

Public relations professional training interface. Comparative study

Interfaz de formación profesional de relaciones públicas. Estudio comparativo

Interface de formação profissional em relações públicas. Estudo comparativo

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ABSTRACT | We adopt an approach that views the education system as an interface of relationships, where individuals and technology interact, to examine the development of professional Public relations (PR) training competencies. The main objective is to analyze the academic offer of postgraduate courses in Ecuador (16), Spain (14) and Argentina (6), from a theoretical and empirical point of view, including the expected competencies, areas of performance and graduate profiles, especially in the context of changes in the field. The methodology includes a documentary and bibliographic review, an analysis of academic programs in the thirty-six main universities, and a review of the main trends in communication management from secondary sources such as industry associations. The findings highlight the predominance of digital and business approaches in the programs of the three countries. In addition, it is found that only a minority of master's programs in communication are clearly focused on public communication or the third sector. Argentina and Spain lead the way in teaching skills in PR, while Ecuador has a stronger focus on digital and technological communication. In summary, this study highlights the dispersion in the approaches of academic programs, which makes it difficult to achieve specific goals and skills for PR. Furthermore, it highlights the need to balance the focus on strategy in academic training in PR. The competencies of management, strategic thinking and action, as well as the organization and implementation of internal and external communication, are associated with high performance in the study programs examined.

KEYWORDS: professional training, competencies, public relations, Ecuador, Spain, Argentina.

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RESUMEN | Con base en el enfoque que considera al sistema educativo como una interfaz de relaciones, en el que individuos y tecnología interactúan, para explorar el desarrollo de competencias de formación profesional en las Relaciones públicas (RR.PP.). El objetivo es analizar la oferta académica de posgrado en Ecuador (16), España (14) y Argentina (6) desde perspectivas teóricas y empíricas, incluyendo competencias esperadas, áreas de desempeño y perfiles de egreso, en el contexto de las transformaciones en la especialidad. La metodología involucra una revisión documental y bibliográfica, el análisis de programas académicos en 36 universidades y una revisión de las principales tendencias en gestión de comunicación a partir de fuentes secundarias, como asociaciones del sector. Los resultados destacan la predominancia de enfoques en áreas digitales y empresariales en los programas de los tres países. Se observa además que solo una minoría de programas de maestría en Comunicación se orienta claramente hacia comunicación pública o al tercer sector. Argentina y España lideran en el cumplimiento de competencias en RR.PP., mientras que Ecuador muestra un enfoque mayor en la comunicación digital y tecnológica. En conclusión, este estudio subraya la dispersión en los enfoques de los programas académicos que dificultan el logro de objetivos y habilidades específicas para las RR.PP. Asimismo, resalta la necesidad de equilibrar la atención hacia la estrategia en la formación académica en esta área. Las competencias de gestión, pensamiento y acción estratégica, así como la organización y ejecución de la comunicación interna y externa, destacan como asociadas a áreas de alto desempeño en los programas analizados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: formación profesional, competencias, Relaciones públicas, Ecuador, España, Argentina

RESUMO | Com base na abordagem que considera o sistema educacional como uma interface de relacionamentos, no qual indivíduos e tecnologia interagem, para explorar o desenvolvimento de competências de formação profissional em Relações Públicas (RP). O objetivo é analisar a oferta acadêmica de pós-graduação no Equador (16), na Espanha (14) e na Argentina (6) a partir de perspectivas teóricas e empíricas, incluindo as competências esperadas, as áreas de atuação e os perfis dos graduados, no contexto das transformações da especialidade. A metodologia envolve uma revisão documental e bibliográfica, a análise de programas acadêmicos em 36 universidades e uma revisão das principais tendências em gestão da comunicação com base em fontes secundárias, como associações do setor. Os resultados destacam a predominância de abordagens nas áreas digitais e de negócios nos programas dos três países. É observado também que apenas uma minoria dos programas de mestrado em Comunicação está claramente orientada para a comunicação pública ou para o terceiro setor. A Argentina e a Espanha lideram no cumprimento das competências nas RP, enquanto o Equador mostra um foco maior na comunicação digital e tecnológica. Em conclusão, este estudo destaca a dispersão nas abordagens dos programas acadêmicos que dificultam obter objetivos e habilidades específicos para RP. Também ressalta a necessidade de equilibrar o foco para a estratégia na formação acadêmica nessa área. As competências de gestão, pensamento e ação estratégica, bem como a organização e execução da comunicação interna e externa, destacam-se por estarem associadas a áreas de alto desempenho nos programas analisados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: formação profissional, competências, relações públicas, Equador, Espanha, Argentina.

INTRODUCTION

The educational system in general, but also at a disciplinary level, could be analyzed in the sense of Scolari (2018) as an interface of relations, a place where subjects and technology interact, from a macro perspective of course. This would allow us to reflect on how the professional field and the academic field, in this case public relations, are being reconfigured as a result of the transformations we are experiencing (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2021; Zerfass et al., 2022). In general, in this article we prefer to use the term public relations synonymously to refer to this field of study and the profession, which is also referred to as strategic communication, organizational communication, institutional communication, business communication, corporate communication, etc. This aspect has been discussed in academia for a long time (Contreras Delgado & Garibay Rendón, 2020; Rebeil, 2018; Krohling-Kunsch, 2017/2014/1997; Pérez, 2015; Míguez González, 2013; Van-Ruler and Věrcic, 2004; Van Riel, 2003; among others) and it is not our aim to close this debate. On the contrary, it is also to identify similarities and tensions in the naming modes. The decision (which responds rather to writing criteria) is justified by taking the name of the main European association for research and education in the field as a reference: European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA); and the debate on the situation in Latin America held within the International Communication Association (ICA), such as the one recently held in 2023 in a pre-conference: "Organizational Communication and Public Relations Dis/encounters: a dialogue from Latin America" (<https://www.redlaco.org/pre-conference>).

This research continues previous efforts (Cisternas et al., 2022) to comparatively analyze, at a theoretical level (definition of competencies and regulatory frameworks) and at an empirical level (academic programs and trends), the main academic offerings for postgraduate students in Ecuador, Spain and Argentina, along the following dimensions: skills development, achievement areas and graduate profiles.

The countries were selected at the researchers' discretion (by convenience), taking into account a highly developed professional market and academic sector (Spain), one in advanced development (Argentina) and a third country with an emerging educational and professional offer (Sadi & Álvarez-Nobell., 2024). The public relations profession requires new skills and reconfigures its meaning in new professional scenarios (Adi, Stoeckle and Arzuaga 2023). These are areas that in many cases go beyond the traditional work of the professional field and are subject to the demands of the context and/or the changing and complex environment that surrounds the dynamics of the profession (Zerfasset al., 2020).

With this in mind, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. What challenges do Argentine, Ecuadorian, and Spanish higher education institutions face in terms of training and skills development in postgraduate public relations programs? and

RQ2. What are the similarities and differences in existing postgraduate programs in each country's academic offerings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational interfaces for the development of professional skills in public relations

According to Scolari (2018), an interface is a space or meeting point where human subjects and technology interact and where connections and relationships are established between the two in a given context. In the context of the education system, Scolari's concept of interface can be applied under the term personalization of learning. Interfaces can be used to adapt learning to the needs of students or to the demands of work. Through the collection and analysis of data, interfaces can provide personalized content and activities that match the level and learning style of the individual learner, the general context, or even specific professional requirements. The design (or redesign) of these interfaces can significantly impact the way learning takes place and facilitate interaction between educational and professional environments. This is particularly important if we locate education at a regional level and at the same time seek to engage epistemologically with prevailing trends (global North) (Barbero, 2002; Álvarez-Nobell, et al 2023).

Although the perspectives of Scolari and Bourdieu come from different theoretical approaches, it is possible to relate the concept of interface to field theory (Bourdieu, 1991; 1984) when applied to the field of public relations. Interfaces play an important role in interaction, skill development and legitimacy building in the field. If we understand the field as the social space in which PR practitioners, organizations, media and other actors interact and compete for resources and recognition, then the development of interfaces is key to competence development. In Bourdieu's theory, actors in a field compete for access to and control of different forms of capital, such as cultural, social and economic capital. Educational interfaces can be vehicles for access to these capitals. Furthermore, Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital', which refers to the ability to influence social perceptions and representations, is also key to understanding the dynamics of power and legitimacy in a field. Educational interfaces can influence the distribution of power by providing certain actors with a set of competencies that facilitate professional recognition.

The notion of competence

At the academic level, the concept of 'competence' is inextricably linked to the need to homologate degrees issued by universities, which obliges these institutions

to define precisely the profile of graduates (Gimeno, 2008). The Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) offers a definition adapted to this context, alluding to "expertise, aptitude or suitability to do something or intervene in a specific matter" (RAE, 2022). This implies that the concept of competence is rooted in the sphere of professional training, where it is not only possessed or acquired, but also demonstrated and put into practice to meet specific demands. (Gimeno, 2008, p. 37).

Carretón-Ballester and Lorenzo-Sola (2020) see competences as a set of attributes, skills and attitudes that complement the professional competences acquired in the academy. Pereda and Berrocal (2001) argue that competence-based training is based on active and participatory methodologies.

According to Rychen and Tiana (2004), competence is a holistic concept that integrates external demands, personal attributes and the context in which it is developed. In this sense, a competence must respond to specific demands in specific situations, making use of personal and professional attributes in a given context.

In the academic field in Spain, Organic Law 3/2022 on Vocational Training defines basic competences as those necessary for personal development, active participation in society and improved employability, while professional competences refer to the set of knowledge and skills necessary to carry out a professional activity (BOE, 2022). These academic competences are meaningful when there is a real and concrete demand in the labour market (Gimeno, 2008).

Tobón (2006) provides a general classification of competences that includes basic or instrumental competences, generic or transversal competences and specific competences. These categories are essential for getting by in life, for carrying out activities in different professional fields and for dealing with technical aspects directly related to the occupation (Tobón, 2006; Armendáriz, 2015; Álvarez-Nobell, Castillo-Esparcia & Ruiz-Mora, 2022)

The development of professional skills in the field of public relations

The pandemic has accelerated significant changes in society, including how people communicate and how organisations manage their communications. This has led to an increase in the professionalisation of the communications function and a debate about the skills needed for future public relations roles.

The educational system, both in general and at the disciplinary level, can be understood as an interface of relationships where individuals and technology interact and reconfigure themselves in response to current transformations (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2021; Zerfass et al., 2022), which poses challenges for the training of public relations and communication skills.

The debate about the competencies needed for public relations practitioners is an active and evolving research topic (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Verhoeven et al., 2011; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Zerfass y Franke, 2013; Fieseler et al., 2015; Tench & Moreno, 2015; Falkheimer et al., 2017; Baquerizo, Vélez, & Yaguache, 2018). Studies have also been carried out on communication skills from the perspective of university students (Sierra, 2010; Casero, Ortells and Doménech, 2013; Mellado et al., 2013) and in the field of journalism (Murciano, 2005; Scolari et al., 2008; García y Martínez, 2009; González-Molina y Ortells-Badenes, 2012; Micó et al., 2012).

In 2018, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management established a global competency framework for the public relations and communication management profession that encompasses communication skills, proactive communication issues, organisational skills, professional skills and expectations (Baquerizo-Neira & Sadi, 2019). Meng (2015) proposed a competency development model for PR leaders based on dimensions such as self-management, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making and effective communication.

In Europe, research suggests a new systematisation of professional roles in public relations (Zerfass, Verčič & Volk, 2017) and the European Communication Monitor identifies five main roles that practitioners can play: Communicator, Ambassador, Manager, Coach and Advisor (Zerfass et al., 2021). However, the ever-changing nature of the discipline requires ongoing research to explore differences between organisations, countries and genders (Zerfass & Volk, 2017).

The Latin American Communication Monitor identifies five clusters of competencies: communication, business, management, technology and data (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2021).

In Ecuador, Baquerizo-Neira and Sadi (2018) found that the profile of the public relations practitioner includes three types of skills: Strategic communication skills, operational communication skills and generic skills of the professional.

In summary, the concept of competence in public relations is a widely debated and constantly evolving issue, with different perspectives and approaches at global and regional levels. Competency education is adapting to changes in society and the discipline, and practitioners need to reflect on their roles and the competencies needed to advance their development.

Public relations of the future

The recent study by Adi and Stoeckle (2023) states that public relations should be: (a) stakeholder-oriented; (b) knowledge-based, research-based, measurable

and evaluable; (c) long-term oriented; (d) persuasive; (e) action-oriented; (f) committed; (g) accountable; and (e) transparent. They also argue that,

The social identity of public relations must be reclaimed so that it is more than a function that seeks to establish itself as a strategic partner at the round table of any organisation, but rather as a vehicle of empowerment, capable of embracing change and becoming the driving force of ethical debate. (Ady Stoeckle, 2023, p. 76).

Furthermore, Gregory, Valian, and Virmani (2023), in their recent report CIPR/ Humans needed, more than ever, state that the more person-centred the discipline of public relations, the less assistance artificial intelligence will be needed. However, these authors argue that it is necessary for PR professionals to have basic knowledge of the tool and apply it in their professional work, because it has been found that tasks such as: "data analysis and social media management have a higher degree of assistance from AI tools, 53.4% and 53.7% respectively". Whereas, "personnel management, coaching and the application of ethical principles have almost zero AI assistance" (Gregory, Valian and Virmani, 2023, p.5).

METHODOLOGY

The questions we posed in this research are:

RQ1. What are the challenges for the Argentinean, Ecuadorian and Spanish academia in terms of postgraduate training and competence development in the field of public relations? and

RQ2. What are the similarities and differences in the postgraduate courses offered in the academic offerings of each country?

In addition to a documentary review (curricula published on websites, the graduate profile and the programme's statement of competences or objectives), qualitative content analysis techniques were used to identify similarities and differences between postgraduate provision in the three countries (Gibbs, 2013; Rivero, 2017). The process followed is described in figure 1 (next page).

The following parameters were considered in the selection of universities:

1. Official and university postgraduate programmes.
2. Postgraduate degrees in communication with different focuses (e.g. digital, political, business communication, etc.); or degrees in public relations and related disciplines. The 36 universities selected include: 14 Spanish, 16 Ecuadorian and 6 Argentinean.

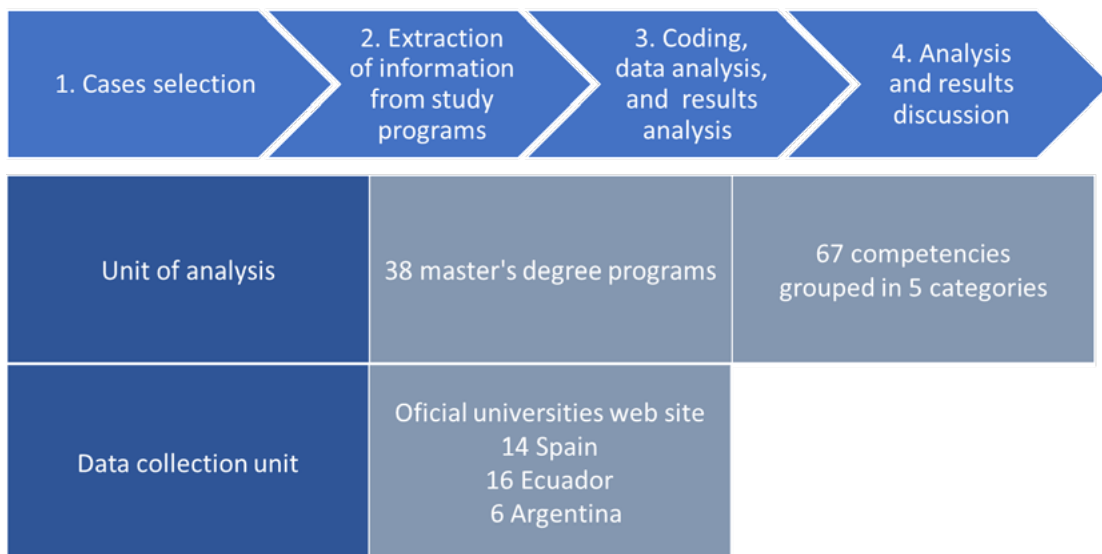


Figure 1. Investigation phases

Source: Own elaboration

The 36 universities selected are 14 Spanish, 16 Ecuadorian and 6 Argentinean. It should be noted that the Spanish Universities of Nebrija and Rey Juan Carlos have two programmes in Public Relations with different degrees¹, making a total of 38 postgraduate programmes for the analysis; in other words, the universe of data used for the analysis (see Table 1).

Data extraction took place in February 2023. After data extraction, coding and analysis took place in March and April 2023. The data analysed from the programmes were: the curricula published on the websites, the graduate profile and the programme's statement of competences or objectives. For the content analysis we used the competence matrix proposed by Cisternas, Baquerizo-Neira, Cordero, Fernández-Hernández, y Álvarez-Nobell, (2022)².

1. The programmes of the Rey Juan Carlos University are: University Master's Degree in Protocol, Communication and Integral Organisation of Events and University Master's Degree in Management, Organisation and Production of Corporate and Institutional Events; the programmes of the U. Nebrija are: University Master's Degree in Political Communication and Crisis and Emergency Management and Master's Degree in Organisation and Management of Events: University Master's Degree in Political Communication and Crisis and Emergency Management and Master's Degree in Event Organisation and Management.

2. The authors propose an analysis matrix based on professional sources, which has five categories and 13 subcategories (Cisternas Osorio et al., 2022).

N°	Coding	Country	Institution
1	1ES	Spain	ESIC University
2	2ES	Spain	Universidad Complutense de Madrid
3	3ES	Spain	Universidad de Cádiz
4	4ES	Spain	Universidad de La Laguna
5	5ES	Spain	Universidad de Málaga
6	6ES	Spain	Universidad de Navarra
7	7ES	Spain	Universidad de Sevilla
8	8ES	Spain	Universidad Europea Madrid
9	9ES	Spain	Universidad Nebrija
10	10ES	Spain	Universidad Pompeu Fabra-Barcelona School of Management
11	11ES	Spain	Universidad Rey Juan Carlos
12	12ES	Spain	Universidad Rovira i Virgili
13	13ES	Spain	Universidad San Jorge
14	13ES	Spain	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
1	1EC	Ecuador	Universidad Técnica del Norte
2	2EC	Ecuador	Universidad Católica Santiago de Guayaquil
3	3EC	Ecuador	Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador
4	4EC	Ecuador	Universidad Tecnológica Ecotec
5	5EC	Ecuador	Universidad Casa Grande
6	6EC	Ecuador	Universidad Técnica de Ambato
7	7EC	Ecuador	Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena
8	8EC	Ecuador	Universidad Particular San Gregorio de Portoviejo
9	9EC	Ecuador	Universidad Técnica del Cotopaxi
10	10EC	Ecuador	Universidad Hemisferios
11	11EC	Ecuador	Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja
12	12EC	Ecuador	Universidad Tecnológica Ecotec
13	13EC	Ecuador	Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí
14	14EC	Ecuador	Universidad de Cuenca
15	15EC	Ecuador	Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar
16	16EC	Ecuador	Universidad Politécnica Salesiana
1	1AR	Argentina	Universidad Argentina de la Empresa
2	2AR	Argentina	Universidad Católica de Salta
3	3AR	Argentina	Universidad Nacional de Rosario
4	4AR	Argentina	Universidad CAECE
5	5AR	Argentina	Universidad UCES
6	6AR	Argentina	Universidad Nacional de San Luis

Table 1. List of the universities included in the sample:

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS

After analysing the results, it can be seen that dealing with technological aspects and managing data and information is the category that stands out among all those analysed. Spain (ES) leads with 58.75%, followed by Ecuador (EC) with 57.5%, while Argentina (AR) scores 36.67%. These results are in line with the predominant focus of postgraduate programmes in Ecuador, which are mainly focused on digital communication and technology (see Table 2).

	CATEGORY: Managerial competences of strategic thinking and action		CATEGORY: Competences in organising, creating and executing internal and external communication		CATEGORY: Commercial and business understanding and action competences		CATEGORY: Competences in handling technological tools, data, information and knowledge management.		CATEGORY: Generic competences of university education and professional context in the area of communication.	
Total number of contests per category	21		18		6		5		17	
	No. of compet. fulfilled per category	% Over the total of comp.	Nº compet. fulfilled by category	% Over the total of comp.	Nº compet. fulfilled by category	% Over the total of comp.	Nº compet. fulfilled by category	% Over the total of comp.	Nº compet. fulfilled by category	% Over the total of comp.
	4,74	22,56%	4,74	26,32%	0,97	16,23%	2,74	54,74%	4,29	25,23%
Average compliance by category Argentina	9,33	44,44%	5,83	32,41%	1,50	25,00%	1,83	36,67%	4,33	25,49%
Average compliance by category Ecuador	4,25	20,24%	5,50	30,56%	0,94	15,63%	2,88	57,50%	1,94	11,40%
Promedio de cumplimiento por categoría España	3,50	16,67%	3,56	19,79%	0,81	13,54%	2,94	58,75%	6,63	38,97%

Tabla 2. Overall compliance by country in the five categories analysed

Source: Own elaboration

There is a slight difference in the level of compliance between the category "competences in organising, creating and implementing internal communication" and the category "generic competences of university education and professional context in the field of communication". The former is 26.32% and the latter 25.23% for the five countries analysed (see Table 2).

The category of competences with the lowest level of achievement in the postgraduate programmes in the three countries is related to the commercial

and financial understanding and action of organisations. This competence is also not observed in the framework of competencies for the profession at a global level, proposed by the Global Capabilities in PR and Communication Management (2018).

Results of the subcategories analysed

According to the analysis of the correspondence of the postgraduate programmes with the five categories³, the subcategory 'technological management' includes competences that describe the professional who is able to use both software and hardware to improve interaction with different audiences (see Table 3). Similarly, they have a command of a variety of technological languages, enabling them to successfully address digital communication challenges. This subcategory stands out for its greater presence in the curricular proposals of academic programmes in the three countries, reaching 50.01% of representation (see Table 3).

Order of compliance Sub-Categories	Order of compliance Sub-Categories	Cump. General	Cump. Argentina	Cump. Ecuador	Cump. Spain
1	Technological management	50,01%%	3,95%	26,32%	19,74%
2	Creation	40,53%	6,84%	22,66%	11,05%
3	Theoretical and professional knowledge	31,58%	6,14%	6,14%	19,30%
4	Strategic	29,93%	7,89%	12,50%	9,54%
5	Skills	29,70%	4,14%	5,64%	19,92%
6	Decisional	24,34%	9,87%	8,55%	5,92%
7	Contextual	22,37%	3,95%	1,32%	17,11%
8	Management	20,85%	4,45%	9,11%	7,29%
9	Commercial and business knowledge	20,18%	3,51%	7,02%	9,65%
10	University and professional generic	18,75%	1,56%	3,13%	14,1%
11	Attitudinal	18,75%	1,56%	3,13%	14,06%
12	Organisational	13,16%	5,26%	6,02%	1,88%
13	Implementation	12,28%	4,39%	6,14%	1,75%

Tabla 3. Overall compliance by country in the subcategories analysed

Source: Own elaboration

3. The five categories of analysis are: managerial competences of strategic thinking and action; organisational competences of creating and carrying out internal and external communication; commercial and business understanding and action; competences in the use of technological tools, data, information and knowledge management; and generic competences of university training and professional context in the field of communication.

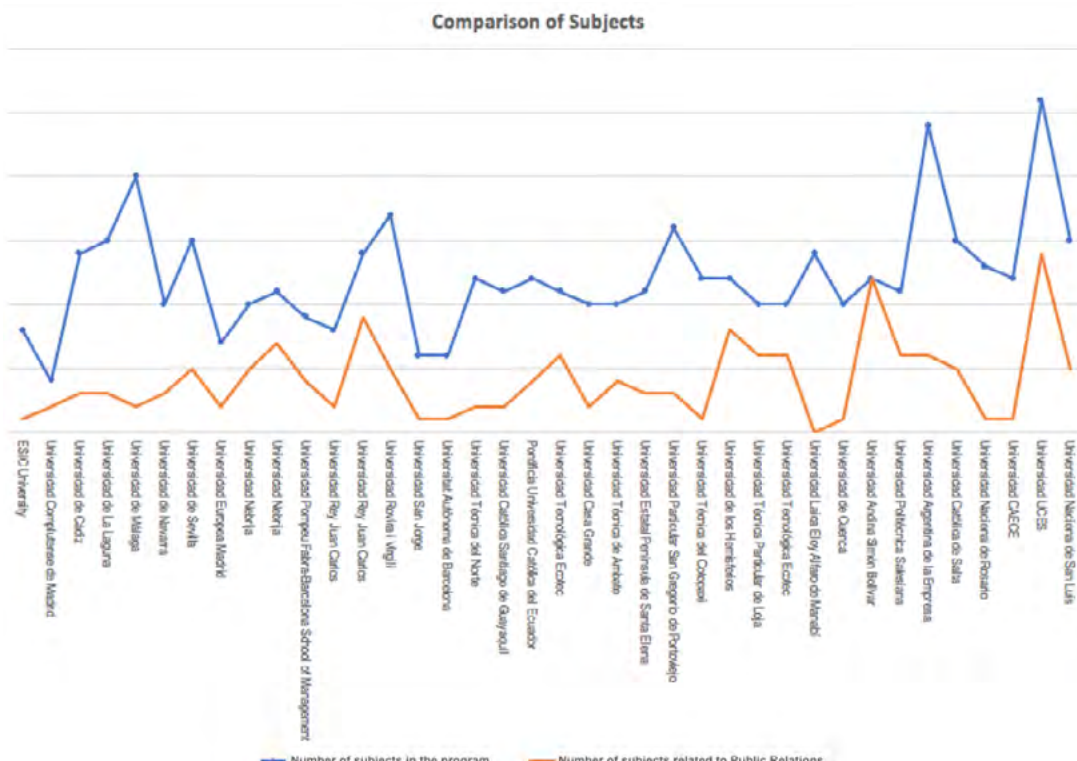
Despite being the best result overall, in the case of Argentina, this percentage is among the lowest. This is due to the predominant focus of Argentinean academic programmes, which tend to be more theoretical and conceptual. In this capacity, it is important to address the need to incorporate in academic proposals basic information and knowledge about AI and its effective and efficient application in the life of organisations (Gregory et al., 2023).

In relation to the subcategories of organisational and implementation competences, performance is lower than in the other subcategories, especially in Spain. These subcategories cover organisational activities: a) defining processes and structures for PR teams; b) ensuring the achievement of communication objectives and budgets; c) having a clear understanding of the organisation's critical processes; d) facilitating the integration of strategic management with organisational needs; e) fostering synergy with other functions; f) establishing communication objectives aligned with those of the organisation. And in the case of the implementation subcategories: a) demonstration of in-depth understanding and alignment with the organisation's vision of financial sustainability; b) demonstration of balance between business objectives, organisational vision and societal expectations in the area of communication.

The results show that the universities that achieve the highest percentage of subjects in the area of public relations according to the total number of subjects that make up the curriculum are: (1) Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (EC); (2) Universidad Hemisferios (EC); (3) Universidad Nebrija (ES); (4) Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (ES); (5) Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (EC); (6) Universidad Tecnológica ECOTEC (EC); (7) Universidad Politécnica Salesiana (EC); (8) Universidad UCES Argentina (AR); (9) Universidad Complutense de Madrid (ES) (see Graph 1).

All the universities mentioned contemplate at least 50% of the subjects in their programmes related to the field of public relations (see Graph 1). Special mention should be made of ESIC University's Master's Degree in Communication and New Technologies Management programme, which has only one subject out of the eight included in the plan, but achieves a competence level of 38 out of 67 (56.72%), as can be seen in graph 1.

Of the total number of competences contemplated in the analysis matrix, the average number of competences achieved by the programmes reviewed is 17.47 points out of a total of 67, which represents an average of 26.87% achievement. In this sense, only 14 programmes out of a total of 38 are above the overall average: seven from Spain, two from Argentina and four from Ecuador (see Graph 1).



Graphic 1. Ratio of the number of subjects in the programme versus the number of subjects in the areas of public relations and business communication.

Source: Own elaboration

Argentinian universities achieved the best performance with 22.83 points out of a total of 67, followed by Spanish universities with 17.44 points, and in last place were Ecuadorian universities with 12.5 points out of a total of 67.

It is the Spanish universities that show the least dispersion in terms of competence achievement. In this sense, the standard deviation is 8.01, in contrast to the Argentinian universities, which have 12.75 points.

The universities in the countries that achieve the best fulfilment of the competences expected of a public relations and strategic communication professional are those in Argentina and Spain. The marginalisation of Ecuador is explained by the fact that communication programmes in that country are mainly oriented towards digital communication or technology.

The universities that present the programmes that achieve the best performance in the training of competences for a public relations and strategic communication professional are those presented in order from highest to lowest:

UCES University - Argentina (62.69 %); Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar-Ecuador (58.21 %); ESIC University - Spain (56.72 %) and Universidad Hemisferios - Ecuador (53.73 %).

In summary, after analysing the results, it could be seen that the professional profiles formed by the universities have similarities in the definition of the main competences. The professional profile of public relations is demanding new competences and skills that in many cases transcend the traditional work of the area. It was also observed that the training response to professional demands is not satisfactorily matched between the competences acquired and the real needs of the profession; there is a deficiency in areas related to the financial and business spheres.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the 1970s, UNESCO defined the scientific fields, dividing at that time, the fields of knowledge and their corresponding impact and conditioning in this respect. Communication did not belong to the "club" and was limited to being a discipline. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then. It is very difficult (though not impossible) to deny the epistemological status of communication as a scientific field, with a multiplicity of objects of study, perspectives, methodological traditions and substantial contributions to society. Organisational communication, strategic communication or public relations, as sub-disciplines of this field, are no exception.

Indeed, these struggles are evident in the processes of institutionalisation of the "Communication Sciences", their training offer, the demands for competences and professional practice. Hybridisations, crossovers and conversations are constant. For this reason, the notion of Interface proposed by Scolari is undoubtedly a model that allows us a better and greater understanding of these relational logics, their changes, transformations and challenges.

Along these lines, the present research set out to address two central questions in relation to the training and development of competences in the field of public relations in Argentina, Ecuador and Spain. Through a comprehensive analysis of the master's degree programmes in communication in these countries, significant trends and disparities have been identified that shed light on the current state of education in this field.

Firstly, the presence of six predominant sub-categories in the Master's programmes, with special emphasis on digital and business approaches in the three countries analysed, stands out. This diversity of approaches, while enriching, has resulted in a dispersion in the achievement of goals and the development

of competences in crucial areas such as strategic communication, institutional and public relations.

Of particular relevance is the finding that only 26.3% of the Master's programmes in Communication have a clear orientation towards institutional, organisational and corporate communication. This result underlines the imperative need for greater attention and emphasis in this area, given its fundamental importance in the professional environment.

It is also significant that programmes focusing on digital and technological communication predominate in Ecuador, while those focusing on institutional, organisational and corporate communication are more prevalent in Spain and Argentina. This disparity of approaches between countries suggests the existence of different needs and priorities in the field of public relations.

The presence of the strategic management approach is also identified in the programmes of the three countries evaluated, indicating a shared concern for the development of strategic skills in communication professionals.

However, it is important to note that only the programmes in Spain present a specific orientation towards political communication, indicating an area of potential improvement in the programmes in Argentina and Ecuador.

The variability in the fulfilment of competences between countries is notable, with a standard deviation of 8.01 in Spain, 11.58 in Ecuador and 12.00 in Argentina. This variability suggests that, although the Spanish programmes fulfil the expected competences to a lesser extent, they present a more consistent behaviour in comparison with those of Ecuador and Argentina.

In terms of specific competences, the managerial competences of strategic thinking and action, as well as the competences of organising, creating and executing internal and external communication, show relatively superior performance. However, the category of competences related to business and commercial understanding and action performs the worst, highlighting the need for greater attention to these fundamental aspects for a communications professional.

Thus, Argentina and Spain stand out as the countries that achieve the best fulfilment of the competences expected of a professional in public relations and strategic communication. The marginalisation of Ecuador is largely explained by the predominant focus on digital and technological communication in the programmes of Ecuadorian universities. It is also important to highlight that the universities: UCES, Andina Simón Bolívar, Esic University and Hemisferios have demonstrated commendable performance in the training of competencies expected

for a professional in public relations and strategic communication. These findings provide a solid basis for future improvements in education in this field.

Zerfasset al. (2020) suggest that the field of public relations is characterised in its relationship with the environment and/or context by its ability to deal with complexity, which makes it a strategic profession today. To this end, they consider a series of factors that drive this process, among which they point out: resources, competition, environment, risk, innovation, commitment, and operational factors. The diversity of aspects that determine these factors means that they are not mutually exclusive, but rather additive. This matrix is undoubtedly key to understanding why the training offer is configured and mutates differently according to the political, economic and socio-educational realities of each country. Also, as mentioned above, the regulatory framework is a determining factor, and a comparative analysis, such as the one proposed here, makes it possible to assess these differences and to incorporate contextual variables in subsequent studies. There are interesting precedents in this regard in the work of Molleda et al (2017), which could be a topic for future research.

In summary, there is a great disparity of approaches in Master's programmes in communication, which has resulted in a low fulfilment of competences, especially in key areas such as public relations and institutional communication. Despite a predominant orientation towards digital, a greater balance and focus on strategic and commercial areas is needed to ensure the holistic training of communication professionals.

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