

RESEARCH

The Perceptions of Professionals, Faculty, and Students Regarding the Implementation of an  
Agricultural Communications Degree Program in the United Kingdom

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## **The Perceptions of Professionals, Faculty, and Students Regarding the Implementation of an Agricultural Communications Degree Program in the United Kingdom**

### **Introduction/need for research**

In the United Kingdom, agricultural studies are the fastest growing discipline at the university level (Truss, 2016). Agricultural communicators are important to agriculture and society as a whole because they are able to bridge the gap between farmer and consumer. Agricultural communications programs provide students the opportunity to study journalism, public relations, and graphic design with an emphasis on the agricultural industry (The Ohio State University, 2020). Therefore, agricultural communications graduates are equipped with the skills to communicate agricultural issues to the public.

The need to develop an agricultural communications degree program in the U.K. has already been established by research conducted by Maples (2018). Building on this study, further research needs to be conducted to determine what types of academic modules should be included in a degree plan. Understanding what competencies employers would expect from a recent graduate, as well as understanding what students expect to learn and what faculty might expect to teach are all important. Also, examining how an agricultural communications program might be structured in the U.K. as compared to what programs look like in the U.S. is important. Though some literature exists on these topics, especially literature focused on building academic programs in the U.S., little to no information exists to guide the development of agricultural communications academic programs in the U.K.

### **Conceptual or theoretical framework**

Sprecker and Rudd's (1998) study on creating the agricultural communications curriculum for the University of Florida, found two themes. The first theme of the study was communications skills were, overall, more important than agricultural knowledge. "Oral and written skills need to be excellent. Students need to be versatile, able to do a variety of communication functions in both print and electronic media" (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998, p. 6). The second theme revealed a broad overview of Florida food, agricultural and natural resources was essential. The study's subjects, who were agricultural communications professionals in Florida, thought an overview of agriculture was more beneficial than specialized agriculture courses (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). In more recent studies, it has been observed that agricultural communications students should be trained in all elements of communication, which supports Sprecker and Rudd's recommendation for students to be versatile (Morgan, 2010). Morgan and Rucker's (2013) comparison of skills industry professionals and faculty viewed as most important for agricultural communication graduates found the skills with the highest level of agreement among faculty and industry professionals included "oral communication and the correct use of grammar" (Morgan & Rucker, 2013, p. 61). The ability to understand the agricultural industry is still perceived as an important skill for graduates (Morgan & Rucker, 2013). In 2020, Leal et al. conducted a national study of agricultural communications faculty, recent graduates, and industry professionals. Among all three evaluation groups, the highest importance for technical skills was placed on "communicating in written form" (p. 7). The most important technical skills needed for students are found in courses that focus on visual communication, oral communication, professional development, and written communication (Leal et al., 2020).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative field interviews were conducted with 14 U.K. industry professionals, academic faculty, and students. Of those 14, three were students, five were faculty members, and six were industry professionals. The pool of professional subjects in the agricultural communications sector was drawn from the Guild of Agricultural Journalists (GAJ) in Edinburgh. The pool of academic agriculture faculty subjects and agriculture students were drawn from the Scotland's Rural College in Edinburgh. Faculty members experienced in agricultural communications and qualitative research curated interview questions designed to provoke subject opinions. The interviews were conducted in person or by phone call. An introductory email was sent to inform participants of the study and recruit participants.

After the collection period, interviews were transcribed and stored on a password protected laptop. Transcribed interviews were coded by the researcher using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative data analysis was documented in NVivo and was peer-reviewed by a panel of experts, constituting the type of audit proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Concerning the analysis of qualitative data, an audit trail (in the form of an NVivo project file) exists to confirm the presence of themes that emerged among the qualitative responses.

## **Results/findings**

Research objective one aimed to understand what skills potential employers would expect new graduates to possess after completing an agricultural communications degree. It also aimed to understand what students would expect to be learning as well as what faculty would expect to teach. According to Sprecker and Rudd (1998), agricultural communicators are not agriculturalists primarily, but rather specialized communicators. The data collected indicates that writing skills and interpersonal communications skills were crucial skills for graduates to possess after graduation.

Research objective two aimed to determine the agricultural and communication modules that should be included in the degree plan. Similar to a study conducted by Sprecker and Rudd (1998), respondents agreed that students should get a broad base of all areas in agriculture, so a generalist approach would be critical. The findings indicated that students would benefit most from generalized agriculture course modules. An overwhelming majority of subjects claimed that writing and journalistic skills were extremely important for students to learn. Another important finding was that students should learn soft skills, including public speaking and interpersonal communication skills, through their coursework.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, an agricultural communications degree program in the UK should emphasize students gaining broad agricultural knowledge, writing skills, and interpersonal communications skills. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended the United Kingdom higher education system should use the following list of potential modules/classes as a starting point for an agricultural communications degree program. Agricultural modules including: introductory classes in animal science, horticulture, crop production, economics, or issues in agriculture; and, communications courses including: communicating agriculture to the public, agriculture reporting and feature writing, public speaking, crisis and risk communications, and electronic communications. The agricultural courses recommended are the type of general agriculture courses that are taught in the agricultural communications discipline in the United States (Large, 2014). The recommended communications courses mirror the capstone courses taught in the U.S. program with emphasis on writing courses (Large, 2014).

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