

The Importance of Public Relations Education to the Development of the Public Relations Profession in Malaysia

Jamilah Hj.Ahmad, PhD *FIPR*
School of Communication
Universiti Sains Malaysia
jahmad@usm.my

ABSTRACT

This study is to determine the importance of public relations education to the development of the public relation profession. The main objective of this study is to determine the perception of public relations practitioners towards public relations education in Malaysia and to determine the contribution of public relation education to the development of the public relations profession. This study is using qualitative method through in-depth interview. The study found that majority of public relations practitioners does not have public relations education background. The study also identifies that public relations education is recognized as an important requirement to progress as public relations practitioners or professional. Public relations education is still considered a new field, and its number of graduates in the working world is still not sufficient. But this may no longer be a problem because of the many universities and colleges have offered public relations courses which will produce quality and qualified public relations graduates for the profession.

INTRODUCTION

The public relations profession is probably the most misunderstood of all profession. Many organisations consider it as unnecessary to have public relations department in an organisation. Although there is such department in an organisation, it is often lack of attention and less important in comparison to marketing and other support services

department. The reality is for those exposed to the reality of public relations world, they will look the profession as one of the most powerful weapons in corporate armory. Public relations in Malaysia started about 40 years back, which is in the 1960's. In 1962, Institute Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) was started by practitioners from the government and corporate sector from a variety of organization in Malaysia. The goal of initiating IPRM is to ensure the development of public relations practice and to maintain the positive development of the practice in the country.

Currently, nearly all government ministries, departments and other government agencies have public relation officers, units or a department on its own. Even the armed forces in this country have their own public relations officers. The Ministry of Information, Malaysia was given the task by the government to provide public relations officers for all the ministries in the country (Hamdan, 2008). This shows that the government acknowledges the importance of public relations as a medium to communicate and disseminate their mission and policy to the stakeholders.

Public relation education is the intellectual training on the discipline. With in-depth understanding and exposure to the real image of the profession, such misinterpretation may not occur. Public relations education started out in the early 1900's when Bernays (1952) taught the first public relation course at the New York University in 1923 (Cutlip, 2000). Ever since the public relations education flourished and grew wider all over the world. However, there are times when public relations still being perceived as not a professional profession (Newsom, 2000).

In Malaysia, according to Hamdan (1985), public relations education has started in the country at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in 1972 and has develop ever since. Subjects included in the syllabus of public relations education at that time and still are today includes the principles of public relations; writing for public relations; mass media and society; sociology; psychology; statistic and many more. Nowadays, public relations education has developed encouragingly. Universities like Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); Universiti Malaya (UM); Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); Universiti

Putra Malaysia (UPM); Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) and also Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) are offering public relations courses or subjects related to the field. Local colleges like Stamford College; Monash Institute of Learning; Sunway College and many more are also offering these courses. It is clear that public relations have become an important field to be studied. The importance of having positive image and branding in organisations create more need to have public relations department in any organizations. Therefore, it is essential to have qualified public relations practitioners to handle the public relations matters.

Basically, public relations education is taught in many different levels to serve the needs of the profession. The awareness on how public relations education is important has seeped in the minds of public relations practitioners and educators, which has sparked the idea of the advancement public relations education all levels. The approach of public relations education may differ from one country to the other, but generally it is for the same reasons, for the betterment of the profession. An article from the Public Relation Journal (1993), suggested since there are students with MBAs who are in public relations or even there are public relations department which is combined with public relations, MBA students are also required to learn public relations. At least, they are required to learn public relation at the basic or foundation level. The level of formal public relations education in graduate business schools across the country is alarming low (Public Relations Journal, 1993).

According to Hamdan Adnan (1985), it is important to have education from higher institutions or training from related fields to public relations for those who are interested. One of the important elements for being a public relations practitioner as mentioned in this book is by being able to practice public speaking. Most of higher institutions that offer public relations courses or courses related to it would have a subject that exposes students to public speaking. Public relations practitioner should also have the ability to write creatively and efficiently. There are also a number of universities that offer public relations courses that include writing for public relations as one of the subjects thought.

This goes to show that public relations courses from universities and college locally are programmed to fulfill the market.

Experience is also important to be in the public relations profession. In Malaysia, apart from public relations basic training the educators would also educate their students on protocol because of its importance in public relations practice in the country. Adzman Abbas (1993) stated that training is a very important element to the development of the profession. Experience gaining activities include seminars; training; workshop and many other activities, which are related to public relations. Another example given by Adzman Abbas (1993) on training, is also involve enhancing the organization's image and communication skills. As part of the public relations function, it is true that training as stated should be done among public relations practitioners in an organization and also other employees relevant to the task.

It is essential for a public relations practitioner to be equipped with public relations education background or related experience to their respective job positions. Those without public relations foundation need to attend proper public relations training related to public relations. As for the public relations officer who is without neither education nor the experience in public relations, they might be jeopardizing the organization's image. This study is to look at the importance of public relations education to the development of the public relations profession. Its objectives are to understand the perception of public relations practitioners towards public relations education in Malaysia and to analyse the contribution of public relation education to the development of public relations profession

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is the qualitative methodology. Intensive interview is suitable because of its ability to obtain sufficient information for the research. The sample of the research is chosen using simple random sampling, with the approach of probability sample method. This study uses a table of random numbers to generate a simple random

sample. A list of companies that has public relations department is listed and numbered. Using the table, the sample is chosen randomly to its numbers. To make the compiling information process a little more convenient, all the research will be done at Klang Valley. This is relevant to the study as most of the active public relations practitioners in Malaysia are mainly located around this area. A total of 10 public relations practitioners from various industries in Malaysia were interviewed.

FINDINGS

The number of employees in a public relations department

Public relations department in organizations at Malaysia is inconsistent in size. It ranges from just two people in the department until about 30 over people. As a whole, five of the companies have employees which are more than 15 and the other five companies have employees below the number 15.

The required education background for the public relations department

Eight of the respondents said that a degree in mass communication or public relations would be an ideal requirement to be in the public relations department. However in the current practice, there are organizations, which have employees who do not have the mentioned education background. Most of the experiences employees at the public relations department are from rank and file.

“It is important to have a degree in mass communication to be in a public relations department. Although there are quite a number of public relations officers who are at their posts through rank and file, I strongly believe that the education background is very important”

Two of the respondents whom have a different point of view said that a degree in any field would be sufficient to be in the public relations department.

“Ideally it should be a basic degree. However, it has been found that having a basic degree is not as valuable as having had prior experience in the public relations industry. Hence, if the person has had quite a bit of experience and has a certificate or a diploma, we would consider having them”

“Degree in any discipline of social sciences is good enough. However, having public relations education is a definite advantage”

Other requirements to be in the public relations department

Most of the respondents agree that communication skills are an important element that a public relations practitioner needs to have. Among the ten respondents, eight of them expressed the importance of communication skills, among other things.

One of the respondents mentioned that a public relations practitioner should also be informative on the things that are related to them and the organization. Basically they need to have a wide range of general knowledge to be a good public relations practitioner.

Writing skills is also one of the requirements which were mentioned by the respondents. Five of the respondents stated that a public relations practitioner should have the ability to write especially in English, as well as in Malay.

“Language is very important. They should have the flare in writing and also speaking especially in English and Malay”

“A person should be able to write to be in a public relations department. A candidate should go through a face to face interview, as well as a written test.

This goes to show that writing and communication skill is important for public relation practitioners”

There are a variety of characteristics, which was mentioned by the respondents. Some of them feel that a public relations practitioner should be open-minded and a person should be knowledgeable and they should also have some experience.

Experience is also an important factor to be considered as a way to be chosen in the public relations department. Six of the respondents mentioned that a person needs to be open-minded and have the initiative to learnt gain good experience.

“To be in public relations, a person must have the need and initiative to learn. Learning is a way to acquire good experience and knowledge and experience in public relations needed to be good in practice”

Other than communication and writing skills, knowledge and experience, one of the respondents did mention that a public relations practitioner should have talents and also interpersonal skills to be in the profession. A person should also have patience when dealing with people.

“Personality of person is important. To be a public relations practitioner, a candidate should be a people’s person and also have the ability to project a good image of the company”

As a whole, a public relations person should be an all rounder. One of the respondents said that a public relation practitioner should be an all rounder; this is because they deal with a lot of people from various fields.

Practitioner’s Opinion on public relations education

When asked about the matter mentioned above, the respondents gave a variety of opinion during the interview sessions. Bottom line all of the respondents agreed that it is good for students and also the profession.

“It is good enough for student’s training. I have attended at work are basically what students have learned at the university level”

“Public relation education in Malaysia provides good training for the future and current public relations practitioners in Malaysia. I feels that the most important part of having the education background, is the ability to apply the knowledge to the real working practice”

“Over the years, public relations education has slowly developed its popularity. At one point of time, public relations courses were only taught at ITM or now known as UiTM and USM. But now, it is taught at nearly all the local universities and in some colleges. This development is because the awareness among people on the importance of public relations. With the growing number of universities and colleges offering courses in public relations, there would surely be the presence of a competing environment. And this is a good way to produce a good quality of future public relations practitioners”

“Public relations education is a good opportunity for students to learn public relations in Malaysian context. This could help the profession by producing well-trained students to be in public relations practice”

“Public relations education in Malaysia is good. But I still think that there is still room for improvement in certain areas. The improvements mentioned are related to the student’s leadership skills, writing and communication skills. Certain skills could be improved through experience, which could be obtained once students have entered the working world”

“Having public relations education in Malaysia is a positive step in improving the profession. It is good in the sense that it is considered a preparation or background knowledge for students to practice public relations in Malaysia”

“Public relations education in Malaysia is still newly recognized compared to courses like accounting and law. However, the effort to have a specialized course in public relations is very encouraging. For me, it shows a good development of the profession”

“Public relations education in the country is growing slowly. It may not be that popular because of the misinterpretation of the profession. There are still those who think that public relations merely requires a person to smile and be nice to people”

Practitioners’ expectations of Graduates from public relations courses

A variety of answers were given by respondents when the mentioned matter above was forwarded. Four of the ten respondents expressed that students should have the ability to apply their knowledge and education that they have acquired during their college years. Another four of the respondents feel that public relations graduates should be fluent in English and Malay, three said that they should be open minded and also have the initiative to learn while one of the respondents said that they should be able to adapt with their surroundings.

“Students should be well prepared for the real working world upon completion of their studying duration. What differentiates each individual is their ability to put the things that they have learned into practice”

“The public relations education is a solid ground for students to be in the profession. Students should be efficient and be able to work fast with the knowledge and training that they have gone through”

“Students are still new in the when they get into the working world. But it is not a reason for them to be passive or inferior with their surroundings. They should be able to apply their knowledge to the real working practice”

“Fresh graduates are expected to know the basic functions of a public relations department. The ability of students to communicate their ideas and thoughts well, be it verbally or in written”

“Students should also be knowledgeable and be able to write and converse in English and Malay language. Students should be open minded in learning new things when they reach path in the real world, because certain things may not be taught in college but might be in the real practice”

“Students must be open minded and have the willingness to learn from people who have been working in the organization that they have just entered. Education is important for students to hold a good position in an organization. But with a degree, a person is still not considered an expert. I expect students to be eager to learn and to try to improve themselves to a good practitioner”

“I do not expect much from them, since they are still new. But they should want to learn and improve fast. This is prior to the reason that students who have just graduated are only equipped with the theory, but they are not exposed to the practical part of their jobs”

Recommended subjects for the improvement of public relations graduates

Three of the respondents mentioned that practical training is very important while another three mentioned general knowledge as a respond to the question. Two of the respondent said that language lessons at college are very valuable. Subjects like etiquette; public

speaking; crisis management; publication and media relations were each mentioned by one respondent.

Practical training is considered very important to be included in the curriculum of public relations courses.

“The practice of practical training in public relations courses by saying that it is the best way to teach students about their future-working world. The theorists are important, but with practical training, students are able to relate what they have learn with their experiences”

“Practical training should also be included in public relations education, other than the basic principles and theories. Students should b given the exposure on the activities of the public relations department in organizations in the real context”

“Students should go to visits to companies. Visits for learning purposes should be arranged for students once in a while to give the exposure on the future fields that they might be working in. students should visit organizations like banks and learn about the activities of the organization, for example its campaign and the service promotions”

Two respondents agreed that language is an important subject for preparing students to enter the working arena.

“All subjects are important, but English and Malay language is the most important subject. In my opinion, public relations officers are required to communicate all the time; thus student needs to master the two main languages to be able to communicate well”

“English is an important subject to be given extra attention to. It is necessary in my opinion for students to a good training in the language. Students should also

need to have a lot of general knowledge. I advised students to read a lot of materials to obtain extra knowledge and to improve their language”

Another respondent who mentioned general knowledge; subjects related to community and culture; etiquette; curriculum of public relations education should be interdisciplinary to ensure that students are equipped with knowledge on the possible fields that they might be working with.

“Students need to have a lot of general knowledge. Knowledge could help students improve their communications skills and make them feel confident in delivering ideas and in participating during business discussions”

“A public relations practitioner has to work with a vast number of people, which comes from a variety of origins and standards. Thus, future public relations practitioners should be prepared with such knowledge”

“Etiquette also important because that student should know how to respect and to act properly around people”

“Subjects like marketing, branding management and languages should be included in the syllabus for future benefit”

The importance of new technology to public relations education

All of the targeted respondents agree to the fact that new technology is an important area for public relations education.

“New technology is extremely important. It is because a public relations practitioner can not afford to be left behind. New technology also gives practitioner more tools to carry their work out efficiently and cost effectively”

“It is good to include new technology in public relations education. This could prepare students to be more exposed and also to be a more versatile practitioner. Having the ability to apply technology in their work could help a person to be, more efficient”

“New technology is a blessing to be public relations field. It is because it makes work easier and faster, especially the e-mail. The web sites are also very useful to provide information. Hence, new technology is important to be included in public relations education”

“New technology is important to nearly everything in this world and public relations are not excluded. Public relations practitioner needs to know about things that they are linked to. This is to produce future public relations practitioners who will be considered an all rounder”

Two of the respondents think that new technology is important to public relations as it is applied for published materials and other things, which involve graphic software.

The preference of practitioners to work with public relations graduates

All of the respondents interviewed agreed that they prefer to have a public relations graduate in their department rather than a person without public relations education.

“A person would learn or take up a course, which is related to whatever they want to be in the future. I believe that if someone enjoys their job that person will be more productive and it would be better for the company”

“Choose a person public relations education background to be in my department. A candidate with public relations education background is faster and easier to work with. In the modern world, the profession needs to have people who are

active. Young fresh graduates have the advantage of being a good public relations practitioner”

“I prefer to have a public relations graduate whom has the ability to apply their education. For me, if the students can not apply or do not know how to use their education, there would be no point in giving them the job. Their training will not be considered beneficial for them and also the profession”

“A person with public relations education is already aware in the works of the profession. Since they are trained to a public relations practitioner, it is to my preference to have public relations educated person in my department”

There are respondents who are more flexible in the sense that they would also considers other criteria to choose a person to be on the public relations department aside public relations education background.

“If the person without public relations education background is charismatic, knowledgeable, and hardworking and has other good traits to be public relations officers, he or she is a good candidate. But having public relations education is a bonus for the persons who would like to pursue in this field”

“I prefer a person with public relations education to be in my department. But I think that if an organization is new, an experienced person is more required his or her education backgrounds”

Suggestions on improving public relations education

Five of the ten respondents said that exposure of the working world from practical training and experienced lecturer is good for improving public relations education.

“I feel that practical training could improve the students’ communication skills. It could that practical the things that they have learned”

“Apart from giving students exposure on the activities of the profession, lecturer should also be experienced in the field”

“Students should be given examples on how the principles really apply to ensure that their learning experience is complete”

Another respondent who suggested practical training as a way to improve public relation education.

“I think that more practical training than classroom work is good for improving public relations education”

“Lecturers who teach public relations should be equipped with experience. This is because the theories learned from books and the practice of public relations in Malaysia may not be the same. Lecturers should be able to relate and share their experience with the students as a way to make them understand the real scenario of public relations in Malaysia”

“I suggest that the quality of the courses need to be improved. In some cases, lecturers without industry experience are unable to provide the proper knowledge and guidance that is necessary for students. And these same lecturers would go far in constantly reading up on case studies and other materials”

Two from the respondents said that intensive learning of Malay and English language is important for the improvement of public relations education.

“Intensive learning on the mentioned languages should be imposed on students to ensure that they would not have problems when they are required to write or to communicate in their future occupations”

“Students should be fluent in English to be successful in the profession”

“It is a bonus if students could have IT as one of their subjects. It is applicable and important in this technological era. I also feel that students should learn on the fields that are related to the profession for example marketing, branding and also advertising”

“That is to change the perceptions of people towards public relation education. Public relations need to be seen as a major course that is important, just as like other professional courses”

The development of public relations in Malaysia

Nine of the respondents are saying that the development of public relations in Malaysia is positive. One of the nine respondents thinks that public relations have gone through an encouraging development pace all through the years.

“I realize that there are a lot of organizations, which has a public relations department. This goes to show that public relations are now recognized as an important component of an organization”

“I think it is safe to say that this department has grown into a good development and its function is fully utilised. Same goes to public relations in Malaysia as a whole. I think it has developed in the direction where it should be”

“I think that public relations industry has been given better recognition these days. A lot of organization has realizes the importance to have public relations

personnel in their organization. Companies are starting to realize that figures are not the only important thing. The image of its organization should also be given attention. Thus, this is where the function of public relations comes in”

“A lot of companies in Malaysia are employing more public relations graduates. Public relations used to be not that important, but now that most companies are in the process of globalization and there is a realization that most western corporations think very highly of public relations, the trend, in my opinion, has spread in Malaysia”

“Public relation is still misunderstood, and some people do not see its importance. But compared to before, the extent of awareness of the importance of this field has improved”

“The Malaysian society still portrays public relation profession as not a very important tool for the organization”

The importance of public relations education towards the development of the profession

All of the respondents think that public relations education is important for the development of public relation profession.

“With public relations education, people will really understand their position and functions. I claim that, in the profession, the training is very important, and public relations are not excluded. With well-educated practitioners, the development of the profession will definitely improve”

“It is important to have public relations practitioners who have public relations education background. With the training and the education background, they are the most suitable persons to be in the profession”

“Public relations education will give future public relations practitioners the rough picture of the practice before entering the profession. Thus, they will have the ability to develop ideas and creativity on how to develop the profession effectively with the knowledge that they have obtained”

“When a person has public relations education, he or she is trained to be in the profession. The person would know how to handle things related to the profession. And as a result, with public relations education, there are and will be a good generation of public relations practitioners”

“Public relations education is a foundation for students. Students could only help the profession if they continue upgrading themselves on the profession. The learning process should not stop upon graduation. If you graduated yesterday and have learned nothing today, you ‘ll be uneducated tomorrow”

“Without education, there would be no proper development of public relations. Thus public relations education holds an important role for the development of the public relation profession”

Employment of non public relations educated persons in the public relations department

Four of the ten respondents commented on the matter above by saying that a person is employed depending on the company’s requirements. Different companies will have different requirements on selecting its employees. Two of the respondents said that there are not sufficient public relations graduates another two said that there are attributes that needs to be considered other than a public relations certificate. The need to have technical knowledge was mentioned by two respondents and another one of the respondent said the companies still misunderstood the real meaning of public relations.

“Selection of employees would depend on the company and the candidate. If the company needs somebody with several listed requirements, and the candidate fulfills it, the he or she might get the job. Hence, if the company wants somebody with public relations education, they will choose somebody with public relations education”

“Companies employ people with different requirements. Some companies may want to have somebody with public relations education because they think it is important, and some companies may think that a good personality and a nice smile is enough”

From a different point of view, two of the respondents said that the number of public relations graduates in Malaysia is not sufficient.

“They might not be enough public relations graduate in the market to be employed”

“Public relations education is still new. Thus, most of the public relations practitioners in the country are at their posts because of their experience and skills”

“Public relations are misunderstood in Malaysia. People do not realize the importance of public relations. I think that an organization which does not realize the importance of public relations education and the field as a whole would just employ just anybody who they think is suitable, even school leavers”

“I feel that if a candidate has what it takes to be a public relations practitioner, that is by being open minded, knowledgeable, hardworking and many more, the company may overlook the education background part. But in my opinion, I

stated that a person with public relations education would always be given priority”

“A degree in public relations does not guarantee one to be employed as a public relations person. There are other attributes that the company has to look for. For example behaviour and technical competencies. There are qualities that help strengthen the company’s image”

“Companies employ non public relations educated persons to be in the department because of the need to have technical knowledge. This is to ensure that no miscommunication will occur”

CONCLUSION

Public relations education as explained in this research is important for the profession but companies are still flexible in recruiting their employees due to the reasons stated in this research. The perception of people on the profession still varies, but most of the practitioners think that the profession is developing in the pace that is shall.

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