



Students' Perspective on Public Relations Curriculum and Their Preparedness for the Industry

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Abstract. Public relations scholars and practitioners have raised a concern on the gap between students' acquired knowledge and skills in the classroom learning and meeting the expectation from employers. There is a call for public relations educators to better prepare students before they enter the industry. The themes of public relations education, public relations curriculum and practices are the conceptual understandings of this paper in gauging the perception of undergraduate students on public relations curriculum and their preparedness for the industry. A qualitative interview was conducted with seven student participants. Public relations students of both public and private universities in Malaysia perceived the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom learning were mainly theoretical with a mix of practical skills. Most students claimed that they were not prepared to enter the industry even though they have positive feedback on their lecturers' pedagogy. Although students of this study are satisfied and have a positive perspective of the public relations curriculum in Malaysia higher education institutions, they suggest students acquire external knowledge outside the classroom by attending personal development courses and having good mindsets in preparing the students for the industry. This paper brings implications for public relations education and course development as well as for professionals in the public relations industry to consider working effectively with educators in identifying the knowledge and skills important for the future of public relations practice.

Keywords: Public relations · Curriculum · Students' perspective · Industry Preparedness · Malaysia

1 Introduction

Public relations education provides a curriculum for students to equip themselves with adequate knowledge and skills to be industry-ready when they enter into the workforce as public relations curriculum and practical works provide students the necessary tools and skills in meeting employers' expectations [1]. By observing the industry demands and skills, it helps educators to revise the public relations curriculum and align with industry expectations. Public relations curriculum should fulfil the needs and expectations of the industry and to do so, it is important to have an up-to-date, relevant analysis of entry-level skills requirements to form a suitable curriculum for the students [2, 3].

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Public relations graduates and their employability are becoming a problem as there is a broad gap between the acquired knowledge and skills from the university and the required skills expected from the employers. Thus, there is a discrepancy of expectations of industry practitioners and the knowledge and skills taught by public relations educators in the public relations programmes [4].

To close the gap, this paper aims to shed light on the perceptions of public relations students towards the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning and whether the public relations curriculum in the Malaysian higher education institutions prepares the students for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry. This paper contains five sections with Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings and Discussion, and finally Conclusion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Public Relations Education

Public relations is a strategic communication process that fosters mutually beneficial connections between corporations and their publics [5]. Public relations as a discipline began in the late 1800s during the period of rapid industrialisation and intense political campaigns in the United States of America [6].

Public relations education in the United States of America is increasingly being called upon to deliver strategic, international, ethical, and research techniques instruction and leadership on a national and worldwide level [7]. The development of public relations education in Malaysia and Asia looks upon the education system in the United States of America. Most Asian universities, including those in Malaysia, consider the American education system to be the ideal model for developing their curriculum and adopt the American public relations education model [8]. In Malaysia, both public and private universities offer diplomas or bachelor degrees for public relations discipline. These universities have different structure of the curriculum in which public relations-related subjects such as principles or introduction to public relations are taught in Communication or Media Studies programmes; whereas some universities offer programmes specialising in public relations will have more public relations-related subjects such as public relations writing, public relations strategies and issues, and public relations campaign management. On top of that, some private universities require their undergraduates students to specialise in one of the areas such as digital media production, journalism, broadcasting or public relations.

According to [9], public relations education, especially in Malaysia, has not kept up with the fast globalisation that has taken place since 1992. Therefore, public relations education in Malaysia should align with the expectations of the public relations practitioners in the industry and contribute to the growth of the industry's professionalism.

2.2 Public Relations Curriculum

Studies have been carried out with the goal of defining the curricular standards for public relations sector namely by the Commission on Public Relations Education, the

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), Public Relations Society of America, as well as the Gold Paper from the International Public Relations Association Commission in 1982. Broad liberal arts education, improving students' communication skills courses, communication theory to equip students for public relations management, business literacy, and practical experience through internships were outlined in the curricular standards and requirements [10].

Educators and administrators in higher education institutions are well aware of the standards, and they continuously review the learning outcomes to ensure that the curricula are on par with the real-world practice [11–13]. Undergraduate public relations curriculum should include courses in the field of liberal arts, communication, and business. Additionally, courses namely principles of public relations, public relations writing and content production, research, campaigns or case studies, ethics, and experiential learning should also be included in the public relations curriculum [14]. The Commission on Public Relations Education identifies six mandatory courses for public relations curriculum which include: (1) Introduction to Public Relations (2) Public Relations Research, (3) Evaluation (4) Public Relations Writing and Production, (5) Public Relations Law and Ethics, (6) Planning and Management, (7) Campaigns and (8) Internships [15]. According to a recent study [16], the public relations curriculum has shown a significant improvement as university-based public relations degree programmes have taught the most fundamental skills for public relations practitioners. However, in determining the essential skills of current public relations undergraduates for entry-level positions, educators and scholars need “to link public relations education and practice by providing students with the tools and skills necessary to succeed in the industry, particularly considering the relative nascence of the field” [17, p. 1].

2.3 Public Relations Practices

In the past decades, the public relations sector has been growing in relevance and sophistication worldwide, and in particular the public relations industry in Malaysia has grown in prominence as a profession [18]. The processes of privatisation, globalisation, and increasing activism have made it crucial for Malaysian organisations to hire professional communicators or public relations practitioners to carry out environmental analysis and function as boundary spanners. These professionals ensure constructive relationships between the organisations and their key audiences are formed and conflict can be avoided [19].

According to past studies, the main function of public relations practitioners is to keep the people informed about government policies, social development and to assist in the government's nation-building efforts [20, 21]. Furthermore, public relations practitioners have the functions to carry out publicity roles by supplying information to the media. Because of these practices, public relations practitioners and educators are working together to develop and improve the curriculum [22]. Both educators and practitioners agreed that training, experience and expertise outcomes are needed to begin a public relations profession [23]. Educators and practitioners claimed that upon graduation, public relations students should have the knowledge of ethics, diversity and inclusion, cultural perspectives, business skills, social issues, and laws and regulations affecting public relations. Students should also be equipped with skills such as writing, research

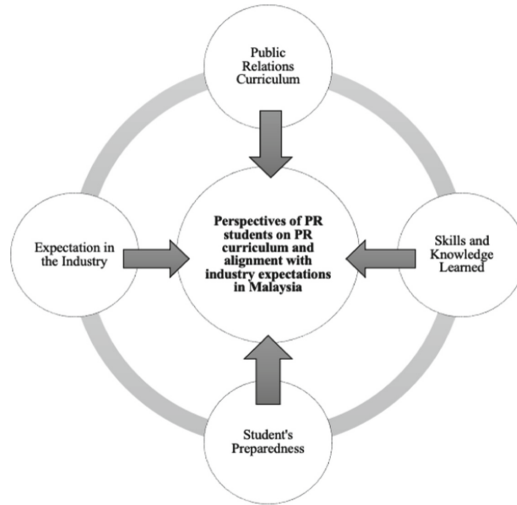


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

and analytics, media relations, social media management, research, critical thinking, and problem-solving [17]. The collaboration between public relations practitioners and the educators can help improve the public relations curriculum which meets the expectations of the employer and public relations professionals, and ultimately graduates are better prepared for the industry.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this research in exploring the perspectives of public relations students on the curriculum and its alignment with industry expectations. There are four factors involved: (1) Public relations curriculum, (2) Skills and knowledge learned in the classroom, (3) The level of preparedness of the students to enter the industry upon graduation, and (4) The expectation of the professional in the Malaysian public relations industry. The students' perception of public relations curriculum, skills and knowledge learned in the classroom could demonstrate their level of preparedness for entry level jobs. Besides, the readiness of the students and the public relations industry's expectation could determine the adequacy of the curriculum in Malaysian higher education in producing industry-ready graduates.

2.5 Research Questions

Research Question (RQ) 1: What are the perceptions of students of Malaysian higher education institutions towards the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning in public relations programmes in demonstrating their preparedness after graduation?

RQ2: To what extent public relations students perceive the curriculum in the Malaysian higher education institutions in producing industry-ready graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry?

3 Methodology

A qualitative interview was adopted for collecting the data for exploring the perceptions of Malaysian undergraduate students towards the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning for public relations programmes and whether public relations curriculum in Malaysian universities produce industry-ready graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry. Qualitative research through semi-structured interviews provides an exploration of insights from individuals and enables researchers to have the flexibility to ask open-ended questions to get more information from the participants.

The participants were recruited through purposive sampling, in which eligible participants were invited to participate in the interview based on the following criteria: 1) Undergraduate students who enrolled in public relations or corporate communication programmes in Malaysian public and private universities, 2) Students who have undertaken their internship, and 3) they are in their final year or fresh graduates within a year from the university. The seven participants with their degree in public relations or communication studies majoring in public relations were interviewed via Zoom with an average duration of 30 to 40 min. The participants comprise of five females and two males, one public and four private universities and their age ranges from 21 to 27 years old. The interview session was recorded for the purpose of transcriptions with prior consent from the participants.

The data collected from the interview was manually analysed through three phases of thematic analysis method. During the first phase, answers for each question were summarised into coding and themes. Next, participants' responses were then analysed and compared during the second phase. Finally, the last step in thematic analysis was the compilation of themes that answer the two research questions.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Students' Perceptions on Knowledge and Skills Acquired in Classroom Learning

In answering RQ1, five interview questions were discussed during the interviews. Participants were asked about their views towards the knowledge and skills acquired from classroom learning; types of courses which are useful in preparing them for the industry; perceptions of the public relations programmes in preparing them for the industry; motivations to choose public relations programme for their undergraduate study; and lecturers' delivery of knowledge and skills in public relations programmes.

The analysis of the views of students towards the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom learning was mainly theory-based and a mix of practical skill sets of writing, critical thinking, social media, and research which are needed in the working industry. One participant claimed that practical skills such as "*PR writing skills... and how you come up with words and how you create a whole write up...*" (S1) is deemed important for public relations discipline. Besides, two other participants (S4, S7) agreed with participant 1 that the public relations writing course was helpful in enhancing their knowledge and skills. "*One of the subjects that was very helpful was PR writing*" (S7). The perceptions of the students towards the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom

learning such as writing, critical thinking and research are aligned with past studies [21] that students should be equipped with writing skills and the most pronounced skill is writing because the core foundation of public relations is journalism [16].

Several participants (S3, S4, S5, S7) voiced their feelings about not being well-prepared for the working industry after graduation. For example: *“I felt ready or not, it’s like a 50/50... But in terms of skillswise, I was not super confident... I felt that there were certain areas that I thought that I lacked, and wasn’t equipped enough to be prepared”* (S3). On the other hand, three participants (S1, S2, S6) felt they were quite prepared as they perceived the public relations curriculum had provided them a clear picture of how the industry works and boosted their confidence in their communication skills.

Next, when asked about the motivations in choosing a public relations or corporate communication programme for their undergraduate study, four participants (S1, S4, S5, S7) mentioned that it is because of their personal interest such as the enjoyment of learning new things and the many elements of public relations as S7 stated: *“I enjoy learning new things and I feel there are many elements of PR... I think I learnt new things every time I do something”* and *“It pickles my interest to see how PR works... really want to know how things works”* (S1). Other motivations include its career prospects and the various core subjects offered in the programme.

In terms of the lecturers’ delivery of knowledge in the classroom, the participants said that it was a good experience and they have positive thoughts on their lecturers’ pedagogy. For example: *“Lecturers impact real-world experiences and testimonials into my classes”* (S1); *“Sharing about industry experience is very interesting. One lecturer came part time sharing her experiences in a PR company... we get to do hands-on planning on one of the campaigns”* (S2); and *“We have professional development week with speakers from the PR industry”* (S5). Past studies revealed that educators should constantly revise their curriculum and teaching methods to align with the industry expectation [11–13].

The answers to the interview questions explore the perspectives of undergraduate students in the public relations programmes on the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning.

4.2 Public Relations Curriculum in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions and Industry-Ready Graduates

The questions asked to the student participants to answer RQ2 include: students’ perception of the public relations curriculum in the Malaysian higher education institutions; and the views about the adequacy of public relations curriculum in the Malaysian universities in preparing graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry and becoming more industry-ready.

Only one participant perceived a positive experience about the public relations curriculum in Malaysian higher education institutions. He said: *“I was fortunate to have a lecturer who told us how to go about in the industry, she used her real-life working experience to educate us and tell us what is actually happening in the real world”* (S1). Three participants felt that the education system was more theory-based and lacked a practical aspect of the discipline. S7 quoted: *“Our education system in Malaysia is more on the theory side and it’s less on the practical side... More like Oh you need to be book smart as well you need to know all the theory, but the theory part is still lacking.”* The

findings showed that students in this study perceived that Malaysian education still has a huge room of improvement in their curriculum compared to the American education system [8].

When the participants were asked of their views about the adequacy of the public relations curriculum in preparing graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry and becoming more industry-ready, there was a positive response. Two participants (S1, S6) claiming that it was very adequate; and three participants (S2, S5, S7) had a neutral to positive stance as they were quite satisfied with the current curriculum, albeit they would prefer amendments made in the programme structure as S5 quoted: *"It is suitable, but I would definitely say to add more, give more subjects in year two instead of fully putting out in year three, at least try to balance it out more in year two"*, and S7 suggested adding more practical subjects in the curriculum as it could help students to do more hands-on work: *"I would like PR programme to infuse with the elements of advertising or broadcasting"* (S7).

Two other participants suggested that it is better to acquire some external knowledge outside classroom learning to better prepare the graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry and become more industry ready. S1 stated: *"I spent a lot of time on extracurricular activities. That's why I learnt a lot of other things and skills"* and *"I would advise them to stretch themselves more by participating in clubs and societies"* (S3). Other factors to prepare graduates to become more industry ready were attending personal development courses, having good mindsets such as openness and humility, and practising more writing skills (as according to S1, S3 S5). According to [17], public relations students should have diversity and inclusion, knowledge of cultural perspectives, and social issues to prepare themselves for an entry-level job position.

5 Conclusion

This paper aimed to shed lights on the perceptions of students of Malaysian higher education institutions towards the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning in public relations programmes as well as to understand the adequacy of public relations curriculum in the Malaysian universities in preparing graduates for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry and for graduates to becoming more industry-ready. Past studies have raised the issue of the alignment of the knowledge and skills learned in classroom learning and meeting industry expectations on graduates who are ready for the public relations industry. To close the gap, two research questions were formed. The student participants specifically emphasised the importance of equipping public relations writing skills. Additionally, in terms of students' preparedness to become more industry ready, some students claimed that they were not well-prepared as they found what they learnt in the classroom was difficult to apply in the workplace. Public relations-related subjects are interesting because it has various elements in it and students were satisfied with their lecturers' delivery of knowledge. However, some participants suggested that public relations students should also acquire skills and knowledge outside of the classroom to be more prepared for the workplace.

Some students suggested that the public relations curriculum should be revised to include practical aspects of the discipline such as hands-on activities of organising campaigns and public relations events. Besides, the curriculum can be revised to give a balance between theory-based and practical-based courses, and provide students a holistic approach in understanding public relations discipline.

In conclusion, the findings of this exploratory paper show that the participants, several undergraduate students of both public and private universities in Malaysia, have a positive perspective of the public relations curriculum and about their preparedness for the industry. However, they also wish for a better improvement in the curriculum to minimise the gap between knowledge and skills learned in the classroom and meet industry expectations. Therefore, educators could constantly review the curriculum to include both theory-based and practical-based courses in the public relations programme.

5.1 Limitation and Recommendations

This paper offers a comprehensive insight into students' perspectives of the public relations curriculum and their readiness for the workplace, but it has two limitations. Firstly, the research only involved students' perspective, and lacked the perspectives of the educators and public relations practitioners. Although students and/or graduates are an important stakeholder of public relations education, it is vital to investigate the perceptions of public relations educators and professionals towards the public relations education and graduates' preparedness for the industry. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the perspectives of public relations educators and professionals in Malaysia about the public relations curriculum in fulfilling the needs and expectations of the industry.

Another limitation of this research is the use of a single-method and using a small sample of participants. Thus, the findings were not able to be generalised to all public relations students in Malaysia. However, this paper serves as an initial effort towards understanding the knowledge and skills acquired in classroom learning and whether the public relations curriculum in the Malaysian higher education institutions prepares the students for entry-level jobs in the public relations industry. Future researchers could collect the data through a quantitative method such as questionnaire survey to determine students' perception of the public relations curriculum and their preparedness for the industry.

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