

Perceptions of Public Relations Students in Oman: Examining the Perception of Public Relations Students to Their Education in Oman

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of undergraduate students in Public relations in the Sultanate of Oman. A survey was designed based on the inputs from the research supervisor as well as academic research, done in the field of higher education, Public relations and higher education in Public relations, focusing on factors that have contributed to higher education in Oman. The survey was conducted to provide a random sample of Public relations students studying in Oman. With a sample frame of around 200 students, a completed sample of 84 was collected. The survey achieved a 42% response rate. The study found that overall Public relations students were satisfied in Oman. The study also found a few factors which differentiated the perceptions of students depending on their gender, institute and varied degree of satisfaction. The study raises possibilities of future researches, including a comparative analysis of the level of perception between female Public relations students and male Public relations students in Oman.

Keywords: Public relations, higher education, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The recent decades have seen an industrial expansion in the Sultanate of Oman. Increasingly, Public relations as a management function is fast growing to maturity in the Sultanate and witnessing a revolutionary change (Focus on Oman, 2014). The profession is recognized as an important instrument to realize the market goals of the organization in the Sultanate (Changing perceptions in public relations, 2014). The trade and industrial sectors are realizing its advantages over advertising in building trust and communicating with its associates (Khan & Malik, 2002). The global economic recession in the recent past has only increased the prospects of public relations as a crisis calls for confidence building (Focus on Oman, 2014).

Even though public relations is increasingly playing an important role in different organizations in Oman, unfortunately, no study has been conducted to investigate and understand the relationship between undergraduate students of Public relations in Oman and the Omani Public relations industry. The researcher believes that the factors affecting this relationship can be measured and quantified using a scientific method of research and the perceptions of students of public relations in Oman can be evaluated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, higher education systems have been shifting from elite to mass to universal access (Altbach, 2012). It is suggested that higher education is an integral priority, the backbone for national growth and a catalyst for innovation, and the principal instrument for the

conservation of national heritage and culture (Lamki, 2002). According to Albatch, the development of mass higher education systems has increased rapidly in the past half century (Albatch, 2007). He predicted that the total world-wide demand for higher education will more than double, from around 100 million today to 263 million by 2025, with the majority of new demand coming from developing countries (Albatch, 2007).

In the past few decades, the Arab economies, including the Sultanate of Oman, have seen a spurt of growth in the higher education sector. This was majorly because of the discovery of massive oil reserves and increasing oil prices (Townsend, 1977). During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a rapid expansion in the field of education in the Arab Gulf countries as a response to an absolute shortage of national educated populace (Townsend, 1977). In Oman, after the renaissance of 1970 the importance of developing the country's national human resources became one of the main aims and policies throughout the Sultanate's successive five year development plans (Sultanate of Oman, 1991).

Over a period of 40 years, the Sultanate of Oman has developed a relatively diverse system of higher education. Salma Al Lamki (2002) suggests that the dynamic growth of the Sultanate's public general (pre-tertiary) education system has outpaced the growth of the public higher (post-secondary) education system. As a result, this has created a deficit between supply and demand for higher education in the Sultanate (Lamki, 2002). The Sultanate of Oman is relying on state sponsored higher education scheme to maintain a balance between secondary education and higher education (Lamki, 2002).

Even though the development in higher education has been steady, yet it has been slow as compared to the development of Oman's economy. Salma Al Lamki (1998) argues that an acute shortage of a skilled Omani workforce has been a hindrance in the development of Oman, as the country transforms from a traditional to a modern economy (Lamki, 1998).

Schultz (1962) theorized that at the individual level, people are motivated to invest in education and training, under the expectations that they will be rewarded by higher earnings during their working life. On the other hand, Gary Becker established that education was perceived as a positive investment, because an educated population provides a competitive advantage for socio-economic development and growth (Becker, 1975). Therefore, it is essential to understand the value of public relations, as perceived by the graduate students who are enrolled in public relations programs, offered by various colleges and universities in the Sultanate of Oman. The kind of education that is delivered at higher education institutes in Oman is crucial to the development of graduate students, to be prepared for the international labour market.

Public relations, as a higher education discipline, are slowly gaining importance in the Omani education system. Watts (2006) puts emphasis on the significance of a Public relations discipline, as he suggests that a Public relations degree can help groom professionals for the industry to form an effective force. He further argues that while studying Public relations as a discipline, the student not only gets a theoretical basis for Public relations, but also achieves a foundation from which practical applications can be built (Watts, 2006).

With a fast developing economy, the market relies on the communication discipline to expand. An examination of public relations studies done internationally gives a holistic perspective of the value given to the discipline. Different authors have emphasized on the importance of public relations in the development of the organization and the overall economy of the country. Grunig's Excellence theory (1992) highlights how public relations can contribute as a key participant in management functions of an organization. The theory also 'evaluated' the value of public relations in an organization (Grunig, 1992). According to

Grunig (1992), the value of public relations professionals results in a healthier and a better organization.

Therefore, public relations in Oman is at a crucial point, where not only it is imperative for the industry, but also at the same time, there is a need to build the discipline as an exclusive specialization that must take precedence over academic unit perspectives and biases.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This body of Public relations research shows the perception of Public relations graduate students in Oman towards education and the discipline in general. Additionally, the study tries to investigate the value that is given by Public relations graduates to the Omani Public relations industry.

The literature show that Public relations as higher education discipline in the Sultanate of Oman is a relatively new concept. Moreover, higher education itself is at a very young stage in Oman and needs to be developed to maintain a healthy balance between industry requirements of skilled work force. The literature also reflects on the ideas of Human capital and motivation for higher education. The literature explained the need and how higher education benefits the graduating student, the organization and hence, the overall economy of the country. The work of Grunig on his 'Excellence Theory', Schultz on Human Capital Theory, Salma Al Lamki on Higher Education in Sultanate of Oman and Watts' Public Relation theory have been the core foundations of this study. Questions have been based to varying degree on the ideas put by the above authors and those put forth by Becker (1977), Habsi (2007), Chapman (2007), Ameen (2007), Sridhar (2002) among others.

With a survey based technique of quantitative research, the study tried to understand the relationship between undergraduate students of public relations in Oman and the Omani public relations industry. It also tried to analyse and compare the opinion of the students with that of the instructors to understand the key skill sets that are required for a Public relations professional in the Omani industry.

METHOD / RESEARCH PLAN

Audience Definition

The primary audience of the study would be the Public relations students studying in different colleges and universities in the Sultanate of Oman. It is estimated that around 200 students in various colleges and universities enrol for Public relations as discipline in their higher education. The population of interest was a mix of Omani nationals as well as the expatriates that are studying Public relations in Oman. However, more than 97% of the participants were Omani nationals. The survey ran in two different languages - Arabic and English. The Arabic questionnaire was translated from the original one in English and was distributed among participants who wanted to answer in Arabic. The English survey on the other hand was posted on www.surveymonkey.com, participants were encouraged to complete the online. The online survey ran from September 7, 2014 to October 2, 2014, until a reasonable total of completed responses (n=84) were received.

Research Design

The survey follows the best practices discussed by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2008) in "Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys". Dillman et al. (2008) describe that internet surveys should include that participation is voluntary and all responses be kept confidential; provide contact information for those who have questions or comments. It was also

suggested that for satisfaction surveys researchers aim for a random sample rather than doing a full census of all users (Dillman et al, 2008). The survey was run from September 7 to October 2, 2014 until the desired amount was achieved. This shorter time frame and random sampling also worked well for the course time frame. As Dillman et al. (2008) note, there is a strong possibility for bias in satisfaction surveys, since the researchers or the client, and sometimes both, are usually hoping to see positive responses. To counteract this bias, 13 of the 17 questions were done in balanced, seven-point Likert scales with true neutral midpoints (either “ Neither agree or disagree”) and options to skip the question (through “I prefer not to answer”). Three of the remaining nine questions were close ended, multiple choice with options presented in neutral language. Options for these multiple choice questions were either designed to capture demographic information.

The survey also followed recommended practices for online surveys. The language of the survey was concise and easy to read online (Stacks, 2011). The survey was designed to have minimal screens for the respondent to scroll through. A credible survey tool, surveymonkey, was chosen to conduct the survey for this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand how students perceive, value and collaborate with Public relations education in Oman, the study will try to seek answers to these issues using four research questions.

1. To what degree are students in agreement with the instructors in terms of course structure that is being taught?
2. Is there any gap between the courses and the expectations of the students?
3. What do the students think about the Public relations industry and what are the key skills that are required for the profession in Oman?
4. To gauge the level of knowledge translation from the instructors to the students as well as from applied practice to academics.

HYPOTHESIS

Based on the literature and interviews conducted, it is expected that the general perception among Public relations students in Oman is a bit of ignorance about the discipline, which translates into a lack of understanding and variations in the way Public relations is perceived as a discipline. Furthermore, due to the recent introduction of Public relations as a discipline in various colleges and universities, the program is still undergoing a lot of changes. It is thought that there is a gap between the technology requirements of the industry and what is being imparted in colleges and universities. It is also expected that students will be satisfied to a certain extent with their overall progress towards their academic as well as career goals.

It is predicted that participants would also comment on the relatively young public relations industry of Oman. This might affect some of the factors that constitute survey questions like - satisfaction, expectations, etc.

DATA ANALYSIS

For this research, the researcher adopted the quantitative approach-survey method to gather the information and the data for the study. This would be obtained by doing a survey analysis of Public relations students studying in Oman. The survey was done in Arabic well as in English, while the English survey ran on the internet, the same survey was translated in

Arabic and copies were distributed in various students from colleges that offer Public relations as a discipline.

As the survey ran on the internet, the objective was to have a random sampling, where random users had an equal opportunity to opt in to take the survey. Moreover, the researcher used the snowball sampling method to spread the survey as much as possible. A sample of 87 responses was received, although the completed sample size was 84, which formed the data set for this study. It should be noted that in the given time frame, the researcher could not convince one of the colleges to participate in the study. The random sampling method would select a sample of size n drawn from a population of size N , in such a way that every possible sample of size n has the same chance of being selected. This type of sampling method would be utilized in collecting data from the selected organizations to obtain a better understanding of the research problem as well as to keep the study as unbiased as possible.

Respondent Characteristics

Of the 84 people who answered the gender question, 70% ($n=59$) were females and 30% ($n=25$) were males. This result was expected because it has been observed by the researcher that more and more females are pursuing Public relations as a higher education discipline.

Questions 1, 3 and 12 were designed to test the perceptions of the students in terms of their expectations from the courses that have been taught. Both the questions were answered by all the participants: 69% ($n= 58$) of the participants agreed to varied degree about the statements that involved the quality of the instructors in institutions that offer Public relations. However, it was found that females who were positive about these statements constituted a major 70% ($n=29$) of the group, while the remaining 30% ($n=25$) of the participants were male students. This suggested an acceptance of the instructors and the teaching methods employed by them. The response also suggested an approval of the quality of the instructors teaching Public relations courses in Oman.

Career and Academic Goals

Questions 4, 5 and 12 were designed to understand the satisfaction level of the students in terms of the achievement that they have received about their career as well as academic goals. The questions were answered in affirmative by 53% ($n=44$), while 40% ($n=34$) did not believe that they have made any progress towards their career goals. In addition, 7% ($n=6$) of the respondents skipped the two questions. This result was expected as Public relations in Oman are still a very young industry and there is considerable confusion around the profession and career prospects for prospective Public relations professionals. However, the researcher had not expected such a massive positive response to the questions. This probably suggests a wider acceptance of the discipline in the Omani industry.

Industry requirements

Questions 2, 6 and 8 were designed to gauge the perceptions of the students in terms of how the academic institutions are preparing them for the industry. It was expected that the responses would be towards the negative side, with little or no positive response to the questions. However, the responses received revealed an unexpected result. 54% ($n=25$) of the participants somewhat disagreed (a lesser degree of disagreement) to the statement, "I agree that the courses offered in Public Relation courses are relevant to the requirements of the Omani Public relations industry", while only 6% ($n=5$) of the participants completely disagreed (highest level of disagreement) to the statement. However, 20% ($n=17$) of the participants agreed in various degrees to the statement, even though none of the participants

completely agreed to the statement. Responses received for the other questions also had a similar response, where 54% (n= 45) of the participants believed that the education does not provide necessary exposure to the Omani industry, while 44% (n=34) believed that practical considerations have not been taken into consideration while designing the courses.

The above responses suggested an overall shortcoming as perceived by the students of Public relations towards their education, in relation to their exposure to the industry as well as towards the course curriculum that is designed to suit the requirements of the industry.

Technological Trends, Overall Expectation and Satisfaction

Questions 7, 9, 10, 11 and 13 were designed to understand how students perceived their overall education and valued Public relations as a profession. Question 7 was designed to check student's response to the changing technology in the profession. The response for question 7 was unanimous, since all the participants believed that the structure of the courses needs to be modified, considering the changing technology of the industry. Interestingly, the last question that had sought comments from the participants also received a similar response in which students mentioned about the need to incorporate the changing technology of the industry into their program curriculum.

The statement "I feel proud to tell my friends and family that I am a Public relations graduate", received a positive response from the participants, with 57% (n=48) agreeing to the statement. Interestingly, out of the 57% of the participants who agreed to the statement, only 15% (n=7) were male students, while the rest 85% (n=41) of the participants were females. This can be attributed to the growing belief in the Sultanate of Oman that regards Public relations as a profession best suited for females. However, no scientific explanation for this difference could be inferred by the researcher and the researcher believes that this can be an avenue for future research on Public relations in Oman.

A vast majority of the participants believed that the career prospects are bright for them. Overall, 59% (n=50) of the participants believed that the future prospects for them are good in the Sultanate. Further, this is believed to be in response to the changing labour policy of the government, which is trying to involve more Omani workforce in the industry. 80% (n=40) of the female participants were positive about their future prospects in Oman, whereas the number of male participants who showed positivity to the statement was only 20% (n=10). Once again, this variation reflected on how the industry is perceived by the current students of Public relations in the Sultanate of Oman.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed much about the perception of Public relations education among Public relations students in Oman. It was also able to assess the variations that exist between the level of satisfaction amongst the different groups of students who belong to different universities and colleges as well as different genders. Many of the researcher's hypotheses were proven in this study, although several interesting insights did emerge. As expected, the overall perception of Public relations students towards their discipline was positive; however there were areas that had left the participants dissatisfied.

The majority of the participants in the study were females; they amounted to more than two – thirds of the participants. Most of the participants were satisfied with the quality of the instructors and the course structure that was delivered to them. On the other hand, all the participants expected or wanted a modification in the way the discipline is being taught, keeping in mind the way technology is being used in Public relations practice. However, there were some discrepancies in the data that was collected from different institutions in

terms of the quality of education and instructors. It would be useful for the Ministry of Higher Education to employ a uniform set of criteria to hire instructors to maintain a uniform level of quality all across Oman.

Questions related to satisfaction in terms of career as well as academic goals were met with a mixed response. The reason for a lack of satisfaction among many participants could be attributed to a relatively young Omani Public relations industry. The Public relations discipline in Oman is also in an evolutionary phase and it is undergoing changes, this could be a possible reason for the mixed responses to the questions asked. However, the difference between the positive and the negative response was less than expected; this suggested a growing acceptance of the discipline by the student community in the Sultanate of Oman. The result also pointed out to a wider acceptance of the discipline in the society in terms of a fruitful career as well as academic prospect.

When it came to evaluate how students are valuing public relations as an industry and as a discipline, it was realized that a majority of the population was positive about it. However, it was realized that it was girls who felt proud of their graduate program and were hopeful of pursuing a career in public relations after they graduate. Male participants on the other hand were not very optimistic about finding a job in the field of public relations. This response was not part of the research questions and was also unexpected for the researcher. Further, for a healthy development of Public relations as a profession and an academic discipline, it is suggested that efforts should be taken to incorporate males as much as females so that both the genders are equally represented in the discipline. Moreover, it was also found that institutes which were far from Muscat showed lesser popularity for the discipline, it may be useful for the government to develop an environment that puts equal emphasis on the discipline in all the regions of the Sultanate. This will not only create a healthier economy but also a much satisfied work force. It is felt that the positive response in terms of career prospect could be attributed to the changing labour policy of the government (Prabhakar, 2014). The government is encouraging organizations to employ local workforce to create employment for the graduating students. This has created an overall positive atmosphere in all the academic institutions in terms of finding employment and hence, a positive response by the participants.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This survey showed that overall, students of Public relations students in Oman were satisfied with their Public relations programs. The most positive expressions were around quality of instructors, course content and satisfaction. The most negative expressions pertained to involvement of technology in the curriculum and exposure to the industry. There exists a difference in the satisfaction level of the female Public relations and the male Public relations students as well as students from different colleges located in different cities of Oman. Both the groups reacted differently to some of the factors that were linked to Public relations education in the research.

The study would have many limitations considering the scope, the resources, the sample size, the research method and the time allotted for the study. Hence, when interpreting the results of this study, some limitations should be taken into account. The biggest limitation of the research would be the sample size of the participants.

The factors that the researcher has taken into account to define and measure perception may not be the real markers of expectations and perceptions among Public relations students in Oman. Also, important events may have happened during the measurement moments,

affecting the relationships between the variables in the study undertaken by the researcher. The snowball method chosen to collect the data would cause further limitations, as it would depend on the skill of the individual conducting the actual sampling and their ability to vertically network and find an appropriate sample. Lastly, the researcher himself belongs to one of the groups, the decisions and the course of the study can be influenced by his personal beliefs and ideologies. Moreover, the political, economic and other changes in the public relations sector, during the duration of the study, could have created a bias in the minds of the participants.

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APPENDIX-A

SURVEY FOR A STUDY CONDUCTED PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS TO THEIR EDUCATION IN OMAN

This survey is being completed by Public relations students studying in Oman so that we may learn more about their perceptions towards the discipline and the Public relations industry in Oman.

Please ensure you read each question all the way through before answering. The survey should take approximately 4-6 minutes to complete. Remember, all of your responses will be kept confidential and will only be shared through submission of manuscripts to academic journals.

Indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements where

[1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree]

1. I believe that in general the students are in agreement with the instructors in terms of course content that is being taught?
 - Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
2. I agree that the courses offered in Public Relation courses are relevant to the requirements of the Omani Public relations industry.
 - Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
3. I evaluate the quality of the instructors teaching Public relations in Omani colleges and universities to be
 - Excellent
 - Very good
 - Satisfactory
 - Not sure

- Poor
 - Very poor
 - Extremely poor
 - I prefer not to answer
4. I am satisfied with the progress that I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
5. I am satisfied with the progress that I have made toward meeting my overall academic goals.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
6. The colleges and universities in Oman provide the necessary level of industry exposure to students of Public relations during their course of study.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
7. I believe that the course structure for Public relations needs to be changed keeping in mind the new technological trends in the discipline. For example, (Smartphones, Social Media etc.)
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree

- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
8. I think that practical considerations and applications have been taken into account while designing the courses.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
9. I wish to pursue a career in Public relations after I graduate.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
10. I feel proud to tell my friends and family that I am a Public relations graduate.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
11. The Public relations program I am enrolled in meets my expectations.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree

- Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
12. I feel that the readings assigned to my courses are relevant to my future as a Public relations professional.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
13. I am optimistic about my career prospects as a Public relations professional.
- Completely Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Agree
 - Completely Agree
 - I prefer not to answer
14. Do you have any other comments you would like to offer about higher education for aspiring Public relations professionals in Oman.
Comments:
15. Please mention your gender
- Male
 - Female
 - I prefer not to answer
16. Please mention your age
- _____
 - I prefer not to answer
17. The name of your college/university
- _____
 - I prefer not to answer

Closing text: Thank you for participating in this study! If you have additional comments or questions, please email: faisal_ahmed.niz@cas.edu.om