

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS REGARDING ROMANIAN PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS ON THE COMPETENCES SPECIFIC FOR PR SPECIALISTS

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**Abstract:** The paper is an attempt to present current perceptions of Romanian PR practitioners on the output of higher education institutions, delivering programs for this new profession. It is based on a qualitative survey and on the discussion of the results, compared against relevant literature regarding the “professional identity” of PR specialists and their competences and skills. The basis for the survey is underpinned by national efforts to create a generally accepted template of knowledge and skills as part of the accreditation of university programs, a process still in progress at national level, as part of a European effort to forge the European Higher Education Area.

**Key words:** competence (general, specific), qualification, development outcomes, autonomy and responsibility, labour market, PR specialists

### 1. Context of research

A survey released in 2010 on the perceptions of recent graduates of Higher education and their integration at the first workplace, carried out to support the developing of the Romanian National Qualifications Framework presented universities with a shocking result: only 32% considered the knowledge they were expected to have come through the university programme and 55% believed that whatever was necessary for them to be proficient in their jobs had been acquired at the workplace. Over 5.500 graduates (5576) took part in this survey, out of a generation of about 26.000. (Voicu: 2010). Also, on analyzing how graduates matched their academic degree with the labour market, it came out that:

- 60% of graduates from computer sciences, mathematics, construction, theology and medical schools found a job matching their degree;
- 30-45% graduates from political science, international relations, communication and public relations, business administration, tourism, management, marketing, telecommunications found a job in a field related to their degree, but not one precisely in their initial field of graduation;
- Over 40% of graduates from geography, language and literature, history, European studies, public administration found jobs with no connection to their academic training.

On their side, job recruiters and employers declare that they are more concerned with general competences and job experience of the candidates, rather than their specialization or the prestige of the university these candidates can point at.

On offering an academic programme for educating PR specialists, the Faculty of Communication Sciences, "Politehnica" University of Timisoara struggled with the results of such a survey. Are professional competences developed through the three years of education programme recognized by the community of PR specialists? Are the topics taught for the graduate level understood and welcomed by a body of professionals, who reached at least a medium-career level in a very new and only recently recognized field in Romania?

## **2. Research framework: objectives, hypothesis, sample, method**

Responses to the above mentioned questions are increasingly important in the process of proving that universities are accountable, responsive and tuned to the general development of society. Also, the major changes brought by the new Romanian Law on education and by the accrediting process require for all academic programs to bring material proof that they engage in the process of supporting the knowledge-based society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Three researchers of the Faculty of Communication Sciences of "Politehnica" University of Timisoara joined forces to qualitatively measure the correspondence (or dissonance) between the academic programme and the expectations of the labour market regarding the particular case of the communication and PR studies. Mariana Cernicova served as an expert in the national project developing the grids for Communication Studies (project DOCIS, 2009-211), Adina Palea, as a doctoral student and also in her capacity of career and academic orientation councilor for students, aimed at analyzing the professional development leading to create PR specialists as a distinctive body on the labour market, while Mugur Dragomir, sociologist, developed the survey instruments and processed the results of the survey. A special recognition should be addressed to Adriana Ritt, at that time president of the academic Board for communication studies, for her effort in disseminating the survey among professionals and for her input in the selection of topics to be included in the survey. The survey was conducted in January 2011.

The authors contacted over 70 PR professionals nationwide (60 from the Western part of Romania and 10 from major cities where universities provide academic programs for PR specialists), inviting them to respond online to two sets of questions (with 37 items each), aimed at measuring their evaluation and hierarchy for the competences, skills and attitudes required for successfully carrying out PR activities. Only half of the contacted persons responded and out of those 20 sets of answers could be validated according to professional standards. This is the reason for which the authors of this paper cautiously consider that these results can only tentatively be interpreted as reflecting the reality and should be deepened by a new survey, which should also bring statistically relevant answers, not only qualitative evaluations.

### 3. Back to the national level and the necessity to correlate national and local dimensions. Discussion of results

The Romanian higher education system strives with developing and implementing a National Qualifications Framework, as part of a European Qualifications Framework, in order to maintain its position in society in shaping professionals for the labour market, while also preserving academic values and defending its unique identity as sites of knowledge, research and education (European: 2008). It also complies with the European effort to create a transparent and easy-to-read system of education facilitating the freedom of workers on a European labor market (Collins: 2011). It tries to give an image of how to reshape academic programmes, in order to reduce the gap between degrees offered and labour market requirements/expectations with respect to a graduate's portfolio of competences.

Desirably, Romanian officials in charge with educational issues thought it was time to have universities enhance their contribution by sharing knowledge with society and by reinforcing the dialogue with all stakeholders, most of all, with the labour market (Zaharia: 2011). Therefore, the Faculty of Communication Sciences at "Politehnica" University of Timisoara developed its own line of communication with stakeholders and professionals, in an attempt to see if and how the local and regional communities react to national and European-wide concerns regarding the state-of-art in creating PR professionals.

On the national scale, graduates and employers place as a top priority the concept of competence in the particular understanding that competence equals the capacity of the competent person to carry out given tasks, on the basis of a combination of factors: skills, knowledge, mental setting helping to find proper solutions (Voicu: 2010). In a more sophisticated way, international official documents, European at least, give a variety of nuances or interpretations to the concept of "competence". Ultimately, the concept of "competence" has been explained by the authors of the Romanian Qualifications Framework as being the proven capacity to select, combine and use adequately knowledge, skills and other attainments (values and attitudes), in order to solve successfully a certain category of learning and work situations, as well as for personal and professional development, effectively and efficiently. According to the Romanian Qualifications Framework, competences fall into two categories:

- Professional competences;
- Transversal competences.

Professional competence is described as the proven capacity to select, combine and use adequately knowledge, skills and other attainments (such as values and attitudes) which are specific to a professional activity in order to solve successfully problem situations related to the respective profession, effectively and efficiently.

Transversal competences are those capacities that transcend a certain field or study programme, having a transdisciplinary nature: teamwork skills, oral and written communication in mother tongue/foreign language, use of ICT, problem solving and decision making, recognition of and respect for diversity and multiculturalism, learning

autonomy, initiative and entrepreneurship, openness to lifelong learning, respecting and improving professional values and ethics for example.

Both types of competences are thoroughly described for each specific academic programme, included in a mandatory grid which is published on the web site of the National Qualifications Register for Higher Education (RNCIS) and each accredited programme will have to show how it shapes the content of the studies provided for students in order to ensure the acquisition of those competences. The description comes in the form of grids, with a specific language and prescribed minimal standards to be attained for a student to graduate successfully (ACPART: 2010).

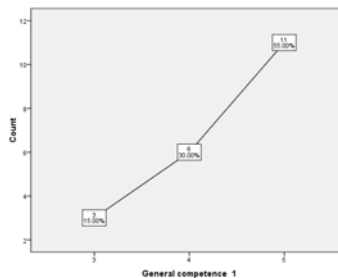
While accepting the fact that the local practice and vision should flow into the national and European trend, the team of researchers from “Politehnica” University, based on the principles of academic freedom and autonomy, looked closer into the particular case of perceptions in the professional community regarding the proposed academic programme. Out of the 37 items measured in the survey we propose for a more detailed analysis the top items which gathered the majority of results for general and for specific competences respectively. The respondents were asked to award grades to each competence, on a 5-grades scale, where 1 is unimportant, 0 is neither important, nor unimportant, and 5 means “of high importance”.

The respondents to our survey selected, from a large menu of competences necessary for proficiency at exercising the PR profession:

- A) Using principles, strategies, rules and norms of oral and written communication (in Romanian and in a foreign language) in different social contexts;
- B) Using IT and new media for professional communication;
- C) Understanding communication as a social construction of reality and as a major factor in creating, sustaining and/or changing cultural differences.

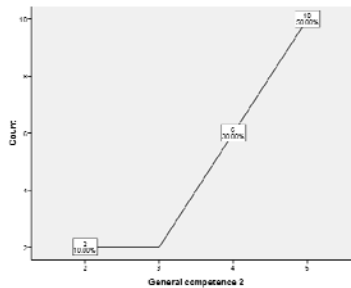
For the sake of brevity, we shall name the above „general competence” 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

For the general competence 1, the following chart is relevant:



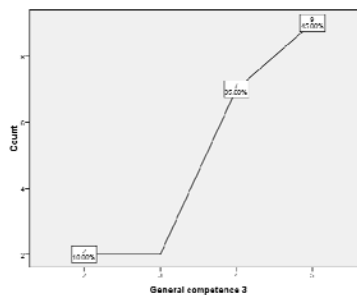
17 out of 20 respondents grade this competence at maximum, i.e. 11 persons (55%) award the highest grade, 5, and 6 (30%) award the grade 4. The average 3 is awarded by 3 persons (15%).

Using IT and new media for professional communication is the second-most important major competence identified in the survey.



The highest grade, 5 is selected by 10 respondents (50%), and 6 (30 %) award the grade 4. The rest of 4 respondents consider that the professional community gives a medium or less than medium importance to this particular aspect.

Understanding communication as a social construction of reality and as a major factor in creating, sustaining and/or changing cultural differences also is a competence highly placed in the hierarchy of pre-requisites for a proficient PR expert. Thus:



9 persons (45%) graded this competence with maximum importance, and 7 (35%) placed it also in the top competences necessary at the work place.

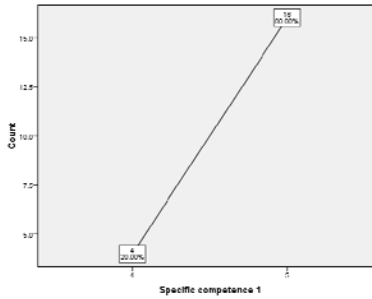
At the other end of the scale, the lowest grades were given to the capacity of describing PR activities and processes from the perspective of the major theories in the field and to scientifically based research of organizational communication. The authors of the present study consider that such responses are due to the highly applicative/vocational feature of the PR profession, which concerns itself relatively little with the theoretical frames of the field.

In the category of specific competences, four gained the most attention:

- A. Identifying the specific categories of public for the organisation and selecting the proper channels of communication (specific competence 1);
- B. Developing a plan a proper strategy for communication and PR (specific competence 2);
- C. Managing communication in crisis situations (specific competence 3).

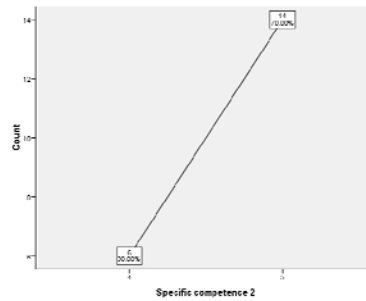
- D. Diagnosing the organizational needs in terms of communication (specific competence 4).

The survey revealed that:

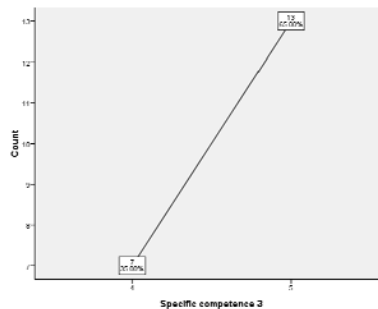


Identifying the specific categories of public for the organisation is considered crucial for a PR specialist, 16 persona (80%) grading this response with 5, while the rest, 4 persons (20%), awarded this competence with 4.

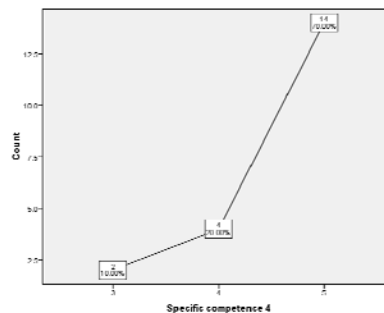
The capacity of developing a plan a proper strategy for communication and PR also scores high. 14 of the respondents (70%) gave it the highest grade, while 6 respondents (30%) awarded this competence the grade 4.



The capacity of managing communication in crisis situations receives the highest appreciation from 13 respondents (65%) and grade 4 from 7 respondents (35 %).



Finally, diagnosing the organizational needs in terms of communication is of average importance for 2 respondents (10 %), of maximum importance – 5 points, for de 14 persons (70%) and scores 4 for 4 persons (20%), as revealed by the chart below:



#### 4. Implications and conclusions

The actual implementation of the Romanian Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, with the help of the accreditation process will have a leveling effect upon academic programmes. All institutions will have to show compliance with the framework and they will have to:

- understand and use the methodological-instrumental component of the Framework, i.e. the tools used to analyze and describe qualifications;
- demonstrate each competence defining the respective qualification;
- describe gradually each level of competences (for graduate – masteral – doctoral programmes);
- handle the certification component, which includes three categories of procedures:
  1. Development of relevant documents for validation of a university qualification by the university study programme providers;
  2. Evaluation and accreditation procedures;
  3. Registration and updating procedures for the National Qualifications Register for Higher Education (NQRHE).

Since the description of all programmes will be standardized and the recognition of an academic programme will depend on its capacity to provide the competences described in NQRHE, it follows that complex, costly and bureaucratic processes are to be launched, placing new tasks and requiring new skills for academia. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that the faculties preserve the core of teaching and while adapting the formats to the national and European requirements they should keep in mind the necessity to maintain a proper load of knowledge, strategies for shaping skills and developing abilities for professionals proficient on the labour market. This paper is an example of reflection upon the core values that should be preserved as crucial at least for a medium-term period, even during the

implementation of new formats, new descriptions of academic programmes and through the process of registering the programme on RNCIS web-site.

Understanding that academic reflection and inquiry is necessary in order to render meaning to the whole procedure, the team of researchers which propose the present conclusions on how the PR specialists react to a rather abstract way of presenting the university offer for aspiring students aim at periodically revisit the conclusions and to possibly assess the change in the relationship university – labour market proposed by the implementation of the Romanian National Qualifications Framework.

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