

African perspectives on PR education

Pioneers in the fields of public relations and communication academia gathered at an academic forum running alongside the main Federation of African PR Associations (FAPRA) conference last week to discuss the future public relations curriculum to be offered on tertiary level.

By Boitumelo Mmotlana & Mmoneng Gwebu 28 May 2006

Professor Ronel Rensburg of the University of Pretoria and Chris Skinner, author of numerous public relations text books, well as academics from various African countries, put their heads together to facilitate the discussion and ongoing debate about what students should be taught about their profession.

Professor Rensburg stated that the role of public relations in developing countries is different from that of developed countries. This is because developing countries have a shortage of resources to enable them to perform to their greatest potential. She also mentioned that the complexity of the African culture cannot be understood by Western scholars, though public relations has long been in Africa, even before colonialism. "Research lends legitimacy," she said. "Our weakness is that we have not done sufficient research but have relied more on gut-feel."

As an introduction to the discussion amongst the delegates, research findings from a study conducted among a number of African countries was given. The main objectives of the study were to determine commonly used terminologies for public relations practice and education, as well as the key concepts in the public relations definition as identified by the respondents. It was found that there are various terms used for public relations, including: Corporate Affairs, Corporate Communications and Marketing Communications. It was also found that there was often confusion regarding the use of the terms 'communication and relationships'. However, it was the opinion of the majority of the respondents that communication is an integral part of relationships. The two terms are inseparable and not mutually exclusive. There was also widespread confusion about which faculty public relations should fall under, as in some institutions it is found in the faculties of Humanities, Art and Management.

Uplift profession

Some of the issues that were highlighted in discussions were that the status of the public relations profession really needs to be uplifted.

As much as public relations is regarded a broad discipline, practitioners need to find a point of departure, a defining characteristic, something that distinguishes them from other professions and something that they know they can do better than anybody else. Communication was seen as being one such area of expertise. Students need to have the relevant education and be equipped with the skills to be able to practise the profession. This will ensure that the student knows what they are doing, why they are doing it and the fact that they need to do it well.

For the moment, the ball is in the court of the Global Alliance as these recommendations of the various scholars have been submitted to them. The point is not to reinvent the wheel but to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the transformation of public relations and communication globally.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Boitumelo Mmotlana and Mmoneng Gwebu are third year communications students from the University of Johannesburg. They assisted at and reported on the Federation of African Public Relations Associations (FAPRA) annual conference in Johannesburg, 21 - 23 May, 2006. Bizcommunity.com chose to publish this report received by them as part of our ongoing outreach to academic institutions in our broader media, marketing and communications industry, and our support of student intern programmes.