



**PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY MEETS PRACTICE: A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE**

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**ABSTRACT**

While the world-wide recession continues, organizations find themselves in a changing world, facing so-called "turbulent" times (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009), that call for significant change and innovation on a wide front (Goodman, 2009) and on all levels and functions of the organization, including public relations (PR).

PR is subsequently required to shift its focus in an attempt to effectively contribute to the survival of the organization, which requires constant enquiry into the PR roles and PR skills needed to face challenges. It is therefore essential to match theoretical learning with practice, to ensure the function operates effectively in the broader organizational context. For the purpose of this paper, it is argued that a dual perspective of the integration of formal studies with work experience, also termed work-integrated learning (WIL), is needed to ensure industry-relevance. The main outcome of this study, as starting point to such a holistic picture, is to explore the inside-out view of students' perspectives of the relevance and value of WIL in the National Diploma: Public Relations Management of the University of South Africa (Unisa).

**INTRODUCTION**

While the world-wide recession continues, the survival of global business increasingly depends on the ability to reposition and transform business approaches. Organizations find themselves in a changing world, facing so-called "turbulent" times (Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009), that call for significant change and innovation on a wide front (Goodman, 2009) and on all levels and functions of the organization, including public relations (PR).

Challenges facing organizations subsequently demand PR to shift its focus in an attempt to effectively contribute to the survival of the organization. Such strategic repositioning requires constant enquiry into the roles PR professionals are required to fulfill, and the skills needed to face challenges. From a theoretical perspective, it is evident that the current educational landscape is similarly challenged to operate and survive in a changing world and a modern society (Unesco, 2002; Van Rooijen, 2011), that conversely impact the workplace contexts in which its students will be employed. According to Van Rooijen (2011, p.6), the foundation of educational institutions comprises research, service and teaching, thus presenting the question of how educational institutions ensure alignment to real world needs and meeting the demands for "practical, real world education". Of particular relevance to this study, is the two-fold challenge educational institutions face in their quest to match theoretical learning with practice: Firstly, to ensure the transfer of skills in the academic programmes and workplace meets the needs of industry and enhance productivity, and secondly to keep track of global trends and developments that impact the industry/workplace in which their students will eventually be employed. For the purpose of this paper, it is argued that a dual perspective of the integration of formal studies with work experience, also termed work-integrated learning (WIL), is needed to guide institutions in being relevant and to ensure that industry goals are met. Such a view will comprise an inside-out and an outside-in view of student experiences, and industry developments and needs, respectively.

Against this background, the question contributing to this study is whether prospective PR professionals possess the necessary skills to add value to the organization in its attempt to meet the challenges it faces today (DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2009; Le Roux & Naude, (in press)). It also reiterates the need for continuous assessment of educational programmes to ensure competent and employable PR students.

**The Public Relations Diploma of the University of South Africa**

The National Diploma: Public Relations Management offered by Unisa was introduced in 1995, initially without a practical module a major shortcoming that was subsequently identified and bridged in 1998 by means of a structured WIL module. The diploma aims to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed in the South African PR context. The WIL learning outcomes are designed to focus on specific *critical* PR skills in the areas identified by Skinner and Von Essen (1994). Critical skills refer to generic skills that, pertinent to this study, are *occupation-specific skills* needed in the PR industry. Since its introduction, no assessment was done regarding the contribution of the PR qualification of Unisa in preparing prospective PR professionals for the workplace, therefore highlighting the need to determine the industry-relevance and value of the practical training.

**Research objective**

The main aim of this study is to determine the industry-relevance and value of the current WIL approach of the Public Relations Management qualification of Unisa, through exploring relevant research studies into the roles PR professionals enact in South Africa, and an overview of open distance learning (ODL) and WIL. This research study contributes to the scholarship of PR and is classified as introspective research by Pavlik (in Sha, 2010), with a specific focus on PR education. The contribution of this study is significant in that it explores the value of WIL as perceived and experienced by final-year public PR students of Unisa, thus seeking an inside-out view, as opposed to previous studies that mainly involved PR professionals, executives and management (De Wet, Meintjies, Niemann-Struwig & Goodman, 2008; DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2008; Steyn, 2000a; 2000b; 2003a; Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

This paper firstly gives an overview of relevant research on PR roles with a focus on the South African context, followed by insights into ODL and WIL, and Unisa's view thereof. Finally, the literature study is supplemented by a research project that explores the focus, content and value of the WIL module in the PR qualification.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLES**

Based on literature it can be accepted that PR professionals enact a variety of roles in the organization. These roles initially comprised traditional roles performed by PR professionals, namely expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solver, process facilitator and communication technician (Broom & Smith, 1979; Hogg & Doolan, 1997; 1999). Two main roles - the communication manager and communication technician, that incorporate all four traditional roles listed above - subsequently emerged and currently still serve as foundation in roles research. Studies in South Africa is perceived limited in terms of size and scope, as result failing to propose a clear profile of the PR professional (Le Roux & Naude, (in press)), and falling short in answering the main question contributing to this study, namely whether PR students of Unisa are adequately equipped to perform their tasks. It reinforces the importance of this study to determine the industry-relevance and value of the WIL module in preparing students for the workplace.

Although various research studies on PR roles ensued to address earlier shortcomings and contribute to expanding the roles of the PR professional, the Unisa diploma aims to prepare students for manager-technician roles. Drawing on the manager-technician role typology of relevance to this study, a noteworthy study by Steyn (2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2003; 2009) confirmed, on completion of a



comparative study of the European Body of Knowledge (EBOOK) with South African roles, significant similarities to substantiate a strategist-manager-technician role typology in South Africa.

In South Africa, valuable contributions were made to define and verify the existence of the three roles proposed by Steyn (De Wet et al., 2008; Le Roux and Naude, 2011; Steyn 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2009). The strategist-manager-technician role classification identified in previous studies and used by Le Roux and Naude (in press), not only delineates specific responsibilities required from PR professionals in each role, but in turn proves valuable in identifying the skills required to fulfill these roles (summarized in Table 1):

**Table 1: characteristics of South African PR roles**

Role	Characteristics
South African Strategist	Strategic role at macro level, information acquisition through environmental scanning, interpretation of organization's viewpoint for stakeholders, outside-in approach
South African Manager	Functional role at meso level, develop PR strategy and communication plan, external representation of the organization, inside-out approach, functional level with an advisory role
South African Technician	Implementation role at micro level, information disposal, operational level (writing and editing communication publications, producing audiovisual messages, creating graphics)

Although these roles may be performed to a varying degree (Hogg & Doolan, 1999), previous investigations into the PR roles concluded that the two roles mainly enacted by South African PR professionals, are manager-technician roles and to a lesser extent a strategic role (Le Roux & Naude, (in press); Steyn, 2009). Of importance here, is evidence that the majority of similar studies point to a lack of academic knowledge in PR, and a perception that training in PR is unimportant (Le Roux & Naude, (in press); Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

Given that these different roles are fulfilled by, and expected from, PR professionals globally and in South Africa, it can be concluded that their day-to-day duties comprise a diverse list of activities. Various authors have identified the activities performed by PR professionals, and at the time of introduction of WIL in the diploma, the categories of activities by Skinner and Von Essen (1994) were regarded the most appropriate due to its relevance to the South African context. This classification by Skinner et al. (1994) presently serves as basis of the WIL module in the PR Diploma. The industry-relevance and value thereof will be tested by means of a research project amongst final-year PR students

#### **AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING APPROACH AND WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING**

Unisa is a comprehensive, dedicated, distance education university committed to the practice of ODL, and currently the only distance university in South Africa offering the National Diploma: Public Relations Management, further strengthening the need to explore the relevance and value of the WIL module. The importance of applying theoretical knowledge in a work-based context is crucial in preparing students and, in this regard, prospective PR professionals to add value in the workplace.

Open and distance learning proves valuable towards meeting challenges of access, quality and equity support (Unesco, 2002). The ODL approach followed by Unisa is student-centered and aimed at bridging economic, social, educational and geographical barriers in its attempt to, amongst others, construct knowledge and promote skills development. Knowledge development has become crucial in developing countries to redress lack of competence and some advantages of distance education, relevant to this study, are perceived to include: increased and speedy access to learning through overcoming geographical boundaries, presenting opportunities for retraining and personal enrichment, cost-effectiveness and balancing inequalities between age groups (Unesco, 2002). Unisa applies people, printed and electronic material, practical training, reflection, research, experiential and work-integrated learning in its ODL approach to facilitate learning and empowerment. This attests to the fact that the ODL approach of Unisa encompasses all three key elements – research, service and teaching – earlier identified as the foundation of an educational institution (Van Rooijen, 2011).

Unisa regards WIL as an important resource through which learning - the construction of knowledge, attitudes and values - in distance learning takes place. It is argued to be a process whereby students acquire knowledge in specific contexts (Beach in Peach, Cates, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Jones & Lechleiter, 2011). In this qualification the form of situated knowledge is the application of theory in the workplace (practice), thus facilitating learning through real-life experiences. The value of WIL in an ODL model, first and foremost, aims to gain work-related experiences and the transfer of skills in the workplace.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Both a qualitative and quantitative approach was used to generate insight into the relevance and value of WIL in the PR: Management Diploma offered by Unisa. Data was generated by means of a literature review and an online questionnaire.

The review of existing literature provided an overview of PR roles research, background information on the ODL approach of Unisa and the value of WIL in such an approach. This review was followed by a research project exploring the focus, content and value of WIL by means of an online questionnaire. The literature already validates the range of communication activities currently included in the WIL component, but it was likewise tested in the online questionnaire (Skinner & Von Essen, 1994; Yeo & Sriramesh, 2009).

#### **Population**

For the purpose of this study a total of 301 final-year PR students of Unisa, who received their practical training from 2008 to 2011, were selected. These final-year students were employed in PR positions or, either unemployed or employed, in unrelated careers. The number of respondents totaled 100, constituting a response rate of 33%.

#### **Data collection**

The basis of the online questionnaire stems from South African roles research, findings on managerial and technical activities by Yeo and Sriramesh (2009), and the assessment tool applied by Jaekel, Hector, Northwood, Benzinger, Salinitri, Johrendt & Watters (2011) that was adapted for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was structured according to the following assessment framework:

<b>WIL assessment framework for the National Diploma: PR Management</b>	
<b>Question 1</b>	Organizational context of the PR function by determining the hierarchical position
<b>Question 2</b>	The type of industry in which WIL was addressed
<b>Question 3</b>	Perceived role and function of the PR position
<b>Question 4</b>	Students perceptions of the value of WIL in providing personal, academic and workplace



	skills
<b>Question 5</b>	Students perceptions of the specific WIL outcomes and communication activities

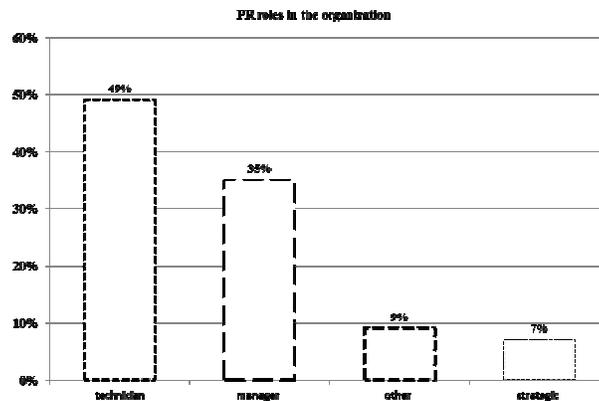
**FINDINGS**

The context in which the findings of this research study are interpreted is the PR environment in which Unisa students received their practical training. Students completed their training in a PR environment under supervision of a qualified PR professional, who ensured the communication activities were adequately addressed, provided guidance and evaluated performance by means of formative and summative assessment.

**The hierarchical position of the PR function, type of PR industry and perceived role and function of the PR position**

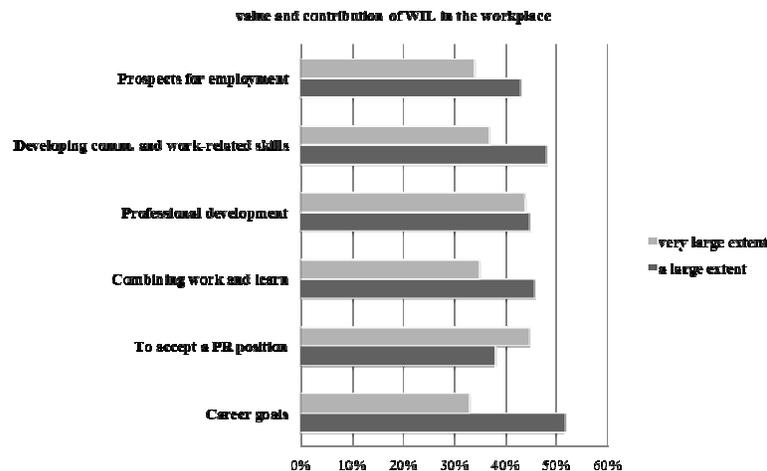
**Questions 1 and 2** aimed to provide insight into the placement and role of PR in the South African context where the PR diploma students were placed. **85%** respondents indicated the PR function is placed in a PR or Corporate Communication Department, followed by **14%** where the function resorts in the Marketing Department. The respondents address experienced WIL mainly in the public sector (**51%**), followed by the private sector (**34%**). This indicates the significant contribution and involvement of the public sector in skills development of Unisa students.

**Question 3** required respondents to identify the PR role (strategic, management or technical) in the organization where the training was completed. As could be expected, and confirmed in the literature review, the PR role is perceived to be mainly **technical**, then **managerial**, **other unrelated** and lastly **strategic**. This confirms previous research findings that the two main roles enacted in South Africa are seen as mainly technician and manager.



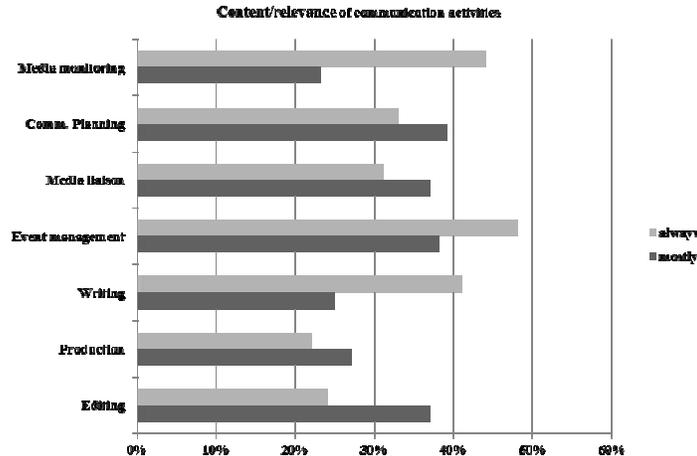
**Question 4** explored the value of WIL in providing personal, academic and workplace skills, strengths and goals and consisted of eleven, 5-point Likert Scale questions where 1 = “to no extent”, 2 = “to some extent”, 3 = “not sure”, 4 = “to a large extent” and 5 = “to a very large extent”.

- **Personal skills** - three questions aimed to determine the extent to which WIL assisted in identifying personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences related to the workplace. Respondents indicated that WIL contributed to a large extent to clarify career goals (**52%**), to identify personal weaknesses (**46%**) and to identify personal preferences (**49%**).
- **Academic skills** – two questions asked respondents to indicate the value of WIL pertaining to their academic motivation, and to assess and reflect on their progress during WIL respectively. Respondents felt WIL largely contributes to their academic motivation, and provides adequate opportunity to assess and reflect on their progress during training.
- **Workplace skills** – the remaining six questions related to the transfer of skills in the workplace and touched on the value of WIL to: clarify career goals, contribute to technical knowledge of PR, match theoretical learning with practice, facilitate professional development in the workplace (self-confidence, teamwork), empower by developing communication and other work-related skills, and improve prospects for employment.





The content and relevance of the communication activities in WIL were investigated in **Question 5** by means of seven 5-point Likert Scale questions where 1 = "never", 2 = "sometimes", 3 = "neutral", 4 = "mostly" and 5 = "always". The aim was to determine the achievement of the specific WIL outcomes (communication activities) and the frequency of how often the communication activities were addressed during their training. Important is the high response to media monitoring (44%), event management (48%), and writing (41%). Further, respondents indicated the remainder activities as 'mostly addressed'.



#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The fundamental role of WIL in facilitating theory application in practice is non-negotiable, however, research into the value thereof on personal, academic and workplace levels, particularly in South Africa, is limited. It is vital that higher education institutions keep track of global and local trends, and developments and needs of respective industries to ensure a holistic perspective of the content and value of their WIL modules in academic qualifications. Time constraints did not allow industry involvement in this project, and did not allow for a qualitative analysis of students' reflective reports. It will be valuable to gain a holistic view (including an outside-in view) regarding the state of the WIL component in the Diploma: PR Management, to ensure relevance and value. This study should be replicated, targeting industry partners involved in the practical training of the students included in this study. Furthermore, the role and requirements of industry partnerships should be investigated.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This study is seen as starting point to the holistic evaluation of WIL in the National Diploma: PR Management. From the background and findings presented in this study, the following major conclusions can be drawn:

- The industry-relevance and value of WIL in the PR diploma, from an inside-out view, is confirmed. Findings supported the content and relevance of the communication activities.
- The hierarchical position of the PR function is mainly in a PR/Communications Department.
- The public sector contributes significantly to the skills development of Unisa students. This commitment is noteworthy and should be nurtured to ensure a mutual beneficial partnership.
- The majority of respondents perceived the PR role as mainly technical and managerial. Considering earlier roles research in South Africa that pointed to a strategist-manager-technician role typology, this endorses the need for further investigation into PR role clarification.
- Respondents were overwhelming positive about the value of WIL in providing personal, academic and workplace skills.

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