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Trends in education of communication professionals: The perspective of educators and employers in Croatia

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ABSTRACT

The extremely rapid development of technology raises the importance of leaders of higher education institutions, as well as educators teaching public relations, to monitor scientific developments of the profession, market trends, and in particular, the needs of employers who will in the future employ recently educated personnel. This element is even more pronounced during times of global crisis in the communications industry where the number of jobs is decreasing, and the increase in criticism of educational institutions, which can be summarized in the claim that educational programs are not adapted to market needs. Guided by this situation, in this paper, the authors analyze the interrelationship between the academic community and employers in the communications industry, and compare their views on the issue of knowledge, skills and competencies which communication professionals must possess in order to be successful in this profession. The main research question is to what extent the views on the quality of education of future PR professionals differ from the perspective of employers and the academic community.

1. Introduction

Public relations, as a profession, is without a doubt developing rapidly and constantly. The growing impact of technology and globalization on the PR practice consequently affects educational programs that are preparing future professionals for their work posts. Chung and Choi (2012) note that, along with its development, many scholars and practitioners in this field suggest that new approaches in education should be developed for the purpose of dealing with new challenges in public relations, in terms of professionalism in the modern global society (p. 375). Educators must respond to changes that technology is bringing to the communities they serve, otherwise the academy can face the prospect of becoming irrelevant by not providing students with the skills and knowledge required by the marketplace (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). As in any profession, the connection between educators and practitioners in the field of public relations is evident, since the former prepare future professionals for their careers in practice, while the later, taking the roles of their employers, are strongly interested in preparing them as best possible. The need for consensus among scholars, educators and practitioners about an ideal public relations curriculum has been a topic of numerous debates (Sriramesh and Hornaman, 2006, p. 158). The rapid growth of the public relations profession in the last decade has caused a growing demand for public relations/communication management specialists by a number of contemporary organizations, which has led to a small expansion of studies in public relations throughout Europe (Gonçalves, 2009, p. 37). According to L'Etang (2008), education plays a very important role in the professionalization of a field by providing both the knowledge base which underpins the specialist expertise sold in the market place and both credibility and qualifications which can be used for gatekeeping purposes to achieve social closure and limit who can and cannot practice (p. 40). It is then necessary to constantly analyze the interrelationship in attitudes of

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academics and employers in the communications industry, and compare their views on concepts of education in the communication field. The purpose of research conducted in this paper is to compare the attitudes of academics and practitioners working in the field of public relations in Croatia regarding the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be able to work independently in practice. The intention of the paper is to define the interrelationship and identify possible gaps and discrepancies in attitudes between the two groups that are essential in educating future public relations professionals and nurturing them into practice. This insight will provide useful guidelines for developing a better relationship between academic institutions and organizations operating in public relations practice. In order to provide better insight and to substantiate the discussion on the obtained data, presented is a brief synthesis about the educational programs design guidelines articulated by academics, practitioners and relevant institutions.

2. Literature review

There have been numerous debates regarding the ideal concept of public relations study programs on all levels of higher education. The main question has always been directed towards defining ideal competencies that students and future professionals should have in the moment when entering public relations practice. Most significant research that led to forming precise recommendations for educational programs in this field were carried out by several Commissions on Public Relations Education that have operated from the early 1970s. Kruckeberg (1998) states that these commissions have produced a number of reports that summarized recommendations for undergraduate study programs and master degree programs in public relations (p. 235). For the purpose of this paper, work and recommendations made by these commissions can be divided in two phases; (1) from 1970 to 1999 and (2) from 1999 to 2012.

The initial Commission was formed in the early 1970s, and its 1975 report was the first *Design for Public Relations Education*. Another Commission was established in the early 1980s; in April 1985, a Commission recommended a detailed curriculum for graduate education. The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, during its first meeting in 1984, reaffirmed the 1975 recommendations until its own report could be published. The sole focus of the 1987 Commission was on the undergraduate curriculum. The 1975 Commission named specific public relations courses while the 1987 Commission addressed course content which should be covered in a comprehensive public relations program (Kruckeberg, 1998, p. 236). Auger and Cho (2013) note that the main question raised in the recommendations during the first period were related to the number of public relations courses that were offered by an institute of higher learning's public relations program since many public relations programs were offered as part of journalism and mass communication majors (p. 52). Debating about the content of these reports, Kruckeberg (1998) concluded that public relations education cannot be relegated as a subset of journalism and mass communication any more than medicine can be a subset of biology. He added that public relations must continue to use the knowledge-and-skills base of journalism and mass communication, speech/communication, the social and behavioral sciences, business administration and the liberal arts; furthermore, its education will best remain proximate if not collegially allied to these areas (p. 239).

The Commission on Public Relations Education published a series of reports between 1999 and 2012. *A Port of Entry,* first of the reports published in 1999, provided a detailed description of 12 areas of competence and 20 specific skills that students completing undergraduate degrees should possess. The Commission also emphasized that the undergraduate public relations curriculum should be grounded in a strong traditional liberal arts and social science education (Commission for Public Relations Education (CPRE), 1999, p. 2–3). The second report, *The Professional Bond*, was published in 2006. Based on five "waves" of research, the Commission concluded that there is substantial agreement between educators and practitioners on what a public relations undergraduate student should learn, and therefore be able to perform at the practitioner entry level. The report defined that writing skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, "a good attitude", an ability to communicate publicly, and initiative were the skills needed in educational programs. There was also agreement that a public relations education should include an internship, practicum or some other work experience in the field (CPRE, 2006, p. 5). This report emphasized the need to include both ethics and diversity in public relations curricula, as well as the imperative for students to be able to understand and appreciate communication technology and the societal ramifications of its use (CPRE, p. 6). The third report, *Educating for Complexity,* was published in 2012 and it focused on master degree education in Public Relations. It outlined that practitioners and educators agreed that desirable knowledge categories tended to be grouped into "strategic management", "business", "theory" and "globalization". The most highly rated knowledge category was "ethics," and the highest-rated skill was "mastery of language in oral or written form." Completing a comprehensive project was rated highest as the culminating experience for a master's degree, while practitioners and educators were split on whether a master's degree is important in hiring (CPRE, 2012, p. 8). The report emphasized the need for a mastery of language in oral and written form and agreed that a master's degree curriculum needed to include the skills of strategic planning, ethical decision-making, persuasive writing, management of communication, issues management and research (CPRE, p. 9).

Besides the Commission of Public Relations Education, there was other research conducted on this topic. Tench, Verhoeven, and Juma (2015) highlighted writing skills and critical thinking as key skills that future practitioner should have. They cite the Corporate Communications Institute's (CCI) Corporate Communication Practices and Trends 2005 study, which listed 23 separate skills that form a "skill set necessary for success as a corporate communicator in a global business environment", as well as the work of Goodman (2006), Oughton (2004), Brown & Fall (2005), McCleneghan (2006), Jeffrey & Brunton (2011) and Sha (2011), all identifying these two skills and knowledge areas as very important qualities of communication practitioners (p. 97).

Skills necessary for future public relations professionals was one of the topics of the National Communication Association's 1998 summer conference. The recommendations of this conference were, among others, directed towards the importance of technology in public relations, and noted that students should understand new technology, be able to manage communication and information technologies, integrate technology into practice and keep up to date with emerging technology (Taylor, 2001, p. 3). Furthermore,

Alexander (2004) noted Pohl and Vandeventer's (2001) discussion where they identified skills and knowledge that undergraduate US students require to "enter the workplace to be effective entry-level practitioners". There were three references to technology. The first dealt with the role of technology, and practitioners agreed there was a growing need for it, but few actually used it for anything more than distributing news, contacting the media, research, or monitoring the competition (p. 5). Tench et al. (2015) cite Szyszka's (1995) coherent grid of competencies relevant for public relations practitioners from a German perspective, in which he differentiates three categories: knowledge in the field of PR, personal attributes and general education. He offers a fuller explanation of how skills, knowledge and personal attributes contribute to competencies. The competencies depicted can be sub-classified into two categories: (1) specific qualifications – those qualifications which are directly connected to the topic of public relations; and (2) unspecific qualifications – those qualifications, like leadership, which can be seen as a core competence for PR practitioners (p. 99).

Several researches on the difference in attitudes towards the skills and knowledge necessary for future public relations professionals between academics and practitioners were conducted. Research done by Sallot, Cameron, and Lariscy (1997) and Sallot (1998) discovered distinctive and different views that academics and practitioners have about the profession. These authors came to the conclusion that, in order to improve education in this field, they have to agree and reach an agreement on professional standards in public relations and then to define the most appropriate public relations curriculum. Auger and Cho (2013) note that reports on this issue have also indicated that practitioners and educators agree that the practical skills necessary for entry-level applicants for public relations positions should include broad skills such as processing and typing, the ability to correspond via e-mail, understand the use of the Internet, conduct research, and the ability to write news releases and newsletters. Additional attributes upon which practitioners and educators agreed as desirable in entry-level candidates included having a good attitude, understanding protocol with media, and creativity and imagination (p. 53).

The debate about public relations curricula has also included the question of theory. Cheng and Gregorio's (2008) survey of public relations academics found that, although they are generally in favor of building closer ties with the industry, practitioners are considered by the academics to be indifferent to theories and academia in general (as cited in Tench et al., 2015, p. 100). This view is supported by Dozier and Lauzen (2000), who state that "the development of a curriculum primarily to meet industry demands has even resulted in a certain intellectual myopia" (p. 7). Philosophical differences between practitioners and academics have also been detected as a reason for different views on education concepts in public relations (Pieczka 2000; Moncur 2006; van Ruler 2005). From this perspective, practitioners are focused on organizational goals and achievements, while academics are more concerned with abstract concepts and understanding the fundamental issues of communication. Tench et al. (2015) also draw attention to the work of Ihlen and van Ruler (2007), Ihlen, van Ruler and Fredriksson (2009) and Ihlen and Verhoeven (2009, 2012), which emphasize that academics keep putting forward the notion that, in order for the professionalization of practice to continue, a closer connection to communication and social theory and to scientific empirical research is needed (p. 101).

3. An overview of public relations practice and academia in Croatia

To understand the public relations education perspective in Croatia, it is necessary to know the roots and basic history of its development in Croatia. Several Croatian authors, such as Tomić (2008, p. 43) and Skoko (2006, p. 15), argue that public relations was introduced in Croatia (then a part of former Yugoslavia) with the establishment of the first position with such a description in "Esplanade Hotel" in Zagreb in 1964. Until the 1990s, public relations has predominantly been developing within the tourism sector, with the exception of the food producing company "Podravka", which established a position that contained the title "public relations" in 1968 (Tomić, p. 44). Milas (2011) notes that the independence of the Republic of Croatia in 1990 made possible the development of contemporary public relations and consequently public sector communication in Croatia, since the then-Government established the first Ministry of Information in 1990. In 1992, this Ministry was abolished and the Government's "Information Office" was founded, which took over all of the former ministry's duties and tasks (Milas, 2011, p. 28). The next milestone for public relations' history in Croatia can be noticed in the formation the first professional PR association, the Croatian Public Relations Association in 1994 (Jugo, Borić, & Preselj, 2012), which became a member of International Public Relations Association in 2002. An important step for public relations in Croatia was also the establishment of the Croatian Association of Communication Consultancies, an association of professional entities specialized in public relations that soon became a member of International Communications Consultancy Organization (p. 40). Although there is no official record of the number of public relations practitioners in Croatia, it is possible to use the number of Croatian Public Relations Association members, totaling 453 in June 2016 (Croatian Public Relations Association (CPRA), 2016). It is justified to assume that the number of public relations practitioners in Croatia is substantially higher.

The rapid development of public relations from the 1990s until today was also accompanied by an increase in the offer of education. Since possibilities of education in the field of Public Relations were severely limited in early 1990's, first serious steps were conducted by Croatian Public Relations Association, which has organized annual conferences since 2000 (CPRA, 2016a).

When discussing public relations from an academic point of view, Milas (2011) notes that communication sciences or public relations in Croatia were not scientifically defined until 2008, when the Croatian National Science Council accepted the notion submitted by representatives of the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Political Science and The Center for Croatian Studies, and classified Information and Communication Sciences as an independent scientific field (instead of the former "Information Sciences"). Public relations became one of its 11 official scientific branches (p. 30).

Croatian higher education has adopted and gone through several modifications within the Bologna Treaty. Croatia signed the Treaty in 2001 and started harmonizing its study programs as of the 2005/2006 academic year, which introduced the binary system consisting of university higher education and professional higher education institutions (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports,

2016). Analysis of the study programs in Croatia shows that there are 19 study programs in 2016 in the field of communications and public relations. Only 14 of 57 study programs (24.5%) in the field of information and communication sciences, and 5 of 184 (2%) in the field of economics include the term "communications" or "public relations". Out of a total of 19 study programs, 7 of them are on the undergraduate level, 9 on the graduate level and 3 on the postgraduate level. All these programs are being conducted by 13 higher education institutions (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2016). When analyzing the nomenclature of the study programs, it is possible to detect three different groups; (1) study programs containing the term "communication science" dominantly performed by public universities, (2) study programs containing the term "public relations" and "communication management" performed by both public universities and private universities of applied sciences and colleges and (3) study programs in the fields of marketing and communications, predominantly conducted by private higher education institutions. To summarize, contemporary public relations in Croatia is very young and dates back only to the 1990s. Its rapid expansion and growth during this 25 year-period has been much faster in terms of practice than academia. The number of higher education institutions and study programs related to public relations and communication suggest that the academic area of public relations still remains at a very young stage.

4. Methodology

In this paper, a survey among staff and heads of study programs at higher education institutions was conducted with the aim of analyzing their views on priorities in the education of students. An equivalent survey of employers in the communications industry (communications agency directors, directors and heads of corporate communications) was carried out as well. The main purpose of the study was to analyze the interrelationship between the academic community and employers in the communications industry, and the comparison of their views on the issue of knowledge, skills and competencies which communication professionals must possess in order to be successful in this profession. Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to analyze what knowledge and skills are necessary for students to be able to work independently in the profession in a short time after graduation and how much time employers spend on the further education of their employees after obtaining a degree in public relations. The main research question was to what extent the views on the quality of education of future PR professionals differ from the perspective of employers and the academic community.

From the stated research objectives, the following hypotheses have emerged:

H1. As opposed to professors, employers consider that the study programs in which future communications experts are being educated are inadequate for the demands of the labor market.

H2. Employers consider that they have to set aside at least an additional year for the further education and training of employees in order for the person to be competent to independently conduct tasks after graduating.

H3. In the opinion of professors and employers, cooperation between the academic community and the market is poor.

H4. Professors consider that, in the study programs that educate communications experts, more important is the acquisition of new theoretical knowledge, while employers place more importance on practical knowledge.

The research was conducted in May 2016.

5. Sample

The research was carried out on 22 members of the academic community (staff and heads of communications study programs at higher education institution) and 22 employers in the communications industry (communications agency directors, directors and heads of corporate communications).

Participating in the research were 11 male professors and 11 female professors, of whom 22.7% have 6–10, that is, 16–20 years of experience, 18.2% have from 1 to 5 years of experience, 13.6% from 11 to 15 years of experience, that is, over 31 years of experience, while 9.6% of professors have from 26 to 30 years of experience. As for research and teaching, as well as teaching appointments, participating were 6 assistant professors, 5 associate professors, 7 lecturers, 3 senior lecturers and 1 tenured college professor (Table 1).

Among employers, participating in the research were 14 men and 8 women, of whom 13 were from public relations agencies, 8 from the corporate sector and 1 from the state and local administration. Among employers, 31.8% have from 11 to 15 years of experience, 27.3% have 6–10 years of experience, 22.7% have 16–20 years of experience, while 18.2% of respondents have from 1 to 5 years of experience.

Table 1
Years of experience.

	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	Over 31
Professors	4	5	3	5	0	2	3
Employers	4	6	7	5	0	0	0

Table 2
Alignment of study programs that educate communication professionals with labor market needs.

	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
Professors	11	9	2	22
Employers	7	13	2	22
Total	18	22	4	44

6. Results

6.1. Connecting education and the labor market

One of the key objectives of the research was to investigate whether professors at higher education institutions and employers in public relations consider that the study programs where communications experts are educated meet the demands of the labor market. The results have shown that, among employers and professors, there is no difference in opinion ($\chi^2 = 1.62$, df = 2, $p > 0.05$), whereby hypothesis 1 has been refuted. Namely, both equally agree and disagree that the study programs where communications experts are educated meet the needs of the labor market. On the other hand, both professors and employers consider work placements at higher education institutions a relevant factor in preparing students for the labor market. Responding in this manner were 95.5% of professor and 90.9% of employers. However, it is interesting that many more employers agree with the assertion that students should conduct a work placement already from their first year of study. Namely, 86.3% of employers and 45.4% of professors agree with this assertion, while 45.5% of employers and 13.6% of professors expressed firm disagreement with this assertion. The research also showed that 72.8% of professors and 90.9% of employers consider that practitioners should be involved in the teaching process from the first year of study. Furthermore, a high 95.4% of professors and 86.4% of employers consider that the work of students on projects in economic entities represents a good manner of connecting education and the labor market (Table 2).

One of the manners of connecting education and the labor market is certainly greater cooperation between the academic and business communities, especially considering informing the academic community on the needs of employers and the labor market. The results of the research have shown that, among professors and employers, there is no difference in opinion concerning whether employers should provide more information to higher education institutions on the needs of the labor market ($\chi^2 = 0.36$, df = 1, $p > 0.05$). Namely, both professors and employers consider that employers should provide more feedback to higher education institutions regarding labor market needs with the objective of affecting the development and changes to study programs (Table 3).

For the development of quality study programs that will completely prepare students for the labor market, a quality relationship between the academic and business communities is essential. Agreeing with this assertion in the research are 95.4% of professors and 95.5% of employers. For the given question, no statistically significant difference between the two groups of respondents was found ($t = 0.62$, df = 42, $p > 0.05$). Although cooperation is necessary, 59.1% of professors consider that the cooperation between the academic community and the market is poor. Agreeing with this assertion are 72.7% of employers, by which hypothesis 3 has been confirmed. Only 18.2% of professors and 13.6% of employers consider that the cooperation between the academic community and the labor market is good. In this question also, no statistically significant difference between the two groups of respondents was found ($t = 0.28$, df = 42, $p > 0.03$).

There is a statistically significant difference between employers and professor on whether higher education institutions teach students essential knowledge and skills ($t = 2.58$, df = 42, $p < 0.05$), whereby employers more often consider that students at higher education institutions do not acquire sufficient essential knowledge and skills. Namely, the research results have shown that 18.2% of professors and 36.3% of employers agree with the assertion that students do not acquire essential knowledge and skills in higher education institutions, while 54.6% of professors and 22.7% of employers do not agree with this assertion. 27.3% of professors and 40.9% of employers expressed that they neither agree nor disagree with this assertion.

The research results have shown that 63.6% of professors and an astounding 95.4% of employers fully or mostly agree with the assertion that higher education institutions are lagging regarding the process of aligning study program contents with technological advancements. Fully or mostly not agreeing with this assertion were 13.6% of professors and 4.5% of employers, while 22.7% of professors said that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the stated assertion (Table 4).

Table 3
Feedback to higher education institutions provided by employers regarding labor market needs with the objective of affecting study program development.

	Yes	No	Total
Professors	21	1	22
Employers	20	2	22
Total	41	3	44

Table 4
Connecting education and the labor market.

	Total		Employers		Professors	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Cooperation between the academic community and the market is essential.	4.75	0.719	4.82	0.853	4.68	0.568
Cooperation between the academic community and the market is poor.	3.59	1.085	3.64	0.953	3.55	1.224
Higher education institutions do not teach students essential knowledge and skills.	2.82	0.995	3.18	0.853	2.45	1.011

6.2. Competence of students for independent work in the profession

Both professors and employers consider that students need some experience in the profession in order to be able to carry out work independently. Namely, recorded were a high 27 responses from respondents that necessary for independent work in the profession is at least one or two years of experience. Between professors and employers there is a statistical difference in opinion as to when students who are enrolled at Croatian higher education institutions educating future communications experts are ready to work independently ($\chi^2 = 4.56$, df = 1, $p < 0.05$). Thereby, professors more frequently consider that students are, immediately after completion of their studies, ready to work independently, while employers more frequently consider that a certain amount of experience is required after completion of studies for communications experts to be competent to work independently, by which hypothesis 2 has been confirmed. Thereby, 7 employers consider that students are competent to work independently one year after their studies, 9 of them two years after their studies, while 3 employers consider that individuals are competent to work independently only after 5 years of working in the profession. Only three employers consider that students, already during their studies or immediately after completion of their studies, are competent to work independently. On the other hand, 9 professors agree with this, while 8 of them believe that students are competent to work independently after working for one year in the profession, 3 professors consider that they are competent two years after completing their studies, while only one professor considers that, in order to work independently, required are five years of work in the profession. The research results also show that, the larger the employer, the more time it is considered is required for students to be competent to work independently. Among professors, no correlation between years of experience and responses from respondents was noticed concerning the question of when students who are educated at Croatian higher education institutions educating future communications experts are competent to work independently.

The stated statistical difference was also confirmed by an additional question in which professors and employers had to express their level of agreement with the assertion that, upon completion of studies, employers must set aside at least one more year for the further education and training of the employee in question, upon completion of studies, to be competent to carry out tasks independently ($t = 2.10$, df = 42, $p < 0.05$). Thereby, employers agree more with the stated assertion than professors. Namely, agreeing fully, that is, partially with this assertion are 59.1% of professors and 81.8% of employers, 18.1% of professors and 9.1% of employers did not agree, while 22.7% of professors and 9.1% of employers neither agreed nor disagreed with the stated assertion (Table 5).

Professors who stated that students are competent to work independently after at least a year of experience upon completion of studies, among the knowledge and skills that they consider are lacking most in such individuals, that is, areas in which employers must train them most, professors most frequently emphasized the lack of practical experience and coping in concrete, real situations, overcoming stress and unforeseen circumstances. Like professors, employers also stated that students do not know how to practically apply acquired knowledge, as well as how to cope with stressful situations at work, however, compared to professors, many employers emphasized that students were ready to work independently only after at least a year's experience in the profession due to a lack of knowledge of strategic thinking and planning. As reason for this, employers also stated the lack of knowledge of media and how the market operates, that is, the industries in which they are working, methods of dealing with clients and working as part of a team.

6.3. Ratio between theory and practice in study programs

As was shown in the theory section of the paper, discussions are frequently held on the ratio of theory and practice in study programs at which future communications experts are educated. Despite the frequent belief that professors who teach at such faculties and employers do not agree on the ratio of practice and theory, the results of this research have shown that there is no

Table 5
Competence of students from Croatian higher education institutions that educate future communications experts to work independently.

	During or immediately upon completion of studies	After some experience (1, 2 or 5 years)	Total
Professors	9	12	21
Employers	3	19	22
Total	12	31	43

Table 6
Ratio between theory and practice in study programs that educate communication experts.

	Theory		Practice	
	M	SD	M	SD
Employers	51.36	11.77	48.64	11.77
Professors	55.24	12.99	44.76	12.99
Total	53.26	12.39	46.74	12.39

significant difference. Namely, in the opinion of professors, the ideal study program for communications experts must contain 55% theoretical and 45% practical subjects. Employers are of a similar opinion, considering that the ideal study program consists of 51% theoretical and 49% practical subjects, whereby hypothesis 4 has been refuted (Table 6).

Multivariate analysis of variance has shown that, regarding opinion on the ratio between theoretical and practical subjects in study programs that educate communications experts, there is no difference between professors and employers (Pillai's trace = 0.03, $p > 0.05$; Wilks' Lambda = 0.98, $p > 0.05$; Hotelling's Trace = 0.03, $p > 0.05$; Roy's largest root = 0.03, $p > 0.05$). The stated results are further confirmed with the *t*-test – both employers and professors give equal importance to theory ($t = 1.03$, $df = 41$, $p > 0.05$) and practice ($t = 1.03$, $df = 41$, $p > 0.05$), that is, it has been shown that both professors and employers equally assess the value of theory and practice in study programs where future communications experts are educated. Further analysis has shown that female professors and male employers allot greater importance to theory, while professors and women employers allot greater importance to practice.

6.4. Key skills and knowledge of communications experts

On the basis of the report by the Commission for Public Relations Education (1999), Commission for Public Relations Education (2006), Commission for Public Relations Education (2012) and Commission for Public Relations Education (2015), singled out are the key skills and knowledge that communications experts should possess, among which employers had to single out five skills and knowledge that are, in their opinion, most important. There is a significant difference between them – while academics give the advantage to broader knowledge, employers demand very specific and concrete communications skills that can be immediately applied. Namely, among key skills, professors singled out oratory skills and public speaking skills, writing skills, social intelligence, creativity at work, the ability to use new technologies and ethics. Employers, like professors, singled out writing skills, social intelligence and the ability to use new technologies. On the other hand, in addition to the stated skills, employers singled out analytical skills and knowledge and knowing the techniques and tools of communication.

7. Conclusion

The development of technology that imposes constant changes in the communications industry, but also the ever greater need for communications experts, has resulted in an ever greater number of higher education institutions where future communications experts are educated. Their quality and success particularly depends on the content of study programs and their success in preparing future experts for the labor market. An important role in the education process is played by professors lecturing at higher education institutions and transferring theoretical knowledge to students, and on the other hand, employers who, with the object of educating future experts as best as possible, must cooperate with education institutions, providing them feedback on the needs of the labor market, as well as transferring to them valuable practical knowledge and experience acquired through many years in the communications industry. With the objective of establishing quality higher education institutions where future communications experts will be educated and who will be competent to independently carry out tasks, necessary is the following:

7.1. Cooperation between educational institutions and the labor market

The organization of round tables, seminars and conferences where members of the academic community and business community will exchange experiences and knowledge every year is a key precondition for developing quality study programs.

7.2. Equal ratio of theory and practice

With the objective of the best possible education of future communications experts and in order to reduce the time employers must set aside for further education and training of students after completion of studies, it is necessary to develop study programs that will consist of an equal number of theoretical and practical subjects. In this manner, students, already from their first day of studies, will have the opportunity to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge that is necessary in order for students to immediately, upon completion of studies, have the capacity to perform tasks independently.

7.3. Involve PR practitioners in the work of higher education institutions

Quality study programs are, first and foremost, those programs that respond to the requirements of the labor market and that prepare students, already during their studies, for real situation they will face in the workplace. This, first of all, means that employers must be involved in the process of developing study program curricula, as well as in the teaching process itself, primarily in practical subjects.

7.4. Work placements with employers

Although practical subjects at higher education institutions are an excellent way for students to apply theoretical knowledge on practical examples, conducting concrete tasks in real situations, working in teams and stressful situations are something that students can experience only through real work with an employer over a certain period of time. In this manner, students acquire proper work habits already during their studies. With the objective of the best possible education, it is necessary for the work placement to begin already in the first year of study. Students can also gain practical experience by working on projects in economic entities, which is, furthermore, an excellent manner of connecting education and the labor market.

The hectic times in which we are living, especially in the business world, require the education of experts who will, immediately upon completion of studies, be competent to conduct tasks independently. This is possible only through cooperation between the academic and business community, that is, through quality education, where students will acquire all of the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge.

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