

ABSTRACT

The primary aims of this research were, firstly, to examine the professionalisation of public relations, and, secondly, to determine if there was a practical means by which those in the Irish industry might advance their own professional standing.

To that end two distinct literature reviews were conducted: the first, to provide a commonly agreed definition of a profession, and to consider in detail the particular challenges for public relations in light of that definition; the second, to understand the nature and scope of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and the extent to which it is believed to provide a path to professional status.

A comparative study of a number of public relations representative organisations and other professional bodies was undertaken to see if, and how, they had implemented credentialing and CPD, and the forms any implementations had taken. It is clear, from both the study and the prior literature review, that Continuing Education (CE) is regarded as a key signifier of professionalism, and that, more particularly, CPD has become the *de facto*, and in some cases the *de jure*, means by which competence to practice is demonstrated. The study also highlights issues encountered by some of the public relations representative bodies, most notably that of low member engagement.

An in-depth quantitative survey of Irish practitioners and two qualitative semi-structured interviews of individuals connected with the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII) were conducted to determine if the collective will and leadership exists for the introduction of CPD. Both are demonstrably present.

In the Irish context the conclusion was reached that CPD does offer an opportunity to further professionalisation, and that the PRII, in lagging behind its peers in public relations and the professions, should make CPD a priority. Several recommendations are made in respect of the nature, scope, timing and governance of a credentialing and CPD framework, and the role of senior practitioners and academic institutions.

In addition, the challenges to professionalisation identified in the initial literature review were revisited, and suggestions are offered as to how CPD might mitigate some of those challenges, with particular reference to the primary research.