

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

Abby Taylor, adt028@uark.edu

1120 W. Maple, E108 AFLS
Fayetteville, AR 72701

(479) 575-2035

Alex McLeod, anmcleod@uark.edu

Jefferson D. Miller, jdmiller@uark.edu

Cassandra Cox, ccrumle@uark.edu

K. Jill Rucker, kjrucker@uark.edu

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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 is needed 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

A study of curricula conducted by Evans and Bolick (1982) found agricultural communications programs in the U.S. during the 1980s had many similarities. In general, the programs were designed to pursue the best of both the agricultural and journalism disciplines. This enabled graduates to apply technical skills and knowledge from both disciplines. Graduates were then better able to communicate between farm and off-farm audiences. Evans and Bolick (1982) also observed overwhelming support by agricultural communications academic programs for students to have general knowledge of agriculture, but knowledge of specific agricultural practices was less important. Sprecker and Rudd's (1998) study on creating the agricultural communications curriculum for the University of Florida, found some themes that corroborate Evans and Bolick's findings in support of promoting a general knowledge of agriculture for agricultural communications students. Communications skills were, overall, more important than agricultural knowledge was one theme of the study. "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). A 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 requiring specialized agricultural courses would be inappropriate. An overview of agriculture would be more beneficial (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998).

Methodology

Qualitative field interviews were conducted with three subject groups: industry professionals, academic faculty, and students. A total of 14 subjects participated in the study. 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 faculty subjects was

drawn from the agriculture faculty at Scotland's Rural College in Edinburgh. Student respondents were recruited from agriculture students attending Scotland's Rural College. Faculty members experienced in agricultural communications and qualitative research skillfully 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 gauge whether they would like to participate.

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 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) and supports the findings of Evans and Bolick (1982) and Sprecker and Rudd (1998) that generalized agriculture courses served to better prepare students over specialized agricultural courses. 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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