreover, almost all participants emphasized the importance for academics to use new communication technologies. “In the first place, communication skills, as the name implies, if an academic has a leading position in this science, then his/her communication should also be good. This is good for him/her, for his/her students, and for his/her organization... Everything depends on communication. We saw this during COVID” (Hakan). “Has to have four eyes. The sixth sense needs to be developed. Talkative, has to communicate comfortably” (Sevgi). “Strong communication, positive, language, articulation, can communicate with everyone, and teach its [communication’s] importance” (Umut).

Reading comprehension, critical thinking, and formulating visions were also underscored as important skills for public relations academics.

In specialized courses, the educators’ background and vision are very important. Those students who have been taught by these educators tend to shine. I told them not to send me students who studied with academics who became educators by accident. They have books, they have articles, but what else do they have? (Aylin).

The participants also mentioned that public relations academics should have knowledge in project management and collaboration. “When we look at academics from universities abroad, they are project focused” (Sevgi). Another skill mentioned in the interviews was written and verbal communication. The participants also pointed toward the importance of diction and being presentable. “I see some educators as if they are going to clean the windows. Apart from knowledge, these educators should also have a social side” (Aylin). However, one participant mentioned that the presentability of public relations academics is no longer as relevant as before.

The findings related to personal skills highlight the importance of implementation, presentation, and teamwork. Communication is mentioned, but this concept is a broad umbrella that involves communicating not only with students but also with the external world. While one could easily say that these skills are related more to professionals than to academics, they are just as relevant for public relations academics. Reading comprehension, critical thinking, and formulating visions are related to academics. The image of a public relations academic is not limited to writing books or doing research but also involves knowing how to manage projects and implement things.

4.3. Personal attributes

The critical personal attributes of public relations academics that were mentioned in the interviews included showing willingness to learn (intellectual curiosity), flexibility/adaptability, self-confidence, extroversion, self-respect, and a good image. “Communication requires cultural and academic infrastructure and is based on closely monitoring the world and the society in which you live and follows basically the same universal principles...” (Nihal). “Integrating extroverts will energize the industry and bring us more students and projects” (Ece). The sensitivity and humanity of public relations academics were also mentioned in the interviews. “Calm, friendly, smiling, constructive, no need to be panicked, solution based, and should assure trust” (Sedef). The humanistic approach that public relations academics should

carry is reflected in the words of one participant when describing the good of society. "...should not be individualistic but takes into consideration the society. Collaborates with nongovernmental organizations and does those from the heart. He has to be society focused" (Didem).

The participants claimed that having international experience would make them become part of further international research. They highlighted the work experience of public relations academics as essential components of education and suggested that the latter should work professionally and accumulate practical work experience. The creativity and innovativeness of public relations academics were also raised by a few participants.

Several attributes that were less associated with public relations academics, such as dynamic, outgoing, and extrovert, were also mentioned. These results altogether paint a picture of public relations academics as not merely academics grounded in research but also academics who are capable of project implementation.

4.4. Competencies

The ECOPSI communication role matrix classifies competency into *managing* (cross-functional awareness and business focus), *counseling* (building relationships, consulting, and coaching), *performing* and *creating* (writing, design, and presentation), *analyzing/interpreting* (research and listening), *organizing/executing* (planning and making something happen), and *supporting/guiding* (vision and standards, ethics, and developing others) (Tench & Moreno, 2015, p. 48). This classification was adopted to interpret the research findings. Table 4 summarizes the knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and competencies of public relations academics as obtained from the research findings.

1. *Counseling competency* includes languages as knowledge, team building and consulting as skills, and team minded and sociable as personal attributes.
2. *Organizing/executing competency* includes project management as knowledge, writing and project management as skills, and multi-tasking, flexibility, adaptability, self-confidence, and self-respect as personal attributes.
3. *Managing competency* includes management, law, branding, and business knowledge as knowledge and experience as a personal attribute.
4. *Performing and creating competency* includes new technologies, communication processes, and Web 2.0 tools as knowledge, writing, communication, visioning, computer writing, multi-media, and presentation as skills, and communicative, life-long learner, curiosity, creative, and innovative as personal attributes.
5. *Analyzing/interpreting competency* includes research and analysis methods and recognizing trends as knowledge and critical thinking, reading comprehension, and listening as skills.
6. *Supporting/guiding competency* includes ethics and law as knowledge, visioning as a skill, and sensitivity and humanity as personal attributes.

Table 4. Competencies, knowledge, skills, and personal attributes of Turkish public relations academics

Competency	Knowledge	Skills	Personal Attributes
Counseling (building relationships, consulting, and coaching)	Languages	Team building and consulting	Team oriented and sociable
Organizing/executing (planning and making something happen)	Project management	Writing skills and project management	Multi-tasking, flexibility, and self-confidence/self-respect
Managing (cross-functional awareness and business focus)	Management, law, branding, and business knowledge	–	Experience
Performing and creating (craft, writing, design, and presentation)	New technologies, communication processes, and Web 2.0 tools	Writing, communication, visioning, computer writing skills, and multi-media skills, presentation	Communicative, lifelong learner, curiosity, creative, and innovative
Analyzing/interpreting (research and listening)	Research and analysis methods and recognizing trends	Critical thinking, reading comprehension, and listening	–
Supporting/guiding (vision and standards, ethics, and developing others)	Ethics and law	Visioning	Sensitivity and humanity

The top competencies found in the data were performing and creating, which represent the competency of public relations professionals than that of public relations academics because the latter are viewed as “doers” and not only people who teach and conduct research.

As expected, public relations academics had a higher supporting/guiding competency than public relations professionals given their roles in guiding the direction of their industry by creating visions, setting standards, and conducting scientific studies. However, this finding is surprising in the case of Turkey given that public relations education has been institutionalized in the Turkish academia for a long time and that some public relations academics who are grounded in this discipline in both their undergraduate and post-graduate studies are now working as educators in the field. Another surprising finding was the relative lack of mentions about counseling competency, which may be ascribed to the fact that public relations professionals and academics do not have strong ties with one another. Under this competency, having knowledge of foreign languages was widely mentioned. Public relations professionals expect public relations academics to establish international connections, which in turn require them to have knowledge on languages other than Turkish.

In addition to the attributes mentioned by Tench and Moreno (2015), some other knowledge, skills, and attributes were identified from the data. For instance, Turkish public relations professionals expect public relations academics to be knowledgeable on psychology

and sociology, to which the public relations theoretical framework is connected. Moreover, psychological and sociological theories are being widely used in public relations research. Interestingly, the attributes of “good image” and “being presentable” were mentioned often. The stereotypical images of public relations often portrayed in the media are reflected in public relations academics. These images are also being emphasized by public relations professionals and not by people outside the public relations industry. Protocol knowledge was also frequently highlighted as a knowledge of public relations academics but not for academics from other disciplines. This finding can be ascribed to two reasons. First, public relations academics are visualized as performers, doers, and implementers of action and therefore require a set of relevant knowledge and skills. Second, the bureaucratic nature of Turkey can be reflected in the demand of public relations academics for protocol knowledge.

5. Discussion

This study differentiates itself from other studies because it taps into public relations practitioners view of public relations academics, not the other way round. One of the emphasis was on public relations academics’ having an interdisciplinary education which includes sub-disciplines such as sociology, psychology, business and marketing. Communication is considered as the most important skill, and it was expected that public relations academic should have both hard and soft skills. With regard to the competency of public relations academics, the most frequently mentioned competencies were *performing and creating*, whereas the least mentioned competencies were *supporting/guiding*. Public relations professionals also expect these academics to be knowledgeable in sociology, psychology, and communication. The importance of having real work experience and awareness of current affairs was underscored during the interviews. Public relations academics are also expected to be knowledgeable in new technologies, statistics, research, and law. The participants argued that public relations academics must not only use new technologies but also follow these platforms. As stated in previous studies, the global developments and changes in the digital world demand for major changes in the public relations curricula, and Turkish public relations professionals suggest that academics should pay close attention to these two areas.

Public relations professionals and academics share some similarities in their personal attributes. The participants highlighted the importance for public relations academics to have a good image, strong communication skills, verbal and written skills, protocol knowledge, presentability, and extroverted nature. Being presentable is generally expected from professionals but not from academics. The participants also mentioned “visioning,” which may be related to planning the future of the profession and becoming good mentors to students who are preparing to enter the industry. Public relations academics were also expected to have the ability to manage projects, work with teams, and exercise creativity and innovation.

Public relations professionals expect academics to be like themselves in many ways. At the same time, these professionals look upon academics because of their status as are scholars/educators. They want to follow, have more access to, and learn from these educators and believe in the usefulness of their research work for the industry.

The following suggestions related to the public relations curricula are proposed:

1) Senior public relations professionals expect public relations academics to be aware of the new developments and add them to the curricula. They want to learn new concepts from these educators.

2) Professionals want public relations academics to be competent in the practice aspect of their profession, which they believe is important for their students' preparation. In general, these professionals expect public relations graduates to show greater readiness for the industry. This practical aspect of public relations has been communicated through writing, communication skills, presentation, and project management courses. The establishment of platforms where students can collaborate in projects is also encouraged.

3) Professionals expect public relations academics to be skilled in new technologies, Web 2.0 tools, computer writing, and multi-media. They demand for a variety of courses on new media to build the digital communication competencies of public relations graduates.

4) Having knowledge of foreign languages can benefit academics in international networking, establishing collaborations, and securing scholarships. From the curriculum perspective, language courses will open new horizons for students because of the industry's great demand for knowledge of the English language. Students who speak a language well will have better employment opportunities in the industry.

The public relations literature highlights the importance of strategy, ethics, leadership, and technical skills. Interestingly, senior public relations professionals have not touched upon these issues and instead focused on technical skills and proposed the addition of more practical courses to the curricula.

One of the main findings of the study is balancing practice with theory in public relations education. If public relations education is transformed into a vocational type of education, then graduates will tend to view things the same way but show differences in their skills depending on where they have graduated. Therefore, public relations programs could be different from each other and challenge the status quo. In other words, the diversity of public relations programs, having different schools such as critical within some of these programs may be beneficial.

How can the ties between public relations academics and practitioners in Turkey be strengthened? The following quote visualizes public relations academics and professionals as communities of practice: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 4). According to Wenger (2010, p. 182), communities of practice are not isolated from each other but rather involve other communities and are part of a broader social system. Therefore, experience is gained by practice, and learning takes place through the accumulation of practice. Communities of practice may be established by looking at their elements, including events, leadership, connectivity, membership, learning projects, and artifacts (Wenger, 2000, pp. 230-231). This study categorizes these elements as follows.

Events: An event, such as professional conferences, guest lectures, and industry days, facilitates dialogue or cooperation between public relations academics and professionals. Team-teaching may be implemented for subject matters that largely involve practical components and is facilitated by the adoption of new technologies. Professional associations may also organize talks with academics and industry members.

Leadership: Each network has a leader that organizes projects that grant practical experience to academics and help professionals reach out to academic sources and use them for their professional work. Some example projects include internship opportunities for public relations academics and the formation of professional associations that allow academics to promote their research to professionals. These projects also allow professionals and academics to cooperate on research papers or projects. The leadership mechanism may also be expanded to internship programs for students.

Connectivity: After establishing profound relationships, communities need to collaborate in organizing internships, solving problems, recruiting professionals, and gathering financial resources. Professional development opportunities for public relations academics may also be designed through these communities. Such connectivity should have a long-term basis than a short-term one.

Membership: Communities may be divided into subgroups, with each subgroup having its own interest areas. Some example subgroups include public relations students, interns, and alumni, and interest areas include crisis management, leadership, and corporate responsibility. Memberships may also be expanded to international platforms.

Learning projects: Learning projects aim to identify the gaps and how can they be filled. This goal can be achieved by assigning specific research projects to the academia or collaboratively forming guidelines. Public relations curricula can be designed by taking the input of professionals into account. The consultancy of public relations academics may also be encouraged.

Artifacts: Guides for the public relations profession and a historical account of public relations may be designed along with social platforms and topic-based websites. Professional associations can showcase the research of academics on their websites as much as they share news and comments from industry members. The existence and visibility of public relations academics can be established in all public relations professional associations in Turkey. Newsletters or publications that show the work of academics and professionals may also be disseminated.

Wenger (1998, p. 73) classifies the three dimensions of communities of practice into “mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.” Mutual engagement implies that public relations academics and professionals should come together, overcome their differences, and work together to establish stronger ties by collaborating on projects. They can mutually contribute to the continuity of public relations community, through which joint enterprises—that will be held accountable for the implemented decisions and actions—can be formed. By accepting their differences from the start, these professionals and academics can strengthen both public relations profession and education. A shared repertoire can be visualized as sharing common concepts, stories, and styles that can produce many benefits, such as preparing students for the industry and transforming academics into lifelong learners of industry practices.

Given the qualitative nature of this work, its findings are inapplicable to all public relations professionals. The data were based on the self-reported perceptions of the participants. Future research may expand the findings of this work by including other professionals (e.g., entry-level practitioners), employing quantitative methods, and taking the insights of public relations professionals from other countries into account. These studies should also explore whether the perception toward public relations academics is universal and check whether the

personal attributes, knowledge areas, skills, and competencies mentioned by public relations professionals differ across countries.

6. Conclusion

Public relations education is well established and prevalent in Turkey, and public relations is a fast-growing and changing profession in the world. Practitioners in the industry are widely expected to be informed about these changes. However, the integration of the changes that have been articulated by the Turkish senior practitioners may not be easily reflected in academia for several reasons. For instance, adding courses to a program requires a process, and finding an expert academic in the subject matter takes time. The credit hours of the students also cannot be easily changed. Therefore, the indirect criticisms of the public relations curricula cannot be easily addressed for administrative/accreditation and academic reasons.

Communication processes are now mainly operating in digital platforms. Therefore, public relations students should receive holistic training on the use of these platforms. Moreover, strategy is more important than implementation. Adding new technologies to the curricula may pose a unique problem because some senior public relations academics cannot teach these courses to a full extent. Therefore, professionals propose that instead of adding new courses, the entire public relations curricula should be redesigned based on new technologies.

The need to establish links between the professional and academic worlds is emphasized in public relations literature and in this study. However, Turkish public relations academics have limited ties to the industry. While public relations academics believe in the value of practice, not many of them have contacts with the professional world. The participants of the study indicated that they do not get together and work on scientific papers with academics, and they do not cooperate in designing the future of public relations in which they think they should. There is limited interaction/contact between them. The participants put forward that for the professionalization of public relations, they should act together, but the weak ties between academics and professionals result in a lack of contribution of public relations professionals to public relations academics and academia. At the same time, the research of academics is not communicated with or presented to professionals, and they do not keep up with public relations scholarship produced by Turkish academics. The expectations of public relations professionals from academics reflect their demands for themselves and for the entire public relations industry.

Contact between academics and professionals may not take place easily for a couple of reasons. For example, educators may think that professionals should reach out to them and not the other way around. Moreover, academics have limited opportunities to establish contacts in the industry. For instance, the public relations industry of Turkey is mainly concentrated on three major cities, and communication faculties and public relations departments are established in many small cities without a public relations industry. Only few public relations academics are members of professional public relations organizations, and fewer academics are serving on the boards. Public relations professionals also show reluctance in participating in the field due to time constraints. They are unwilling to take part in educational activities and sometimes do not accept public relations interns.

While words are necessary to establish close working collaborations, such closeness is rarely reflected in deeds. One area where public relations academics are in touch with pro-

professionals is arranging the internships of students. Some academics also work for the industry as consultants or trainers. Meanwhile, professional public relations organizations are keeping in touch with public relations programs, such as student public relations competitions and communication platforms with public relations students. These initiatives may have a long history in Turkey given the longevity of the country's public relations education and industry. Public relations programs also arrange guest lectures and teaching programs for professionals. Public relations professionals may also be invited as speakers in academic conferences.

The use of the term "coin" in the title of this manuscript alludes to a relatively underexplored topic in public relations research, that is, the public relations academics. These academics do not merely engage in research or scholarships but are also well-grounded in project implementation and are therefore capable of preparing graduates for the public relations industry. These academics are perceived as life-long learners that hold dialogues with the industry for their own, their students', and the industry's benefit.

Public relations academics warrant further attention given their roles as the driving forces of the public relations profession. How professionals perceive academics and what do the former expect from the latter present two other important topics. Promoting cooperation is impossible if we focus on one side (i.e., public relations professionals, students, and graduates) while ignoring the other (i.e., public relations academics). Many studies have focused on public relations graduates and professionals yet only few have attempted to understand public relations academics and their credentials. The suggestions of public relations professionals on the curricula and graduates may be well-received by academics, and a sound long-term cooperation between these parties may be established. In other words, both sides of the coin need to feed each other. As the study indicates, there are strong intentions of cooperation, but not realized yet. Moreover, another contribution of this study is related to the professionalization of public relations in addition to generating ideas on how industry-academia can be connected to each other. In Turkey, there are few studies on the professionalization of public relations (Görpe, 2013; Öksüz & Görpe, 2013; Öksüz, 2015) and the current literature on this also lacks empirical research. This study aims to learn practitioners' views on public relations academics. These views will contribute to the shaping of public relations education by taking the views of practitioners and to the professionalization of public relations.

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