

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

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INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom, agricultural studies are the fastest growing discipline at the university level (Truss, 2016). Agricultural communications programs provide students the opportunity to study journalism, public relations, and graphic design with an emphasis on the agricultural industry in order to bridge the gap between farmers and consumers (The Ohio State University, 2020). The need to develop an agricultural communications degree program in the U.K. has already been established by research conducted by Maples (2018). This study was designed to gather detailed information to aid in the planning of future academic programming in the discipline of agricultural communications in the U.K. Its purpose was to gather the opinions of professionals, academic faculty, and students involved in the industry as well as in academia to guide the creation of a new agricultural communications academic discipline in the U.K.

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Further determine professional skills U.K. agricultural communications professionals, faculty, and students would expect to have after completing an agricultural communications degree.
2. Determine what modules will be more useful and important to graduates entering the agricultural communications field.

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 subjects were drawn from the Guild of Agricultural Journalists (GAJ) and Scotland's Rural College both in Edinburgh. 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 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.

Writing and journalistic skills

I think being able to write in an interesting way with logically presented information is an extremely valuable skill.
[CH, faculty]

Interpersonal skills

It is important to be able to interact with a range of people and to be able to draw insights from those interactions.
[PH, faculty].

General agricultural modules

I think they should get a good grasp of all the basics that are driving the food and agricultural sector.
[SK, professional]

Communication modules

In terms of communication courses, interview skills, presentation skills and all these soft skill areas would be very helpful to get credibility in that kind of industry.
[SM, faculty]

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. 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. 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.

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:

- introductory classes in animal science
- horticulture
- crop production
- economics
- issues in agriculture

Communications courses:

- communicating agriculture to the public
- agriculture reporting and feature writing
- public speaking
- crisis and risk communications
- electronic communications