

Towards the Professionalisation of Public Relations in Malaysia: Perception Management and Strategy Development

Zulhamri Abdullah

Department of Communication, University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
&

Terry Threadgold

Cardiff School of Journalism, Media & Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

Abstract

Purpose - The aim of this study is to explore how the status and standards of public relations as a profession are perceived by the three main groups involved in public relations: academics, practitioners, and business leaders. This study approaches the issues from several perspectives including the sociology of the profession and strategic management in Malaysia. Low recognition of the profession, a shortage of qualified practitioners, a lack of regulation, and a lack of credibility among practitioners are major issues in the Malaysian public relations industry.

Design/methodology/approach - In order to administer this study, two research methods were employed: qualitative in-depth interviews and a review of policy documents. In each case, the focus was on following four dimensions of public relations professionalism: the exclusive jurisdiction of public relations; PR education: the establishment of its exclusive training schools; the importance of a code of ethics; and accreditation and licensing. The in-depth interviews and a review of policy documents offer a qualitative, empirical and analytical exploration of the educational and professional standards of public relations management.

Findings - The results of this study revealed that although the Malaysian public relations industry has grown due to the substantial influences of Western PR knowledge, the public relations profession has not yet matured in terms of achieving professional status in the eyes of society as a whole. In a new global economy, business leaders really value the importance of public relations in improving their organisational strategy development but they were not impressed with the quality and competencies of PR practitioners. Therefore, most of them stressed the importance of accreditation (registration) to improve practitioners' competencies but some of them noted that it is too early to implement legislation. They believe that the main focus should be on the quality and precision of PR practice as current practitioners' tactical and managerial tasks are neither complex nor sophisticated. Thus, there are four key areas of expertise identified which are considered to be the exclusive jurisdiction of public relations: stakeholder relations, reputation management (corporate branding), corporate social responsibility, and consultative and corporate advisory services at the top management level.

Originality/value - It is concluded that public relations can be a 'true' profession if all parties involved are united and committed to developing standardised, universal forms of public relations practice. The most critical factor that diminishes the value of public relations is the quality and precision of PR practice. Public relations must be seen as a 'terminal' occupation that maintains its exclusivity to balance its dual role as advancing stakeholders/clients importance and protecting the public interest.

Introduction

Profession is seen as an occupational term that describes a domain of expertise. This term has developed over hundreds of years to refer to a rigorous occupational system in our society. It is important to distinguish between craft, technician and professional in any division of labour. Thus, different levels of practice require different levels of competence. Job designations and responsibilities, status and prestige, professional autonomy and financial rewards are all key factors in building a professional development system. In sociological analysis, professions such as accountancy, medicine, law, and engineering have been vigorously debated by a number of distinguished scholars such as McDonald (1995), Freidson (1994), Larson (1977), Moore (1970), Halmos (1973), and Johnson (1972). However, none of them have said that public relations is a profession.

Although many public relations scholars acknowledge the importance of professionalism in public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ehling, in Grunig 1992; Sallot et al., 1997 & 1998; Cameron et al., 1996; Stacks et al., 1999; Nef et al., 1999; Cornelissen, 2000; Parkinson, 2001; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996, L'Etang, 1999, 2002 & 2004; White & Mazur, 1995), public relations is still seen as a common occupation for a number of reasons.

First, there is no clear distinct domain of expertise for public relations or communication management (Cornelissen, 2004). Johnson (1972) and L'Etang (2002) emphasised the importance of exclusive jurisdiction in establishing unique professional standards. Public relations is seen as media relations only, in which the main tasks are managing press conferences and writing press releases. Some see public relations as a persuasive tool to serve marketing (Kotler & Mindak, 1978; Kitchen, 1997) by which organisations use PR as a promotional mix or publicity to

achieve marketing goals. Others consider public relations to be managing reputations or image building (Hutton, 1999; Hutton et al., 2001).

Second, there is no universal standard of accreditation and licensing practised by PR professional bodies throughout the world. Different PR associations practise different forms of accreditation and codes of ethics. For example, although many PR associations have adopted the Code of Athens, some PR bodies such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, UK (CIPR) have adopted their own code of ethics.

Third, public relations is not seen as a 'terminal' occupation (full-time occupation), one of the key criteria of professionalism (see Abbot, 1988). Due to its poor image in the corporate world, there are only a small number of qualified PR personnel practising public relations (White & Mazur, 1995). Additionally, there are people who join PR by default or who regard PR as a second choice in their career development. It is also common to see that a number of PR practitioners start their career in public relations, but then change their career to other challenging management fields such as human resources or marketing.

Fourth, there is a need to develop a rigorous body of PR knowledge, which requires the establishment of exclusive training schools (see Johnson, 1972). Newsom et al. (2000) argued that public relations could not yet be viewed as a profession because it lacks a tradition of continuing education. In connection with this, there is a critical debate about the location of courses of public relations - whether in media/mass communication or business schools (see Cornelissen, 2004; L'Etang, 1999: 282; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006: 440; Grunig & Grunig, 2002). Although Grunig and Grunig (2002) agreed that public relations should be a part of MBA programmes, especially in subject areas such as strategic management, public affairs and corporate

social responsibility, they argued that PR practitioners must be educated in schools of mass communication. Some argued that PR curricula should be housed in business schools (Cornelissen, 2004; Kitchen, 1997), as these are appropriate educational training institutes to nurture in business leaders the importance of public relations to their organisations.

There is still a debate whether public relations should be a profession like medicine, law or accountancy. As compared to other professions, there is a clear-cut difference between medical and law schools (Larson, 1977). Additionally, accountancy is considered an established profession (McDonald, 1995), though most accounting curricula are housed in business schools. Furthermore, there are a number of well-established professional institutes, such as the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) for human resources and the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) for marketing (Murray, 2002: 13). In fact, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) was awarded a Royal Charter in February 2005 due to their significant and robust contribution to the UK's political, economic and social development. They have stated a preference for public relations to be housed in business schools to give the best training and development, especially about business strategy for PR practitioners, yet it might be asked whether these are the best institutions for the development of a 'universal professional project' to achieve professional status for public relations globally.

Theoretical Framework

This study mainly aims to reconceptualise the standards of professionalism of public relations from multiple perspectives: the sociology of the profession and strategic management. Based on Weber's notion of rationalisation and Wilensky's model of

professional development (Wilensky, 1964: 142-146), adapted by Neal & Morgan (2000: 12), it is believed that this study will develop a 'professional project' for public relations with the purpose of increasing professionalism. Exclusive jurisdiction, the standardisation of professional services, the regulation sanction, and the role of professional associations are seen as critical elements in developing the desired 'professional project'. Nurturing professionals is a long and complex process of educational and professional developments and depends on two core elements: (1) determining the distinct domain of expertise for public relations, and (2) identifying levels of practice and competencies among PR practitioners.

It is worth noting two opposing views, the first posited by the foremost PR educator and practitioner Herbert Lloyd, an IPR President (from 1968 to 1969). Greatly concerned about the status of professionalism in the industry, he argued that:

We must establish a Chair ... at the London School of Economics. You must have public relations taught at the university level (PR qualification). Once you've done that you've gone a long way towards increasing its status (L'Etang, 1999: 274 original emphasis).

In contrast, Tim Traverse-Healy, another IPR President (from 1967 to 1968), placed his emphasis on personal abilities, and commented that:

In taking on people, degrees don't matter a damn. What does matter is to have critical ability (personal abilities) to be able to assess a situation and the factors affecting it. You must have maturity ... This is the sort of man (sic) who will go to the top (L'Etang, 1999: 274).

As this study also aims to reduce the gap between academia and practice, both opposing views stated can be considered as a 'chicken and egg' situation. It is essential to note that PR qualifications and personal abilities are inseparable facets in attaining the highest standards of PR professionalism. They are important elements for the educational and professional standards of public relations management.

Importantly, the PR industry must produce practitioners with a strong academic background. A 2003 survey by the CIPR, 'Unlocking the Potential of Public Relations: Developing Good Practice', reveals that there is room for UK PR practitioners to strengthen their theoretical background, rather than relying solely on practical experience (CIPR, 2005). Additionally, PR practitioners must undergo Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to develop their personal competencies. This is a base for the integration of educational and professional standards of PR professionalism.

In order to seek the integration of educational and professional standards of public relations, it is important critically to view what professionalism is and what is required. According to Kultgen (1988), there are two kinds of profession: traditional professions like medicine, law, architecture and the ministry, and contemporary professions, such as engineering, accountancy, etc., all offering comprehensive scope for an ideal of professionalism. Acquiring moral competency or proficiency is important for PR practitioners in demonstrating their skills, especially for specific tasks. Other sociological scholars such as Freidson (1994), Larson (1977), and McDonald (1995) see professions such as medicine, law, accountancy and engineering as one entity, since they all have an exclusive jurisdiction in the divisions of labour. Therefore, it is argued, because in corporate practice public relations does not have an exclusive jurisdiction (Cornelissen, 2004), public relations (or corporate communication) needs to define a distinct domain of expertise that is difficult to imitate by other occupations.

It is worth reiterating that the term 'professionalism' has been debated extensively by sociological scholars in identifying the divisions of labour, especially with regard to occupational roles in a wider society (Freidson, 1994; Larson, 1977;

Vollmer & Mills, 1966; Moore, 1970; McDonald, 1995; Abbott, 1988). There is, in particular, much debate on the definition of a 'profession', in an attempt to determine what a 'true' profession is and the criteria of professionalism (Freidson, 1994: 14). One of the commonly identified main characteristics of a profession is formal education (Larson, 1977; Freidson, 1994; MacDonald, 1995), and thus, while professionals need to have specialised knowledge which is abstract and theoretical, they equally require professional skills which need 'the exercise of complex judgement' (Freidson, 1994: 112).

In this study, criteria of professionalism from a sociological perspective are important in defining what a true profession is and how public relations may gain a stable professional status from a wider society, not only among the PR community. Under a universal accreditation programme, professions like medicine, law and accountancy have met and maintained the criteria of professionalism such as gaining technical competencies from an accredited educational institution, becoming members of a professional body, and abiding by codes of ethics (Freidson: 1994: 154).

Wilensky's model of a way to achieve professional status is also influential. Wilensky (1964: 142-146 adapted by Neal & Morgan, 2000: 12) proposed four pillars of professional development:

- 1) The profession must become a 'terminal' occupation (full time). This is compulsory for the process of professionalisation because 'it entails routinisation of the work and a relatively high level of commitment to the development of the profession' (Neal & Morgan (2000: 18).
- 2) The establishment of exclusive training schools (approved by a professional association) where a steady development of approved curricula is established. Exclusive academic and/or professional qualifications must be clearly set up to

demonstrate the substantial and rigorous knowledge and skills of the profession.

- 3) On completion of such training as in (2), all graduates must join the professional association and adhere to membership criteria and regulations set by the association. Qualifying examinations are offered to evaluate the levels of practitioners' competencies. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is mandatory for all members to expand their knowledge and skills. The profession is also seen as 'lifelong learning'.
- 4) All members must abide by rules of conduct (a formal code of ethics) and the stringent regulation formed by council members of the professional association. Eliminating unqualified practitioners, minimising internal competition, protecting clients and focusing on a service ideal are parts of the regulation sanction that is clearly stated in their code of ethics.

Having discussed the concepts and criteria of professionalism, applying those criteria to public relations practice in Malaysia would be useful. In addition, some concepts of corporate strategy¹ identified by Kitchen and Schultz (2001) and Mintzberg and Quinn (1996) have been employed to modify the dimensions of professionalism. When combined with the numerous elements mentioned above, including those derived from strategic management perspectives create a comprehensive and more practically focused framework. Thus, this study can contribute to the body of public relations knowledge.

¹ Management is seen as a professional discipline. Public relations here is a management discipline. Thus, knowledge of corporate strategy is essential for today's public relations practitioners in gaining professional expertise, autonomy and credentials. Poignantly, some US PR scholars such as Sallot, Cameron, Weaver, Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg seem to have abandoned this knowledge in favour of their work in the communication domain.

It is hypothesised that the system theory of public relations and core competency strategies will strengthen concepts of public relations management in Malaysia. Thus, the role of public relations theory can guide PR practitioners to practise coherently according to the abovementioned tenets of Wilensky's model (adapted by Neal & Morgan, 2000: 12), and thence to improve the PR industry. For this reason, the application of a system theory of public relations, one of the most important PR management theories, and of core competency strategy, another of the strategic management models, has been made to provide an in-depth discussion of the professionalism of public relations management.

With the application of a system theory of public relations, professionals in the field can play adaptive roles in shaping the standards of professionalism based on the concepts of adjustment and adaptation of public relations. These concepts are important in managing the openness and transparency of organisations to their environment. Therefore, public relations, viewed as a 'true' profession, should be able to respond to the dynamics of the real world, especially in the highly competitive business environment (Cutlip et al., 2000; Cornelissen, 2004: 167).

In addition to this theory, the core competency strategy, identified by Mintzberg and Quinn (1996) and DeSanto and Moss (2004), is employed to observe educational and professional standards from a strategic management perspective. This core competency strategy is chosen in this study because, it focuses thoroughly on a set of skills or knowledge, being flexible and permeable (capable of providing long-term benefits), and customer-relationships (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996: 66). Therefore, elements of this approach may be compatible with the elements of system theory. Indeed, this study is possibly the first attempt to find a convergence between system theory, one of the theories of public relations identified by leading public relations

scholars, and core competency strategy, one of the approaches of strategic management.

With the strength of the concepts of strategic management in public relations, a model of boundary-spanning is very useful in determining distinctive roles for public relations and improving the quality of PR professionalism. White and Dozier (1992) and Kitchen (1997) expanded the concept of the boundary-spanning role of public relations by emphasising the importance of strategic decision-making from the perspective of strategic management when venturing into today's competitive business environment.

There are quite a number of research papers on PR professionalism published in the leading public relations and communication management literature, yet they all fail to determine what the professional standards of public relations are, for a number of reasons. First, some strongly focus only on media relations (spin-doctoring). Second, professional standards are viewed from practitioners' personal perceptions alone, and not by top management teams of large organisations who, arguably, have a view of the real value of public relations from a perspective of strategic management. Third, there is a lack of understanding about what constitutes 'strategic management' in the context of business strategy and in applying this to public relations practice. Ironically, some public relations scholars additionally seem to have failed to define an exclusive jurisdiction for public relations.

Indeed, it is useful to define an exclusive jurisdiction (the distinct domain of expertise) for public relations. Here, public relations is viewed as a distinctive management discipline which influences the behaviour of diverse groups of strategic constituencies (customers, employees - including top management team - investors and regulators) in a diverse and complex business environment. It is suggested that

both corporate governance and corporate advisory arenas should be at the heart of strategic public relations management. With such expertise in public relations management, it is hypothesised that every organisation will need public relations services.

Having identified the importance of corporate governance and corporate advisory services, this study will investigate the views of business leaders, including CEOs or senior directors, on the real value of public relations and the visions they have about the 'professional project' that the PR professional bodies must pursue in order to gain professional status and privilege from a wider society. As building respectability (McDonald, 1995 & Johansen, 2001: 67) is a core element of professionalisation, it is then possible to launch a schema for full professionalisation of public relations - one which differentiates public relations from marketing, journalism, and advertising, but also one that must achieve a stable professional status like established professions such as accountancy, law and medicine.

Purposes

The main purpose of this study is to explore the status and the standards of professionalism of public relations from multiple perspectives - the sociology of the profession and strategic management - in Malaysia. Four research questions are developed to achieve the purposes of this research:

Objectives

This study will focus on the extent to which (1) chief executive officers/senior directors, (2) PR practitioners, and (3) PR academics have a clear sense of the standards needed for the professionalism of public relations management in Malaysia.

This approach will answer the general question of the thesis: Is public relations a profession? Four dimensions of PR professionalism are developed as the theoretical framework of this study: (1) knowledge base and personal competencies, (2) research and education, (3) a code of ethics, and (4) accreditation and licensing.

Research question 1 – three sub-questions:

- a) What is the extent of knowledge and skills in determining the standards of professionalism in public relations?
- b) How important are specialised knowledge and skills, and personal competencies to PR practice?
- c) Are corporate governance and the corporate advisory service necessarily distinct domains of their expertise?

Research question 2 – two sub-questions:

- a) What is the extent of research and education (and the establishment of exclusive training schools) in improving the standards of professionalism in PR?
- b) How important is research and education to PR practice? Should distinctive PR schools be developed?

Research question 3 – two sub-questions:

- a) To what extent is a code of ethics central to improving the standards of professionalism in public relations?
- b) How important is a code of ethics to PR practice?

Research question 4 – two sub-questions:

- a) What is the role of accreditation and licensing in setting the standards of professionalism in public relations?
- b) How important is accreditation and licensing to PR practice?

Research Methods

To further understand the dimensions of PR professionalism, the qualitative method (in-depth interviews and a review of policy documents) is used to gain a critical and comprehensive view of educational and professional standards of public relations management. The three small target institutional groups for this study are academic institutions that educate PR practitioners with an emphasis on theory, corporations that produce PR services and business leaders/policy makers who influence the practice of PR services.

This qualitative tool requires an interviewer to participate actively in discussing particular topics (Seidman, 1998; also see Daymon & Holloway, 2002). In terms of the size of the sample, Saunders et al. (1997) argued that the positivistic approach (a quantitative method) needs a large sample of respondents; in contrast, the phenomenological approach (qualitative method) requires a small number of informants. Thus, these interviews were conducted with two small groups of PR people: PR academics and PR practitioners. Additionally, a series of interviews were conducted with CEOs/senior directors of large corporations, especially public listed companies, who have a view on the real value of public relations.

A summary of the interviews that were conducted with three groups, respectively PR academics, practitioners and CEOs/senior directors as well as related

parties, is presented in Table 1.0, which provides a brief profile of informants to support the reliability and validity of this method.

Table 1.0: Interviews with three groups

Group A: Interviews – PR Academics²						
Academic institution	Job Designation	Size of Institution	Faculty/school	Expe-rience in function	Qualifi-cations	Professional affiliation
A1	Professor/ Dean	Big/Public	Faculty of Art & Social Science and Research Centre	38 years	PhD, MA, & BA (Hons)	Fellow of IPRM
A2	Senior lecturer	Big/Public	Faculty of Modern Languages/ Dept. of Communication	10 years	MA, BA (Hons) & Diploma	none
A3	Lecturer	Big/Public	Faculty of Social Science/Dept. of Media Studies	5 years	MA & BA (Hons)	none
A4	Lecturer	Big/Private	Faculty of Art/Dept. of Communication	4 years	PhD, MA & BA (Hons)	none

Group B: Interviews – PR Practitioners						
Company	Job Designation	Size of company & Sector	Year listed in KLSE³	Qualifications	Expe-rience in function	Professional Affiliation
C1	Managing Director	Big/ Global firm	-	- MA & BA (Hons)	30 years	- A former member of IPRM - Member of PRCAM
C2	Head/ Director	Big/ Banking	-	- MBA, MA & BA (Hons)	25 years	- Member of IPRM - Member of IABC
C3	Head/ Director	Big/ Property	1961	- MSc & BSc (Hons)	17 years	none
C4	Head/ Director	Big/ Energy	1990	- MA & BA	23 years	- Member of IABC

² Those participants selected are full-time PR lecturers and/or have a formal qualification in communications/public relations and also have demonstrated their contribution to the PR industry. There is an extreme shortage of PR academics teaching and conducting research specifically in public relations in Malaysia (Khattab, 2000). Although a range of PR subjects is offered by universities, PR subjects are always taught by part-time lecturers from other institutions or the PR industry.

³ KLSE – Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange

C5	Manager	Big/Oil & refinery	1994	- BA (Hons)	13 years	none
	Senior Executive			- BA (Hons)	6 years	none
C6	Manager	Big/ Gaming	1970	- MBA & BA (Hons)	12 years	- Member of IPRM - Associate member of MIM
C7	Manager	Big/ Auto-mobile	1990	- SPM (GCE - O level)	22 years	Member of IPRM
C8	Head/ Director	Big/ Food & Beverage	1989	- MA & BA (Hons)	19 years	Member of IABC
C9	Officer	Big/Sport	-	- BA (Hons)	10 years	none

Group C: Interviews – Chief Executive Officers/Senior Directors

Corporation	Job Designation	Size of company & Sector	Year listed in KLSE	Experience in function	Major clients/ Supervisors of senior PR staff
C1	Chief Executive Officer	Big/Oil & refinery	1960	21 years	Major Client
C2	Chief Executive Officer	Big/Waste management	-	23 years	Major Client
C3	Chief Executive Officer	Big/Automobile	1990	38 years	Major Client
C4	Chief Executive Officer	Big/Property development	2000	20 years	Major Client
C5	Chairman	Big/Banking	1967	37 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff / Major Client
C6	Chairman	Big/ Conglomerates: properties, hotel, plantation and manufacturing	1990	32 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff
C7	Chairman	Big/World class/Shipping	-	35 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff / Major client
C8	Deputy Chairman	Big/ Conglomerate: properties, construction, manufacturing, education, and healthcare	1984	34 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff / Major Client
C9	Adviser to Chief Executive Officer	Big/ Telecommunication	2002	25 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff
C10	Senior General Manager of Legal counsel, Corporate affairs & Facilities management	Big/ Oil & refinery	1994	26 years	'Supervisor' of senior PR staff / Major Client

These interviews took place between March and May 2004. All interviewees were selected randomly from a database of the latest edition (2003) of the Directory of Malaysian Companies. Due to the cultural diversity in Malaysia, the interviews included the three main races: Malay, Chinese and Indian. Of 20 selected PR academics and practitioners, only 14 of them replied and agreed to be interviewed. Of two selected non-PR sector key informants, only one replied and consented to be interviewed. First, a cover letter noting the purpose of this interview was delivered to informants via email. Then all the interviewees were contacted by telephone or email to set an appointment. With the permission of interviewees, a cassette recorder was used to record the conversations, which helped the researcher to conduct the interview smoothly and efficiently. All interviews were undertaken at the interviewees' places of work. The interviews were conducted in English and/or Malay - depending on which language the interviewees preferred. During the interviews, a set of questions was used to guide the conversation and, importantly, the researcher also posed probing or follow-up questions to stimulate the conversation on the topics discussed.

Between mid-November 2005 and February 2006⁴, the researcher conducted a series of interviews with CEOs/senior directors of large corporations and/or major clients of public relations services in the Klang Valley who understand the real value of public relations and communication management. Table 1.0 shows the size of sample – Group C. In November and December 2005, the researcher reviewed the directory database from the homepage of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. Every public listed company had produced a current annual report. Through the annual report, the researcher reviewed the profile of the board of directors and corporate

⁴ Note: between mid-November and December 2005: scheduling appointments, and between January and February 2006: visiting and interviewing informants.

information such as organisational structure, the latest office address, website, email address and telephone and facsimile numbers. The researcher also reviewed newspapers, newsletters, bulletins and suchlike to find business leaders who have a view of the real value of public relations. Sending emails to a number of PR leaders to find business leaders who have contributed to the PR industry, such as those to whom the IPRM has awarded the 'Most PR Savvy CEO' award, was a part of the strategy in framing the sample of the study. Of 26 selected business leaders with large corporations and/or major clients of PR services, only ten replied and agreed to be interviewed. Five of them replied but declined for some reason, such as, 'too busy' and 'matter of policy'. Eleven did not respond. All potential informants were contacted through email, telephone and facsimile. The cover letter and the interview schedule were officially sent to their corporate communication managers asking their help to arrange interviews with their bosses/supervisors⁵. Then, appointments were set up to conduct face-to-face interviews at the informants' office. The interviews lasted about one to two hours. During the interview, central questions were about the value of public relations and the required elements of the professionalisation of public relations. Some probing questions were asked to seek more information and clarify their opinions/expectations. A digital voice recorder was used to record conversations between the interviewer and interviewees after permission was obtained. All data were transferred to computer software, and a digital wave player for the process of transcribing. All valuable inputs were then analysed and interpreted as findings of this study.

In order to supplement the in-depth interviews used in this study, the researcher gathered and reviewed the desired information as well as possible

⁵ Normally, corporate communication managers report directly to CEOs/Chairmen.

information about how PR is practised in the selected organisations in the Klang Valley. This technique involved the analysis of two sets of documents: organisational documents emerging from PR practitioners' work, such as business plans, key performance indicators, annual reports, as well as operational reports, letters, press releases, organisational newsletters, bulletins and relevant documents; whilst academic documents included course outlines, journal papers, conference papers, publications, news releases regarding the PR curriculum and relevant documents.

Findings

Findings of this study review the qualitative results of interviews with PR practitioners and academics (Phase 1) explored the importance of the standard of PR professionalism to the current PR industry. Importantly, the qualitative results of interviews with business leaders (Phase 2) revealed how the professionalisation of public relations could be accomplished in relation to the four identified dimensions.

The qualitative results disclosed various perceptions, needs, expectations and aspirations from different groups in the PR industry – business leaders, PR practitioners, and PR academics. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods attempted to answer the question of whether public relations is a 'true' profession like medicine, law and accountancy.

Based on the qualitative results of this study, it is concluded that public relations is a fast growing and modern management discipline but has not yet become a 'true' profession like medicine, law and accountancy. Not surprisingly, public relations has been highly valued and recognised at the corporate level, as today's corporations must be able to interact with various internal and external stakeholders. PR roles and responsibilities assist in these interactions. There are growing needs and

demands in public relations especially for service corporations in a complex and competitive business environment. However, the talents and competencies of current PR practitioners are still expected to be at a low level. Current PR practice (with regard to performance and the tools used) is neither complex nor sophisticated. This finding supports a study by Van der Jagt (2005: 182) arguing that CEOs of the large Dutch corporations were not impressed with the quality and competency of PR practitioners in Amsterdam.

Ten top senior management personnel in large Malaysian corporations were interviewed and agreed that public relations is a 'true' profession to some extent but that it is not exactly a 'learned profession' such as medicine, law or accountancy. When asked whether public relations should be a profession like medicine or accountancy, the chairman of one of Malaysia's largest container ports in the maritime industry argued that:

Yes, but it would be varied from medicine or accountancy as these two fields involve actual applications whereas here it would involve *situational reasoning*, from case to case basis. There is no one solution which can be applied across the board.

The serious issue of the talents and competencies among the current PR practitioners studied raises the critical question of whether public relations needs to be regulated. The findings of this study revealed that accreditation (registration) would be a very important requirement in the professionalisation of PR practice. This accreditation should be based on a voluntary rather than an imposed mandatory system. There is a need to develop a universal professional body in public relations to regulate and serve the PR fraternity. The main focus should be on providing technical and managerial knowledge and skills that are more complex and more sophisticated.

In the light of the exclusive jurisdiction of public relations, public relations is seen as an exclusive strategic external function of organisations, which is in line with other management science disciplines such as marketing, human resources, finance and suchlike. In the overall organisational system, public relations is integrated with other management disciplines, especially marketing, and these have a strategic external function to grab opportunities in the marketplace and harness the core business of organisations. Public relations also plays a major role in safeguarding and sustaining the organisational reputation and image in a strategic way for the long term. The results of this study confirmed that for business leaders, the core functions and responsibilities of public relations are *stakeholder relations, reputation management, corporate branding, corporate social responsibility* and *community relations*.

Indeed, public relations is also involved in ‘situational reasoning’ – analysing and solving different issues affecting the company image. This role delivers long-term benefits through safeguarding the organisational reputation and image. This flexibility makes public relations more exclusive and different from other management functions such as marketing or advertising, as both these disciplines focus on immediate benefits in their practice.

Because of the main responsibilities of public relations, it is ranked at the top of the agenda of organisational strategy development. At the corporate level, *consultative and corporate advisory services* are key functions of public relations. Some business leaders expected that PR professionals would be able to influence the thinking and judgement of CEOs about how to communicate corporate policies strategically to their internal and external stakeholders. Thus, real PR professionals become ‘the key representative and flag bearer of corporations’ in their critical

mission to safeguard and sustain the organisational reputation. The CEO of the leading waste management company emphasised that:

“Unlike multinational companies which are taking a great concern over public relations as they have gone up and down, but some Malaysian companies have not really exposed to high competition and being having good at all time. Malaysian CEOs must be more agile and competitive. Communication is very important for a company to be appeared as the best company. This can be done by communicating and engaging your business with external stakeholders. That’s why we invest in PR to be seen by our stakeholders. A real PR practitioner must be able to influence a CEO’s thinking and judgement. Here, PR is a part of top management committee”.

Concerning the quality of the competencies of PR practitioners, nurturing PR professionals is vital to meet the growing needs and demands of the PR industry, which requires the establishment of an exclusive qualification and training school. Although experience and exposure to this field are considered very important criteria, possessing the right academic and professional qualifications as a knowledge base is what will enable practitioners to practice the profession professionally. It is understood that public relations delivers intangible results to corporations, but some business leaders expected that PR professionals must nevertheless be trained using distinctive and formal measurement techniques such as key performance indicators, return on investment, and suchlike. The intangible will need to be measured.

Importantly, adhering to a code of ethics is very, very important to PR professionals. Although many corporations have their own code of ethics that is practised by all employees including PR practitioners, practising an exclusive code of ethics set by a professional body is seen as being vital to gain professional credibility. PR practitioners must protect the public interest. However, litigation can only be accomplished if PR practitioners become members of the professional body. Indeed, managing trust, transparency and good governance are among the most difficult things for every organisation to gain credibility from their stakeholders. Thus, PR

professionals acting as corporate guardians must protect and sustain the reputation of organisations. The CEO of a leading oil and refinery company emphasised that:

We have our own code of ethics to which every employees must adhere to and being governed. We call it *General Business Principles* which focus on sharing a set of core values – honesty, integrity and respect. But there is always temptation to have problems such as bribe and corruption. We don't do it because we uphold to the code of ethics. That's kind of ethics is quite important for business success.

Conclusion and Contributions to the Body of PR Knowledge

This study is among the first to examine the views of CEOs/senior directors, PR practitioners and PR academics on the standards of PR professionalism drawing from two perspectives – the sociology of the profession and strategic management. Many studies in the United States and Europe on the standard of PR professionalism have been produced based only on the viewpoints of practitioners and academics.

This study contributes to the understanding of how public relations should become a 'true' profession based on the four pillars of professional development described. However, none of these pillars have yet been achieved. A lack of talent and competency among PR practitioners in the public and private sectors is considered one of the most critical issues. Unsurprisingly, Neal and Morgan (2000: 15), in their study 'The Professionalisation of Everyone?', did not include public relations in the 19 professions listed from the highest (lawyers – compliance: 100%) to the lowest rank (chartered insurance brokers – compliance: 28%).

This study also disclosed that forming an independent professional association for public relations is vital, provided that it follows global standards in terms of several key elements of the professional project: strategic plans; universal accreditation (registration); global benchmarking standards; international relations; continuous professional development; a code of ethics; membership benefits; and

training and qualification. It is arguable whether, even if all/the majority of PR professional associations in the world developed and practised global standards of professionalism under 'one profession and one voice', as quoted by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (Global Alliance, 2006: 1), public relations would be recognised as a profession.

In order to realise this vision, developing the universal body of PR knowledge is the top priority towards the professionalisation of this field. Competent PR practitioners need to be accredited to differentiate between real PR practitioners and the non-qualified practitioners who are practising in Malaysia. However, some business leaders think that attaining a Royal Charter is just a starting point for a public relations profession and not necessarily the highest standard of PR professionalism. Thus, it will be a long process to nurture real PR professionals and especially to enhance levels of competencies among the PR fraternity.

References

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cameron, G., Sallot, L. & Weaver-Lariscy, R. (1996). *Developing Standards of Professional Performance in Public Relations*. Public Relations Review Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 42-62. JAI Press Inc.
- Chartered Institute of Public Relations. (2005). An Official Homepage. United Kingdom. Available Online: (<http://www.cipr.org.uk/index.htm>).
- Cornelissen, J. P. (2000). *Toward An Understanding of the Use of Academic Theories in Public Relations Practice*. Public Relations Review. Vol. 26, 3. Elsevier Science Inc.
- Cornelissen, J. P. (2004). *Corporate Communication: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publication.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H. & Broom, G. M. (2000). *Effective Public Relations*. London: Prentice Hall International, Inc.

- Daymon, C. & Holloway, I. (2002). *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications*. London: Routledge.
- DeSanto, B. & Moss, D., (2004). *Rediscovering What PR Managers Do: Rethinking the Measurement of Managerial Behaviour on the Public Relations Context*. Journal of Communication Management. Henry Stewart Publication.
- Ehling, W. (1992). *Public Relations Education and Professionalism*. In Grunig, J. Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Freidson, E. (1994). *Professionalism Reborn: Theory, Prophecy and Policy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Halmos, P. (1973). *Professionalisation and Social Change*. The Sociological Review Monograph. Staffordshire: The University of Keele.
- Hutton, J. G. (1999). *The Definition, Dimensions, and Domain of Public Relations*. Public Relations Review. Vol. 25 (2), pp. 199-214. Elsevier Science Inc.
- Hutton, J. G., Goodman, M. B. & Genest, C. M. (2001). *Reputation Management: The New Face of Corporate Public Relations?* Public Relations Review. Elsevier Science Inc.
- Global Alliance (2006). *Strategic Plan 2005-2008*. Available online (www.globalpr.org.com). Accessed on 5 March 2006.
- Greenwood, E. (1966). The Elements of Professionalisation. In Vollmer, H. M. & Mills, D. L. (1966). *Professionalization*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Grunig, J. E. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. Forth Worth, Unites States. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Grunig, J. E. & Grunig, L. A. (2002). *Implications of the IABC Excellence Study for PR Education*. Journal of Communication Management. Vol. 7, (1), pp. 34-42. Henry Stewart Publication.
- Johnson, T. J. (1972). *Professions and Power*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Johansen, P. (2001). *Professionalisation, Building Respectability, and the Birth of the Canadian Public Relations Society*. Journalism Studies. Vol. 2, pp. 55-71.
- Khattab, U. (2000). *Perhubungan Awam dalam Iklim Panas: Nama Baru, Wajah Lama; Pindah Randah, Papa Kedana?* (Public Relations in Malaysia: New Name, Old face). Journal of Communication. Department of Communication, National University of Malaysia.
- Kitchen, P. J. (1997). *Public Relations: Principles and Practice*. London; Boston: International Thomson Business Press.

- Kitchen, P. J. & Schultz, D. E. (2001). *Raising the Corporate Umbrella: Corporate Communications in the 21st Century*. London: Palgrave Publisher.
- Kotler, P. & Mindak, W. (1978). *Marketing and Public Relations: Should They be Partners or Rivals?* *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 42, (10), pp. 13-20.
- Kultgen, J. (1988). *Ethics and Professionalism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Larson, M. S. (1977). *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (1996). *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*. London. International Thompson Business Press.
- L'Etang, J. (1999, Fall). *Public Relations Education in Britain: A Historical Review in the Context of Professionalisation*. *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 25, (3), pp. 261-289. Elsevier Science Inc.
- L'Etang, J. (2002). *Public Relations Education in Britain: A Review at the Outset of the Millennium and Thoughts for a Different Research Agenda*. *Journal of Communication Management*. Vol. 7, (1), pp. 43-53.
- L'Etang, J. (2004). *Public Relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the 20th Century*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (2006). *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Macdonald, K. M. (1995). *The Sociology of the Profession*. London: Sage Publications.
- McKinlay, J. B. (1973). *On the Professional Regulation of Change*. In Halmos, P. (1973). *Professionalisation and Social Change*. The Sociological Review Monograph. Staffordshire: The University of Keele.
- Mintzberg, H. & Quinn, J. B. (1996). *The Strategy Process: Concept, Contexts & Cases*. London. Prentice-Hall International, Inc.
- Moore, W. E. (1970). *The Professions: Roles and Rules*. New York: Russell Sage Publication.
- Murray, L. (2002). *Public Relations and Communication Management: Suitable Subjects for Management Education?*. *Journal of Communication Management*. Vol. 7, (1), pp. 9-13.
- Neal, M. & Morgan, J. (2000). *The Professionalisation of Everyone? A Comparative Study of the Development of the Professions in the United Kingdom and Germany*. *European Sociological Review*, Vol 16, No. 1, pp. 9-26. Oxford University Press.

- Neff, B. D., Walker, G. Smith, M. F. & Creedon, P. J. (1999, Spring). *Outcomes Desired by Practitioners and Academics*. Vol. 25. Issue 1, pp. 29-44. Public Relations Review. Available online (www.sciencedirect.com). Accessed on 29 March 2003.
- Newsom, D., Turk, J. V., & Krugkeberg, D. (2000). *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations*. 7th Edition. Australia. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Parkinson, M. (2001, Fall). *The PRSA Code of Professional Standards and Member Code of Ethics: Why They are Neither Professional nor Ethical*. Public Relations Quarterly. Vol. 46. No. 3. United States. Available online (<http://search.epnet.com>). Accessed on 10 April 2003.
- Sallot, L., Cameron, G., & Weaver-Lariscy, R. (1997, Fall). *Professional Standards in Public Relations: A Survey of Educators*. Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 197-216. JAI Press Inc.
- Sallot, L., Cameron, G., & Weaver-Lariscy, R. (1998). *Pluralistic Ignorance and Professional Standards: Underestimating Professionalism of Our Peers in Public Relations*. Public Relations Review. Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 1-19. JAI Press Inc.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (1997). *Research Methods for Business Students*. London: Financial Times Management.
- Seidman, Irving. (1998). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. London: Teachers College Press.
- Stacks, D. W., Botan, C. & Turk, J. V. (1999, Spring). *Perceptions of Public Relations Education*. Vol. 25, Issue 1, pp. 9-28. Public Relations Review. Available online (www.sciencedirect.com). Accessed on 29 March 2003.
- White, J. & Mazur, L. (1995). *Strategic Communications Management: Making Public Relations Work*. Addison-Wesley. Harlow.
- White, J. & Dozier, D. (1992), *Public Relations and Management Decision Making*, in Grunig, James E. ed. *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*. New Jersey: Hillsdale.
- Wilensky, H. L. (1964). *The Professionalisation of Everyone?* American Journal of Sociology. Vol. 70, (2), pp. 137-158.
- Van der Jagt. (2005). *Senior Business Executives See Communication and Reputation as a Crucial Part of Their Leadership Role*. Corporate Reputation Review. Vol. 8, No. 3, Henry Stewart Publications.
- Vollmer, H. M. & Mills, D. L. (1966). *Professionalization*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.