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# **GLOBAL CAPABILITIES FRAMEWORK**

# **FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT**

**AUSTRALIA**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Global Capabilities Framework-Australia study was undertaken between March 2017 and January 2018. The three-stage research project, which included a Delphi study, an online survey and focus group discussions, involved public relations and communication practitioners, employers and educators from around the country. The study resulted in a list of ten core capabilities for public relations and communication management:

- Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights. (STRATEGIC ANALYSIS)
- Conducting and interpreting formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making. (RESEARCH AND EVALUATION)
- Advocating and advising on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices. (ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE)
- Analysing, identifying and negotiating with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs. (STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT)
- Demonstrating business acumen by aligning business objectives with societal expectations, and vice versa. (BUSINESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY)
- Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms. (STRATEGIC AND CREATIVE COMMUNICATION)
- Identifying appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risks. (REPUTATION MANAGEMENT)
- Communicating with understanding and sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world. (GLOBAL AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION)
- Identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation. (RISK AND ISSUES MANAGEMENT)
- Building and maintaining relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork. (RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT)

The following report documents the research process and findings at each stage of the project. We identify the capabilities with indicative quotes and additional comments from the participants. The above list proved to be surprisingly consistent throughout the study, with only minor differences in terms of perceived importance between the individual items. This presented some interesting challenges for the research team, encouraging further discussion, hypothesising and directions for future research.

Participants felt strongly about the fluctuating nature of the importance of individual capabilities. They were adamant that the developed capabilities should not be ranked, due to the ever-changing demands on expertise and skills, and respective contexts (geographical, but also time and issue related). Although participants agreed on the importance of each of the capabilities developed as part of this project in the Australian context, they commented on their global applicability. The only item that was singled out by some as “more specific to Australian PR” is the one that refers to cultural values. Participants expressed that this may recognise and reference Australia’s status as a multi-cultural society.

During the project, the appropriateness and suitability of the “public relations” label was questioned by a number of participants, suggesting alternatives such as communication management or strategic communication, that may capture more appropriately what their day to day job entailed.



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Fawkes, J., Gregory, A., Falkheimer, J., Gutiérrez-García, E., Halff, G., Rensburg, R., Sadi, G., Seigny, A., Sison, M.D., Thurlow, A., Tsetsura, K., & Wolf, K. (2018), A Global Capability Framework for the public relations and communication management profession. Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) Research Report. Huddersfield, UK: University of Huddersfield.  
is available as free PDF version from [hud.ac/ect](http://hud.ac/ect) or on request to [globalcap@hud.ac.uk](mailto:globalcap@hud.ac.uk)

# CONTEXT

## NATIONAL PROFILE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Public relations as an industry is well developed in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 25,700 professionals are currently employed in the PR industry and a strong growth is predicted for the future of the sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2018). The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) is the peak body for public relations and communication practitioners representing over 4000 practitioners and 100 consultancies across seven states and territories (<https://www.pria.com.au/aboutus/who-we-are>). Founded in 1949, the PRIA is one of the founding members of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management.

Australian communication practitioners may also be members of one or several professional associations, aside from the PRIA, including: the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), the Communications Council, the Australian Marketing Institute (AMI) and the Association of Corporate Directors.

IABC provides access to a global network of communication professionals, focusing on broader communication practice. With a network in 70 countries, IABC is represented in the four Australian states--Victoria, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, Queensland. All four states are part of the IABC Asia Pacific region. A fifth chapter is about to be launched in Perth, Western Australia. Professionals in other parts of the country can join the Asia Pacific region as 'members at large'.

Public relations education in Australia began when RMIT, through its business school, introduced a three-year part-time certificate in public relations in 1964 (Gleeson, 2014). However, public relations education experienced a period of major growth between 1985-1999 (Gleeson, 2013), seeing an expansion from three courses in 1980 to 10 by 1990. By the end of the 1990s there were 18 undergraduate and 11 postgraduate programs (Fitch, 2014). Today, there are 31 accredited programs across 18 universities, as well as nine online courses and one VET-based Diploma course (PRIA, 2018). According to the Australian employment statistics, a Bachelor degree or higher is now commonly expected for individuals to succeed in the industry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).





In November 2016, the PRIA launched its Professional Framework to facilitate a common understanding of different levels of experience and skills throughout a public relations career, arguing that “a clear description of the work that professional communicators actually do will better inform their education and provide a greater degree of work readiness” (PRIA, 2017). The Professional Framework is now deeply embedded in the Institute’s accreditation guidelines, thereby shaping the curriculum and learning outcomes of accredited programs.

## METHODOLOGY

The Australian study received ethics approval through RMIT’s Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network in two lots: Stage 1 (Delphi) in November 2016 (CHEAN A 0000020497-10/16) and Stages 2 and 3 (Survey and Focus Groups) in July 2017 (CHEAN B 20924-06/17). For Stage 1 and Stage 2 we used Qualtrics as our online survey platform.

Selection criteria for the Delphi method followed the general approach of the global study. The Delphi study ran from 16 January to 24 March 2017; the second round from 9 April to 17 May 2017 and the third round from 30 May to 22 June 2017. Twelve respondents participated in rounds 1 and 2, and 11 respondents participated in round 3.

The online survey ran from 15 August 2017 until 15 January 2018. The deadline was extended several times given the initial low number of responses. The final number of survey respondents was 96.

The focus groups were conducted during November and December 2017. Seven focus groups were held, five in person and two online, to capture educators and practitioners from around the country. A total of 32 individuals participated in the focus groups.



# STAGE 1: DELPHI METHOD

**PRACTITIONERS** N=6

**EMPLOYERS** N=2

**ACADEMICS** N=4

**TOTAL: 12**

**Table 1: Breakdown of Delphi study respondents**

A total of 12 respondents participated in the Delphi study (although only 11 respondents completed the third round).

Senior practitioners, employers and educators were identified and invited to participate in the Delphi study. The target respondents were drawn from the board members of the PRIA and IABC, as well as included senior educators in Australia, largely relying on the researchers' professional contacts and networks. Given the launch of the PRIA's Professional Framework in November 2016, we had some initial difficulty in gaining respondents, due to perceived over-surveying and a level of confusion relating to the difference between the two projects. To lessen the confusion with PRIA members in particular, and given that the original timing fell into the summer holidays, round one of the Delphi study was delayed until March. Two more rounds of responses were collected via online questionnaire by June 2017. Expert participants were able to adjust their original responses in subsequent rounds of data collection. Anonymity of the participants has been ensured.

Respondents were equally divided between males and females. Six of the nine practitioners represented the consultancy sector. Most states and territories were represented, with exception of Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the Northern Territory (NT). Three quarters (9) of respondents were aged 40-59 years old, two were in the 60-64 age bracket and one in 30-39 age bracket. The educational qualifications of the respondents are summarised in Table 2.

**BACHELOR**

N=5

**MASTERS**

N=4

**DOCTORAL**

N=3

**TOTAL: 12**

**Table 2: Delphi study respondents' qualifications**



## FINDINGS

### Round 1

In the first round, respondents listed a wide range of capabilities under the Strategic, Operation and Generic Professional capabilities.

In the Strategic Capabilities category, common responses included capabilities to:

- demonstrate business acumen;
- develop strategic communication;
- undertake and analyse research;
- engage and maintain relationships with key audiences/stakeholders; and
- practise ethics and governance.



Some respondents also mentioned the need for ‘meaningful communication’, ‘creativity’, ‘general benefits for society and the planet’ and ‘risk mitigation’.

In the Operational Capabilities category, common responses included capabilities to:

- generate outstanding written and verbal communication;
- identify appropriate stakeholders/audiences;
- select and use appropriate media/channels;
- understand business and finance; and
- undertake measurement and evaluation.



Some respondents also mentioned ‘scanning the environment’, ‘risk/issue/crisis identification and management’, ‘communicate with sensitivity to cultural values’, ‘work with other complementary fields’, and ‘strategy design’. One respondent also highlighted the ability to ‘apply laws affecting privacy, copyright, plagiarism, confidentiality, conflict of interest, and disclosure’.

In terms of the Generic Professional Capabilities, common responses included capabilities to:

- apply ethical frameworks;
- exercise curiosity;
- budget and manage financially; creativity; and
- project management.



Two respondents were not very clear on what these generic professional capabilities might mean so one indicated project management and change management. The other argued “generic would imply undifferentiated, less highly priced services and therefore unimportant”.

Five respondents provided further feedback in the qualitative comment section at the end of the survey, three to raise their concerns about the use and perceived datedness of the term public relations. As a label and descriptor, public relations was perceived as “too narrow” and “outdated”.

They argued that “it is about time we stopped referring to ‘Public Relations’ in a world where strategic communication and communication professionals are focusing more on relationships, audience trust, integrity and honesty as the key focus in engaging the audience”. And “vast tracts of the communication management industry does not see itself as PR or use that title, e.g. corporate communication, strategic communication, public communication, government communication, etc.”





These sentiments were repeated in not all, but some of the stage three focus groups. Participants raised questions about how public relations is being perceived in Australia, not only by the general public, but equally by its own professionals, which suggested a narrow interpretation of the job scope and associated responsibilities.

## **Round 2**

Using word clouds and thematic analyses, the first round findings were summarised into the following 12 capabilities:

- To scan, assess and critically analyse the business environment and provide strategic insights.
- To identify potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation.
- To demonstrate business acumen and align business objectives with societal benefit.
- To identify appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risk.
- To analyse, identify and negotiate with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs/
- To advocate and advise on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices.
- To conduct and interpret formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.
- To plan, solve problems and advise on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages as media platforms.
- To communicate with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world.
- To engender debate, dialogue, curiosity and aptitude for learning on broader societal issues.
- To demonstrate critical and creative thinking through knowledge of current affairs.
- To build and maintain relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork

The challenge, going forward, was that with exception of “To engender debate, dialogue, curiosity and aptitude for learning on broader societal issues” (which was rated as low, slightly and neutral in terms of importance by one respondent each) and to a lesser extent “To demonstrate critical and creative thinking through knowledge of current affairs” most items listed were rated as important (moderately, very and extremely important).



Top ranking items (rated very and extremely important only) were (in order of perceived importance):

- To scan, assess and critically analyse the business environment and provide strategic insights.
- To conduct and interpret formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.
- To advocate and advise on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices.

“To build and maintain relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork” was rated as ‘not at all’ and ‘slightly important’ by one respondent each. However, given the centrality of relationship management in public relations, the decision was made to keep this item for the following round.

### **Round 3**

Based on the analysis of the second round, ten capabilities were included in the third and final round, to which 11 of the original participants contributed by rating each on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important):

- To scan, assess and critically analyse the business environment and provide strategic insights.
- To conduct and interpret formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.
- To advocate and advise on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices.
- To analyse, identify and negotiate with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs..
- To demonstrate business acumen and align business objectives with societal benefit
- To plan, solve problems and advise on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages as media platforms.
- To identify appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risk,
- To communicate with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world,
- To identify potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation,
- To build and maintain relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork,

Responses slightly varied from earlier ones, raising the question of how daily challenges and the project might have influenced individual's perception of professional capabilities and their importance. For example, two respondents rated "To conduct and interpret formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making" as slightly important and one respondent rated "To advocate and advise on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices" as slightly important.

The only items consistently – across all rounds - rated as very and extremely important (in order) were:

- To analyse, identify and negotiate with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs,
- To plan, solve problems and advise on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages as media platforms,
- To communicate with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world,

Interestingly the items that received top marks for importance varied between round 2 and 3. This prompts the research team to raise questions in regards to the reliability of these findings. Given that the same participants responded, why did they rate the importance of various items differently across the three rounds? Do context and daily challenges come into play – and what does that say about the reliability of the study design and consequent insights gained per se?



## STAGE 2: SURVEY

### **a. Sampling**

The sampling method used was purposive sampling, as we wanted respondents to fit our pre-determined categories: practitioners, employers and educators. To recruit these respondents we employed various approaches. First, we promoted the survey through the relevant industry associations such as the PRIA and IABC. The PRIA have members who are practitioners, employers and educators. However, in order to increase survey participation, we also employed snowball sampling, drawing on the researchers' personal networks and contacts, as well as special interest groups (e.g. The PRIA's College of Fellows & national Education Committee).

## b. Dissemination

To access these potential respondents, we contacted the PRIA and requested their endorsement and support in promoting the study. As such, the online survey was promoted in the PRIA eZine and through PRIA's committees/special interest groups, such as the Education Community Committee and the College of Fellows. Similarly, we requested IABC Victoria colleagues for support in promoting and participating in the survey.

The online survey used Qualtrics, enabling participation via personal smartphones or computers. The professional associations disseminated the survey links via their ezines and social media channels (LinkedIn). The researchers also sent anonymous links to individuals who may not have seen the PRIA/IABC links, or whose Qualtrics links were not functional. We also found that personal follow up and requests were critical in increasing the response rate.

As at 15 January 2018, a total of 96 respondents completed the online survey.



## c. Survey Instrument

While the survey instrument generally followed the original UK-designed guide, we decided to tweak some of the questions for clarification and contextual purposes. For instance, in Q2, where we wanted respondents to identify themselves as educator, practitioner or employer, we included definitions for each category. These distinctions were perceived as important as some individuals reportedly identified with two roles (educator and practitioner; or – more commonly – practitioner and employer).

We also included our states and territories for obvious reasons, but also adjusted the gender category to include 'other' as an option, as increasingly common practice in Australia. We also revised the education categories to resonate with the tertiary qualifications relevant to Australia.

The ten items emerging from the final round of the Delphi study were then slightly rephrased to emphasise the active process involved in each statement, e.g. "Identifying potential issues" as opposed to "To identify potential issues".





The ten capabilities included in the survey were as follows:

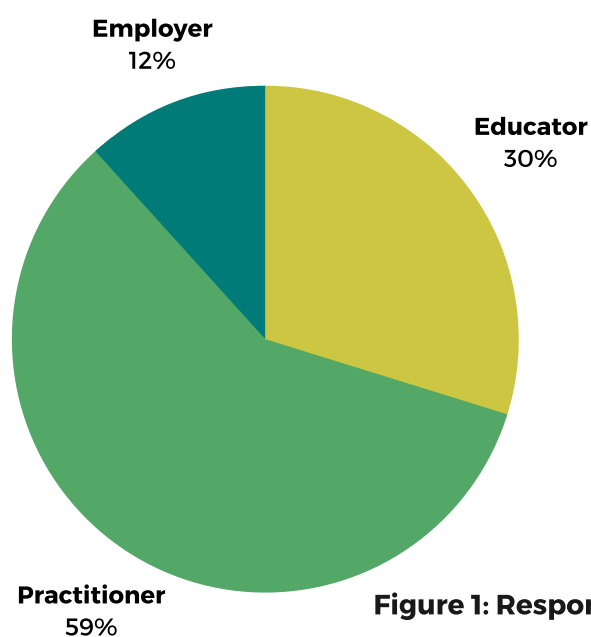
- To scan, assess and critically analyse the business environment and provide strategic insights.
- To identify potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation.
- To demonstrate business acumen and align business objectives with societal benefit.
- To identify appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risk.
- To analyse, identify and negotiate with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs.
- To advocate and advise on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices.
- To conduct and interpret formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.
- To plan, solve problems and advise on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages as media platforms.
- To communicate with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world.
- To engender debate, dialogue, curiosity and aptitude for learning on broader societal issues.
- To demonstrate critical and creative thinking through knowledge of current affairs.
- To build and maintain relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork

#### d. Respondent Profile

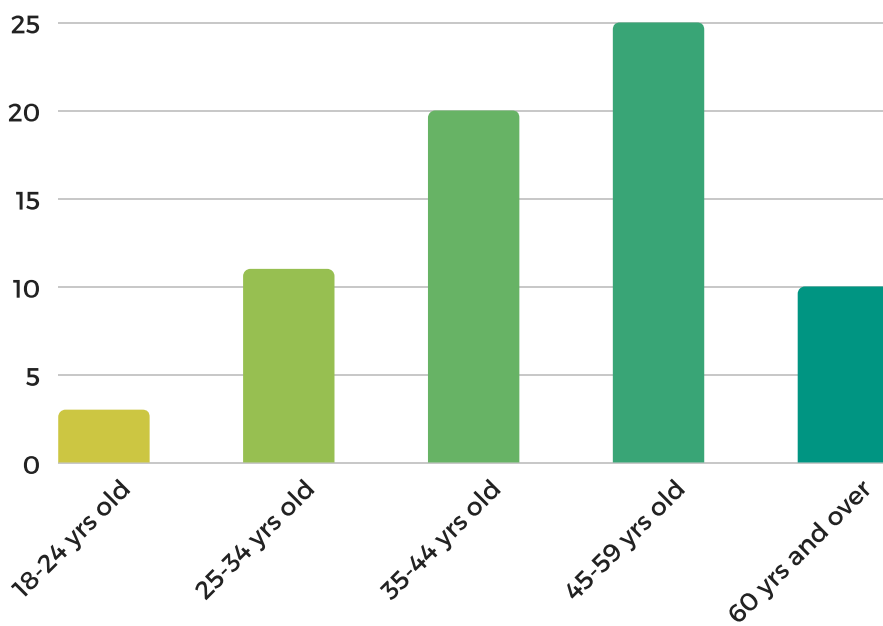
More than half of the respondents identified as practitioners, almost 30 percent were educators and less than 12 percent identified as employers.

Of the 96 respondents, 72% identified as female. Of the respondents who revealed their age bracket (69), more than a third were between 45-60 years of age.

Respondents were located in six states and territories.

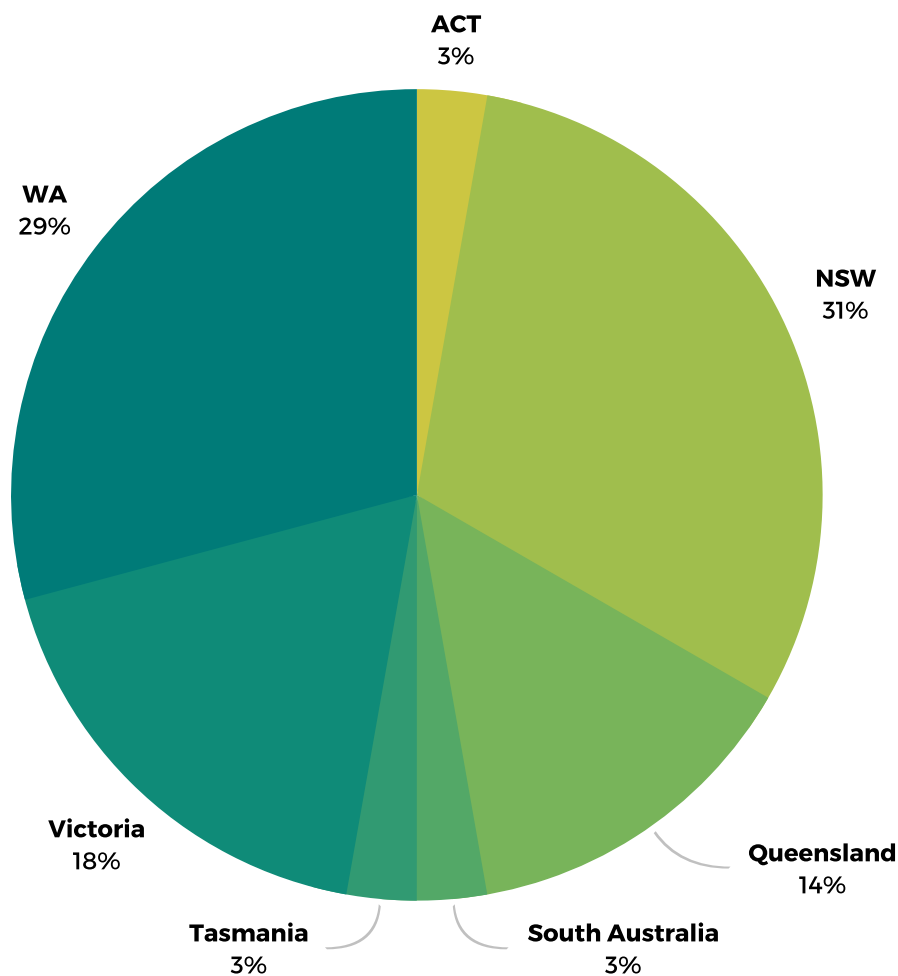


**Figure 1: Respondents' employment categories**

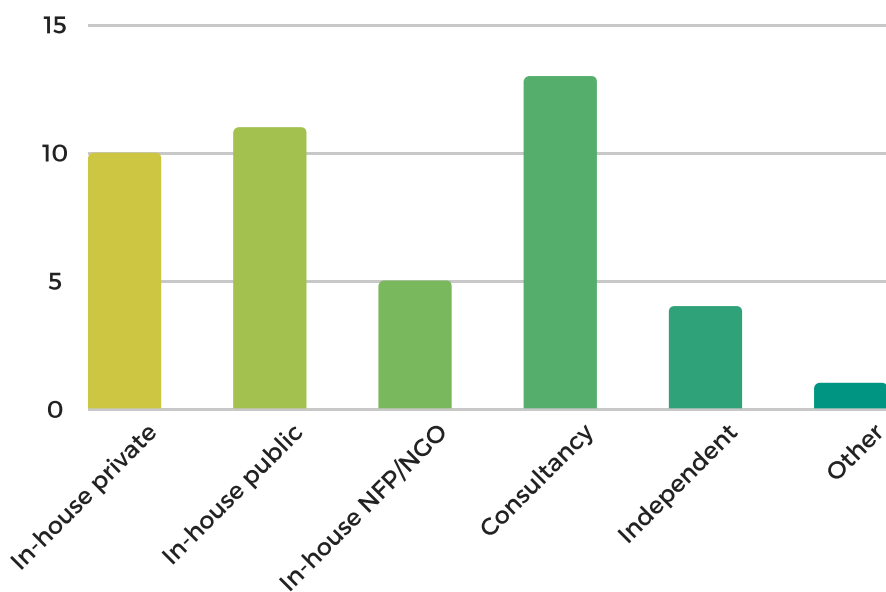


All educators reported being employed by higher education institutions. In terms of the practitioner organisations, a third were from consultancies, a quarter were in house public sector practitioners, followed closely by in house private sector and a few in- house NGOs and independent practitioners.

**Figure 2: Respondents' employment categories**

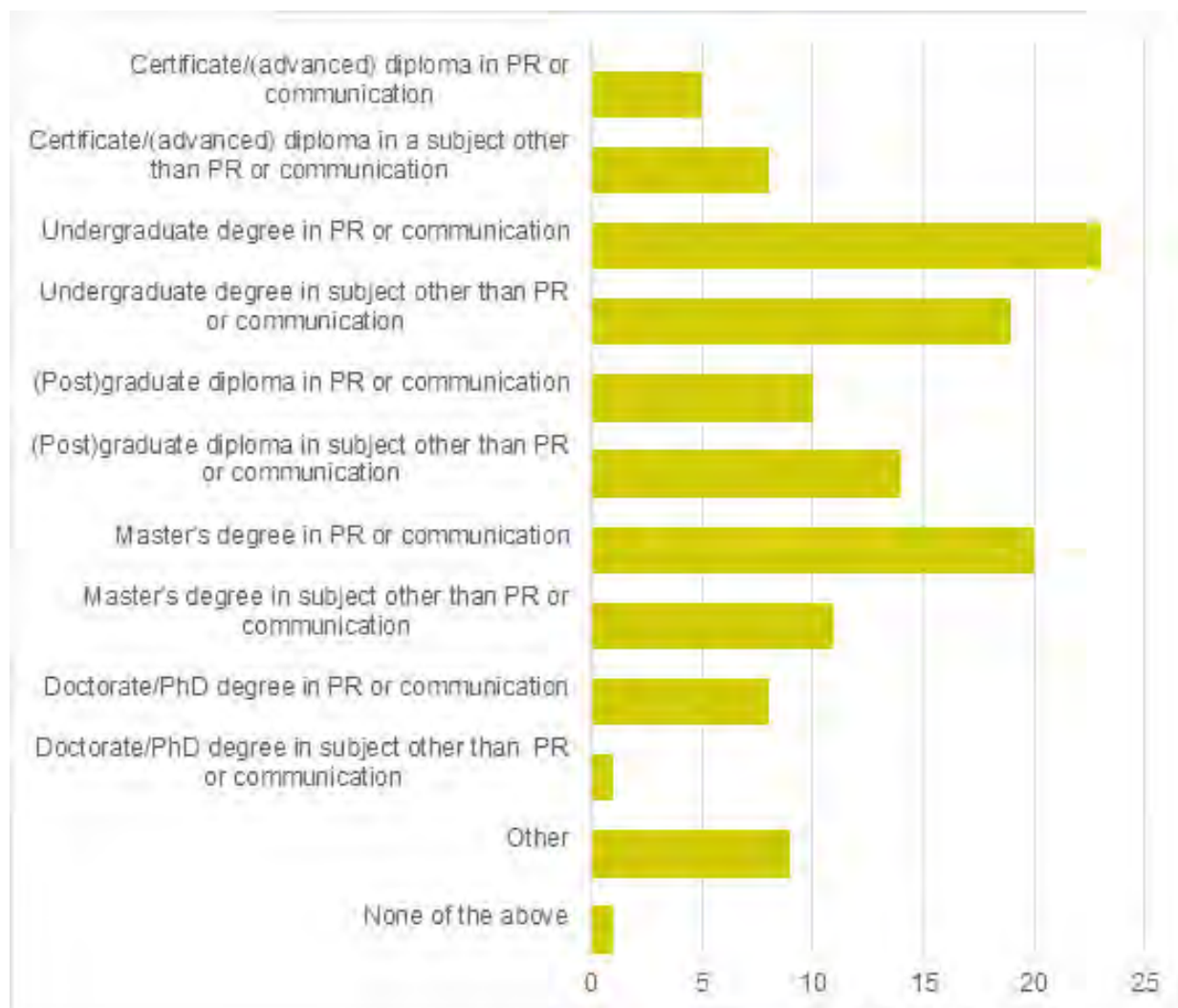


**Figure 3: Location of respondents**



Respondents were asked to identify all their educational qualifications. It is interesting to note that most reported an undergraduate and postgraduate qualification in public relations, or communication. But it is also noteworthy that a considerable number have qualifications outside public relations or communication.

**Figure 4: Type of practitioners' organisations / employment**

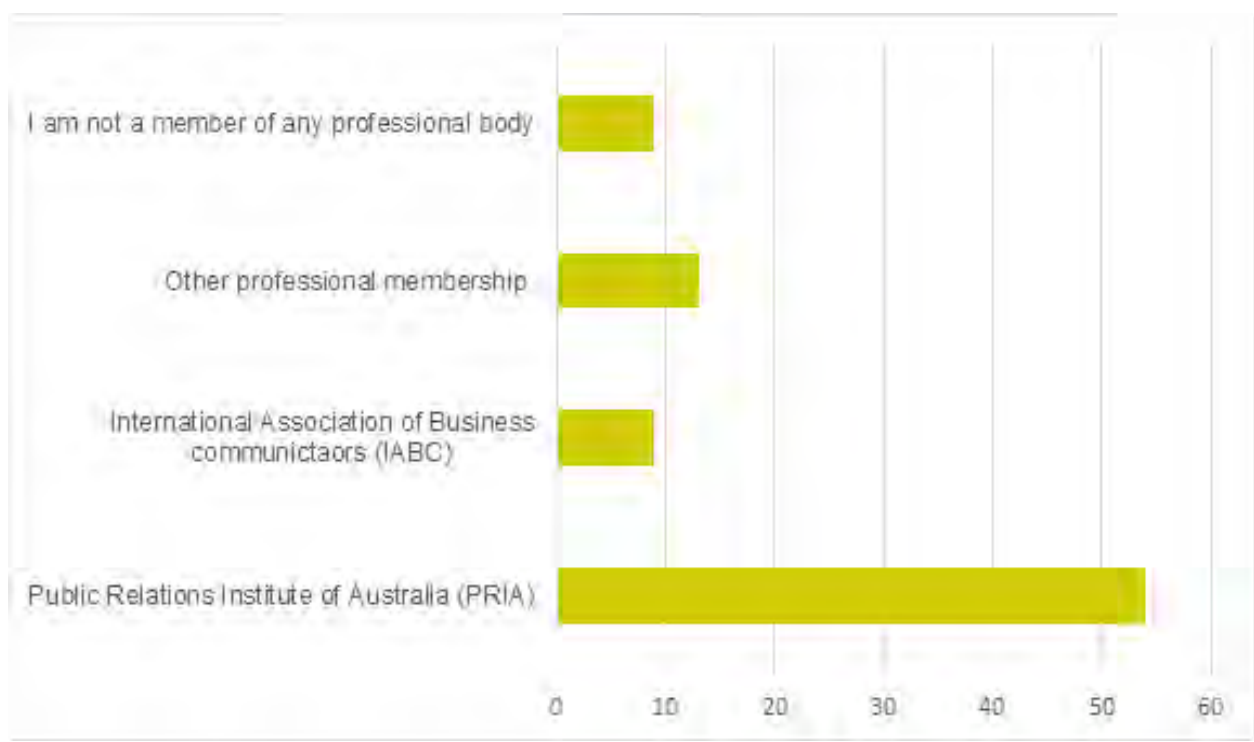


**Figure 5: Respondents' educational qualifications (multiple answers)**



Unfortunately, we were not able to determine whether the public relations/communication qualification was first completed at undergraduate or postgraduate level, nor in what discipline the other qualification might have been.

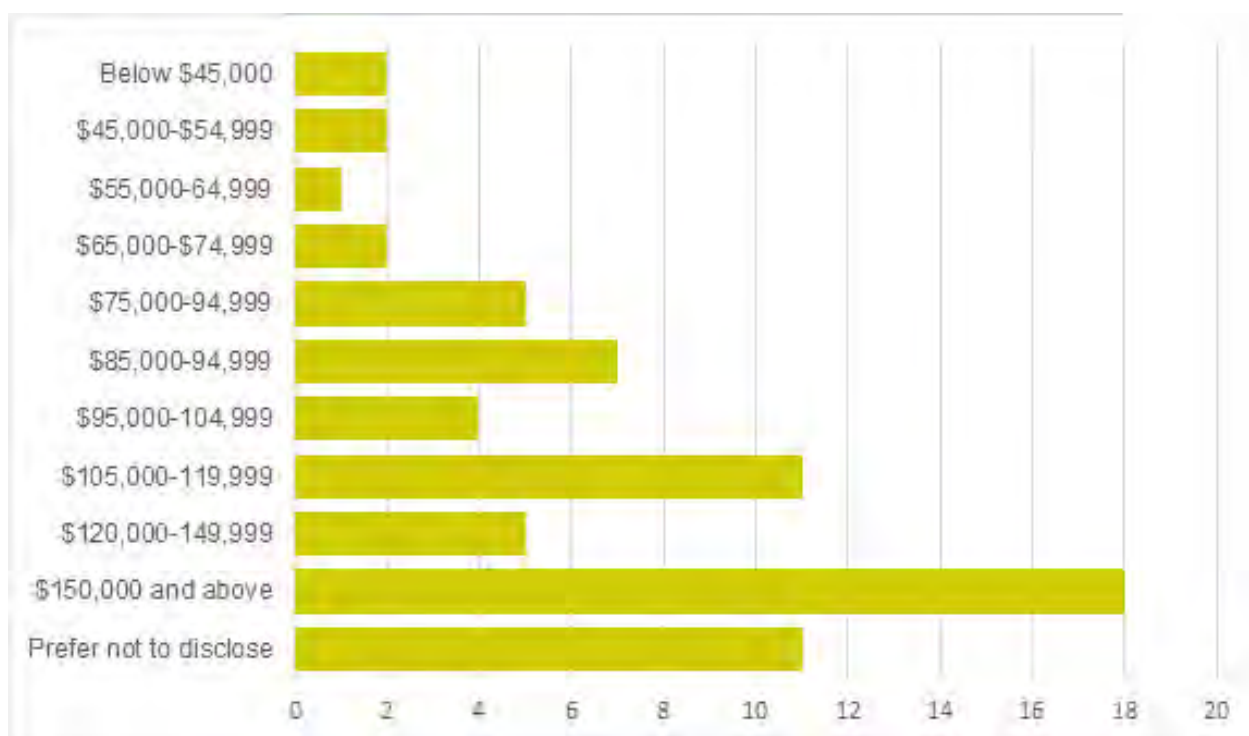
As previously mentioned, public relations and communication practitioners may be members of different professional associations. The respondents reported the associations in which they belong to in the chart below.



**Figure 6: Respondents' professional membership**

While some respondents preferred not to disclose their annual salary, those who did reported an average salary of between AU\$105,000 and 149,000.





**Figure 7: Respondents' reported annual salary**

### e. Findings

As in earlier stages of this study, there were no stand out capabilities. All ten capabilities were broadly embraced, with an approval rating (very & extremely important) between 73% and 85%. Notably, second stage results saw a greater use of the entire scale, with between two and four individuals rating some items as “not at all important”. Given the marginal differences in the level of endorsement of each capability, coupled with the reasonable but nevertheless limited number of responses, any ranking of capabilities based on level of perceived importance would arguably be meaningless – even more so given the noted variation in perceived importance among an identical group of respondents compared to the first stage of this study. In the words of one respondent: “all of these capabilities are highly and nearly equal in significance”.

When all respondents were asked to rate the level of importance of the 10 capabilities for future practice, the results showed the top three capabilities (based on their mean):

- Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights (mean= 4.43)
- Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms (mean=4.41)
- Identifying appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risks (mean= 4.38)

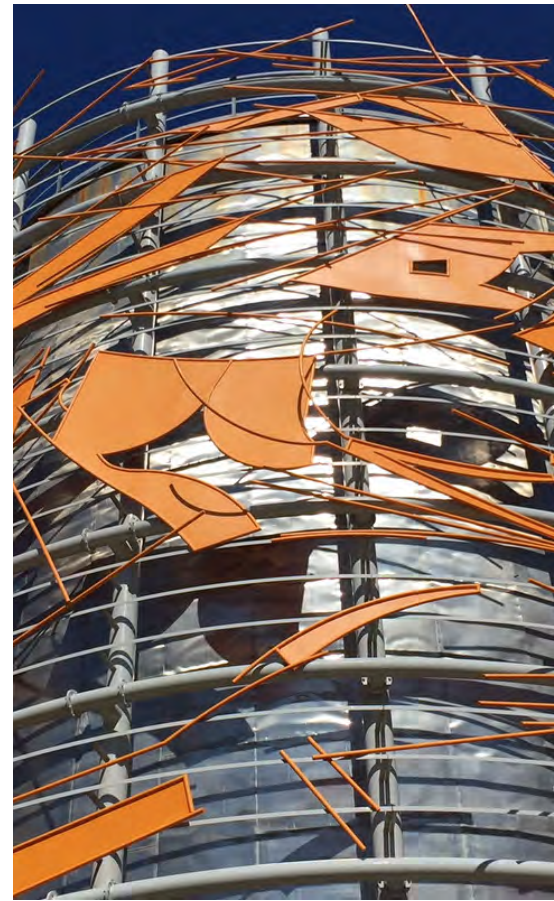
Not far behind was the capability

- Identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation (mean= 4.36).

Figure 8 shows the mean values of the respondents' perceived importance for each of the 10 capabilities.

The capability that gained the lowest rating of importance was "Advocating and advising on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices", with a mean of 4.06. An even number of respondents (7.37%) rated this item as either slightly or not at all important. Only three quarters of respondents (76.84%) rated this capability as 'very to extremely important'.

The other capability that had the second lowest rating of importance was "Demonstrating business acumen and aligning business objectives with societal benefits, and vice versa" (mean= 4.18).



Importance of capabilities N=96 (Mean)



Figure 8: Perceived importance of capabilities (mean)





When we compared the responses across the three respondent categories, we found some slight variations in terms of levels of perceived importance for future capabilities.

<b>In your opinion, how important are the following capabilities for the future (five to ten years) of the public relations and communication management profession?</b>			
	<i>Educator</i>	<i>Practitioner</i>	<i>Employer</i>
Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights	4.5	4.46	4.55
Conducting and interpreting formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making	4.43	4.32	4.27
Advocating and advising on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices	4.14	4.05	4.18
Analysing, identifying and negotiating with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs	4.36	4.38	4.27
Demonstrating business acumen and aligning business objectives with societal benefit, and vice versa	4.18	4.23	4.09
Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms	4.46	4.48	4.27
Identifying appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risks	4.36	4.48	4.27
Communicating with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world	4.32	4.25	4.27
Identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation	4.36	4.45	4.27
Building and maintaining relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork	4.21	4.32	4.27

**Table 3: Comparison of respondents’ perceived importance of future capabilities (mean)**

#### Most important capability

When asked to select the one capability which they consider to be the most important, educators, practitioners and employers consistently endorsed “Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights”, in line with the overall results.





Educators emphasised the need for formative and evaluative research skills slightly more than their industry counterparts, who in turn highlighted the ability to plan, solve problems and advise on communication messages and media platforms marginally more (ranked second and third respectively). The employer sample was the smallest overall, with n=11. Here, business acumen was emphasised when asked to select the second most important capability when building a workforce for the future. However, when asked to select the third most important capability, opinions were divided/spread across the remaining capabilities.

### Capability rated extremely important

Respondents	Most important	Second most important	Third most important
<i>Educator</i>	Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights.  Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms.	Conducting and interpreting formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.	Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights.
<i>Practitioner</i>	Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights	Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms.	Conducting and interpreting formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making.
<i>Employer</i>	Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights	Demonstrating business acumen and aligning business objectives with societal benefit, and vice versa.	Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms.  Identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation.  Building and maintaining relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork.

**Table 4: Capabilities rated as extremely important by different employment categories**



### Constraints to capabilities

For educators, the biggest hurdles, preventing incorporation of the selected capabilities in the syllabus were curriculum restrictions, followed by skills shortages among existing teaching staff. There appears to be also a (perceived) considerable resistance to implementing formative and evaluative research in particular.

Practitioners were mainly held back by pressures on time, followed by a lack of encouragement from their employer and pressure on funding. The pressure on time was echoed by employers, as well as the perceived lack of suitably qualified applicants to address existing (and future) capability gaps.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Constraints</b>	<b>Suggested solutions</b>
<b>Educators</b>	Curriculum restrictions Skill shortages among existing staff	Curriculum review Institutional support Training for teaching
<b>Practitioners</b>	Pressures on time Lack of encouragement from employer Pressures on funding	Employer support Employer funded training course Self-funded training course
<b>Employers</b>	Lack of suitably qualified applicants Pressures of time on existing staff	Reconsider recruitment policies Funds for external training Organisational support for in house training

**Table 5: Constraints & solutions identified by different employment categories**

### Solutions to address constraints

Educators identified curriculum review, institutional support and training of existing teaching staff as primary solutions to addressing their ability to teach the capabilities identified as most important over the coming 5-10 years. Practitioners equally emphasised the need for training, preferably funded by the employer, although self-funded training was rated only marginally lower, indicating a commitment to personal development. The need to secure funds for external training in order to address capabilities and anticipated capability gaps in their future workforces was echoed by employers, as well as a need to reconsider recruitment policies.



## **f. Summary**

Survey respondents in all three categories perceived all ten capabilities as very or extremely important. While a seeming consensus around the important capabilities was valuable, it equally provided challenges, resulting in an inability to highlight differences. In this regard, we would like to acknowledge 'outliers' and 'additional comments' that are also worth considering.

In terms of additional capabilities, some of the responses included:

- governance
- measurement and evaluation
- new technologies
- digital content development

We also observed that respondents appeared to struggle distinguishing between capabilities and competencies. For instance, some individuals (educator and employer category) highlighted the need for technical skills, e.g. website creation, writing or social media management, storytelling skills and corporate writing.

Highlighting governance as a key capability suggests support for the capability on advising on ethical and legal communication practices. Another suggestion was to add the word 'understanding' to the capability: 'Communicating with understanding and sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world.'

Another interesting capability suggested by one practitioner respondent was the need to effectively manage "the understanding of and respect for the public relations function by stakeholders". This comment highlights the need for practitioners (and educators) to actively manage the reputation of the profession by generating respect and recognition of public relations through their personal practice. The focus group comments further supported this.

# STAGE 3: FOCUS GROUPS/ INTERVIEWS

## a. Sampling Methodology

The aim of this stage was to capture employers, practitioners and educators from across the nation to discuss the earlier findings and encourage reflection, discussion and further guidance in reducing the capabilities to a core list of 3-4 (plus subsections).

Given the global timing requirements, we employed purposive and convenience sampling. We invited various industry professionals, representing the three employment categories, across different states and with varying levels of seniority. While some of our invitations to participate were accepted, some did not turn up at the appointed date and time. Nevertheless, we were able to organise a total of seven (7) focus group discussions. Five face to face focus groups were conducted—two in Melbourne, three in Perth—and two online focus groups were facilitated to capture perspectives from around the country.

## b. Respondent profile of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants

A total of 32 individuals participated in the seven focus groups--24 females and 8 males.

Mode	No.	Educator	Practitioner	Employer
FTF (5)	23	7	15	1
Online (2)	9	4	3	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>3</i>

**Table 6: Respondent profile of FGD participants**

We conducted five face-to-face focus groups—two in Melbourne, consisting of PRIA and IABC members and educators—and three in Perth, one organised by the PRIA State Council as part of its annual planning meeting, one bringing together WA-based educators and the third capturing industry practitioners from across a range of sectors, including consultancy, government and not-for-profit.





To capture thoughts and insights beyond Perth and Melbourne, we ran two online focus groups, comprising members of the PRIA College of Fellows (representing a cross section of the arguably most senior and respected Australian PR professionals) and members of the PRIA Education Committee, representing some of Australia's most senior educators, as well as industry practitioners, with a particular interest in professional development.

Following a guided format with some opportunity to extend discussion points, the focus groups generated robust conversations. As per ethics procedure, each participant was asked for their consent to participate and to be voice recorded.

### **c. FGD process**

At the start of each focus group, the FGD leader provided a brief background on stages 1 and 2 of the GCF project, particularly focusing on the definition of capability. This decision was made to address initial concerns, following survey respondents confusing capability and competence. We had to remind participants of the 'future orientation' of capabilities within the context of this project at various points of the FGDs.

Below are the guide questions we used in the FGDs:

1. What are your thoughts / comments and insights on the capabilities identified?  
Including your feedback / thoughts on the top three capabilities (as per current ranking and your suggested ranking /priority)
2. Are there any capabilities you'd like to add or subtract from this list?
3. How would you collapse this information into 3-4 CORE capabilities?
4. How would your institution / organisation address these capabilities in terms of training?
5. What are the barriers / opportunities to developing these capabilities?  
What might hinder or help the profession to develop these capabilities?
6. Do you believe any of these capabilities are particularly unique or relevant to Australia?
7. How could / would you use these capabilities in your work?  
In developing your team  
In developing your personal career
8. What would make the framework useful to you?



## d. Results and Analysis

Overall, FGD participants supported the capabilities approach and looked forward to the final outcome of the project. Below are some of the comments received during the focus groups:

### General comments

- The capabilities—as opposed to a ‘competencies’— framework (such as the recently launched professional framework by the PRIA) highlights the difference in emphasis between the higher education and VET sector (vocational education and training).
- The capabilities reflect a higher-level framework almost akin for a CEO. In the same vein, participants noted how only three (of a total of 10) capabilities referred specifically to communication and relationships, i.e. areas of expertise typically associated with public relations.
- Participants also questioned the reference to ‘business’ and the implied ‘commercial’ context, given that public relations practice cuts across public sector, NFP and social enterprise.
- Participants suggested capabilities not to be ranked, as they were perceived to be equally important, depending on the individual context. They were also surprised that ethics and relationships were being rated relatively low in importance. What does this mean for the profession? Some suggested that ethics and the focus on relationships may be so deeply engrained in today’s practice that practitioners may not see the urgency to mention them explicitly. However, the question arises if the low ranking actually challenges this particular view.
- Participants discussed the term ‘societal benefit’, which all seemed to agree on in terms of its importance. However, they wondered whether the capability should read “Demonstrating business acumen by aligning business objectives with societal benefit/expectations, and vice versa.”
- Participants agreed that there was too much overlap between the 10 capabilities and made suggestions on combining a few to generate key capabilities.
- Participants also mentioned the capability to stay across old, new and emerging media platforms including issues of cybersecurity.

### Training

- Participants questioned whether developing capabilities can be addressed by ‘traditional’ training, or whether they are developed over time, based on maturity, exposure and opportunity.
- Three approaches to training were offered: in house (workplace) training; professional association/education/training organisations; personal/individual development.

- In house/workplace training can include formal and informal approaches: lunch and learn sessions, team sharing/peer learning; formal and informal mentorship; debriefing after an issue/crisis by line manager; modelling behaviours to junior staff; inform/educate CEOs and senior managers about capabilities; reflective practice.
- Professional association/education/training organisations can include: seminars and workshops; unpacking/discussing case studies and identifying capabilities that were/not applied; partner with other institutions outside of public relations/communication to broaden knowledge; train the trainer (eg focus on leadership, mentoring and how to build capacity among junior staff and emerging leaders).

### Barriers to developing capabilities

Participants agreed that public relations/communication is often misunderstood by management and this limits full utilisation of capabilities. Varying perceptions of public relations (as marketing, media relations, publicity) and a broad range of practices (finance, government, consumer) appear to dilute the identity and purpose of the practice/discipline. Inadequate leadership, lack of funds, and a lack of time to learn were also mentioned as barriers to developing capabilities.

### Opportunities

Participants agreed that there is a lot of scope to develop capabilities through various methods: peer to peer learning; networking; embed in tertiary education context beyond skills training; upward influence.

Participants also reported that a capability approach is critical to strengthen their identity as professional, strategic practitioners, not simply tactical, skilled technicians. This included a personal reminder to themselves in terms of why they do what they do, ensuring they don't get 'bogged down' in tactical activities

Participants also highlighted the opportunity to 'reclaim' public relations from disciplines who have 'encroached on our space' (eg social marketing, corporate journalism).

### Australian context

Participants' comments revealed an interesting paradox: while Australia is a westernised, developed country, it prides itself of considering 'social contexts', privileging these over business and politics.

In particular, the capability that highlighted attention to 'cultural values' relates the awareness of the country as a multicultural and diverse society. One of the participants suggested however that more needs to be done in terms of integrating cultural values and cultural sensitivity in public relations practitioners' capabilities.

Participants suggested that the priority for the capabilities, not necessarily the content, may change due to cultural, geographic and legal contexts.

# SUMMARY OF COUNTRY FINDINGS

## a. Key points

Overall the project was well received and the focus on capabilities lauded. Respondents recognised the importance of capabilities in furthering the standing and reputation of the profession(s).

### *Future-oriented capabilities welcomed*

Given the recent emphasis of and focus on the PRIA initiated Professional (Competencies) Framework, participants welcomed a future-oriented conceptualisation of their profession. Participants commented that the focus on capabilities could potentially aid them in educating management about their role and the role of public relations per se, particularly in terms of addressing misconceptions. Educators commented that the comparison between the Global Capabilities and Professional Framework highlighted the differences between university and VET education, i.e. a focus on critical thinking and future oriented capabilities, vs technical abilities, which have traditionally been the focus at a vocational training level.

### *Generic capabilities: leadership communication*

Multiple participants pointed out that only three of the 10 final capabilities presented to them were communication centric. It was widely agreed that the capabilities listed broadly captured “the job description of any CEO” (in reality – and as imagined, in terms of self-attributed skill sets). Hence, questions were raised on whether – based on their generic nature – the capabilities are exclusive to PR or could cover other /related disciplines and areas of employment.

### *Broader cross-sectoral application*

In its present form, the capabilities were deemed to refer to business or commercial/private sector organisations. It was recommended to remove the reference to business as it implied the capabilities as only relevant in the commercial context. Instead it was suggested to use a broader term (e.g. organisation) to reflect the role of public relations in government, social





enterprise and not for profit. This was an interesting comment, because in our view, 'business' or financial acumen is also relevant to practitioners in the public, not for profit and even social enterprise sector. Many communication practitioners outside of the private sector have fundraising and 'partnership development' as part of their position description which requires capabilities to manage financial requirements.

#### *Relevance of 'public relations' term*

From the Delphi study (first stage) through to the focus group discussions (third stage), Australian participants questioned the use of the term 'public relations'. Three participants in the Delphi stage highlighted this in their open comments, suggesting that the term 'public relations' is dated. There seems to be a preference for 'strategic communication', 'communication management', or the broader term 'communication.'

#### *Capabilities relevant to context*

Respondents agreed that all ten capabilities, as presented, were important, but were sceptical about the value of any ranking. They noted that the order of importance would be situation specific, i.e. not just jobs specific, but dependent on individual, contextual communication challenges, projects and clients.

#### *Training for capability development*

Respondents initially questioned if capabilities could be developed via formal training, or if they develop as a result of maturity, exposure and opportunity, including reflective practice. Training was frequently associated with instructor / facilitator-centric, formal training events, as opposed to informal opportunities. This is a valuable point, which requires further unpacking. Capability development may require a program of development that involves more investment in time and resources. Given that 'lack of time' and 'lack of funding' were reported as barriers to developing capabilities, some strategic decisions need to be made to identify resources for practitioners.

#### *Informal vs formal training*

Participants suggested that informal (vs formal) training could – and should – play a more dominant role in developing capabilities. Informal training can come in the form of knowledge sharing and peer learning approaches, such as Lunch & Learn team sessions; formal and informal mentoring; and for senior practitioners modelling 'good' behaviour to junior staff. Leaders and senior staff were also expected to initiate knowledge sharing, such as line managers organising staff debriefing sessions after major issues/crisis events.



### *Professional associations' training role*

The professional bodies were also expected to play a key role in developing these capabilities. These training activities could include: the provision of case studies; show and tell type seminars with guest speakers; facilitation of mentoring programs; and a greater emphasis on train the trainer initiatives (e.g. leadership competencies & style, how to facilitate professional development of junior staff etc). Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs and requirements could be instrumental in this context, across all levels of seniority. Some of the suggestions include guidance and mentorship among peers that could focus on reflection (on mistakes/learning outcomes) rather than merely 'developing junior staff'. Comments also implied an expectation of the professional bodies to utilise the capabilities to build the reputation of the profession.

### *Broadening learning partnerships*

It was also highlighted that public relations needs to reach beyond the talent and expertise within the current network by partnering with experts who are perceived to "do it better", e.g. Innovation Centres for creative thinking skills. These cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partnerships highlight an opportunity for capability development.

## **b. Capabilities not represented**

Based on the responses in stage 2 and stage 3, respondents reported other capabilities that they felt were not represented in the ten capabilities that were developed throughout this project.

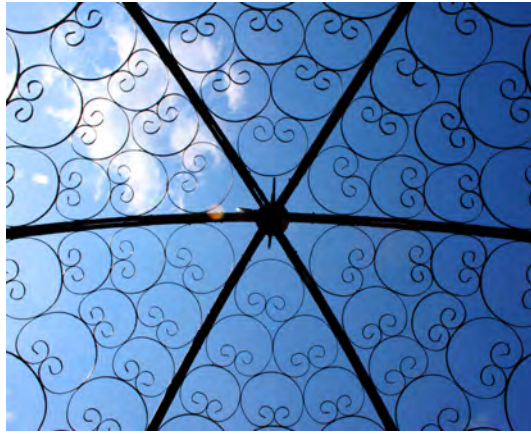
These include the following:

- governance
- measurement and evaluation
- new technologies
- digital content development
- listening and engagement
- language competency

We argue that some of these can be embedded in the capabilities as sub-capabilities, which we propose later in this report. In contrast to comments provided in the earlier stages of this research project, focus group participants appeared to be more comfortable with the concept of capabilities, straying only rarely into the domain of competencies.

## **c. Reflection / discussion**

This three-stage research project has provided interesting insights into Australian perceptions of capabilities within the public relations/communication context. The general agreement on the importance of all 10 capabilities listed indicated a consensual approach to the practice.



On one hand, this can be viewed as a 'streamlined' and 'very mainstream' view of the profession—i.e. that the educators, practitioners and employers alike are 'made from the same mould'. According to the information provided in the survey, most respondents have a qualification in public relations or communication. While some reported qualifications outside the field, these are most likely in addition to a qualification in public relations or communication. In one respect, this reveals that the Australian tertiary institutions seem to be in sync with Australian industry practice, and vice-versa.



On the other hand, this streamlined approach also limits the potential extension of public relations/communication capabilities. We also need to look at the capabilities that have been viewed as 'not important' and question why this is the case. Are they not deemed important because they are already currently in practice? Or are they deemed not important because they do not fit the communication role?

We also need to further examine why particular respondent categories highlighted certain capabilities over others. For instance, why did educators emphasise 'scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights' as most important, while none selected 'identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation' or 'communicating with sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world'?

The discussions and comments generated from this project reveal that Australian practitioners and educators are primed for capability development. Various suggestions were offered on how best to develop these capabilities, both informally and formally. Some participants have articulated how they look forward to a tool that will remind them what they do and why they do what they do; and that will help others outside the profession understand the practice of public relations better.

We think there is scope to further unpack these capabilities and explore innovative ways to embed them in our practice within our specific contexts. Aside from regional and cultural values, we might need to examine how organisational roles, seniority and organisational type might impact on capability development.

#### **d. Refining the capabilities**

Based on the above analysis, we propose the following capabilities and sub-capabilities:



CAPABILITY	SUB-CAPABILITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scanning, assessing and critically analysing the social and business environment to provide strategic insights (STRATEGIC ANALYSIS)</li> </ul>	Scan and assess the environment to provide insights
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting and interpreting formative and evaluative research to inform strategic decision-making. (RESEARCH AND EVALUATION)</li> </ul>	Develop instruments to measure and evaluate Undertake research Analyse and interpret research findings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocating and advising on ethical and legal communication practices, including questioning current practices (ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE)</li> <li>• Analysing, identifying and negotiating with appropriate internal and external stakeholders on their communication needs. (STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT)</li> </ul>	Advise ethical practice Question current practice Advocate on responsible action and communication Map and identify stakeholders Listen, understand, analyse stakeholders' communication needs Develop stakeholder engagement strategy/ies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrating business acumen by aligning business objectives with societal expectations, and vice versa. (BUSINESS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY)</li> </ul>	Demonstrate business and financial acumen Consider business objectives vis a vis societal expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning, solving problems, and advising on creative, effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms. (STRATEGIC AND CREATIVE COMMUNICATION)</li> </ul>	Plan and advise on creative solutions Advise on effective and appropriate use of communication messages and media platforms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying appropriate responses to enhance organisational reputation and minimise risks. (REPUTATION MANAGEMENT)</li> </ul>	Identify opportunities to enhance reputation Provide advice on appropriate responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating with understanding and sensitivity to cultural values and beliefs in a connected world. (GLOBAL AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION)</li> <li>• Identifying potential issues, risks and opportunities for the organisation. (RISK AND ISSUES MANAGEMENT)</li> </ul>	Understand how communication may impact on stakeholders' cultural values and beliefs Consider and be sensitive to cultural values in communication messages Identify and analyse key issues and risks for organisation. Advise on non/response strategy and implications.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building and maintaining relationships through nuanced interpersonal communication, collaboration and teamwork. (RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT)</li> </ul>	Establish and maintain regular communication with key stakeholders. Engender listening opportunities across key actors. Enable collaboration and partnerships as appropriate.





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# THANK YOU!

TO ALL THOSE WHO  
PARTICIPATED IN THIS  
PROJECT

If you wish to use the Australian framework in any future publication/report, may we please request that you use the proper citation:

Sison, M.D. & Wolf, K. (2018). Global Capabilities Framework - Australia Final Report.