Mokhtar ELARESHI*
Ayman BAJNAID**

Libyan PR Participants' Perceptions of and Motivations for Studying PR in Libya

Abstract

Public relations in Libya is very much a new phenomenon, even compared with other Arab countries, although there are PR practices growing in tandem with some large local businesses and organisations. Based on the assumption that PR continues to play a vital role in communities and businesses, it is important to reconsider and evaluate its practices regularly, especially in terms of teaching and skills (including its curriculum). This study explores the quality of the educational PR curriculum, training and taught courses in Libyan universities by focusing on the perceptions of Libyan PR's academic professionals and senior PR students, covering roughly more than a quarter-century of teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It examines how university PR students are taught, what strategies and modules are applied and how professionals and students evaluate the PR curriculum and their practical advantages. Based on a survey (N=367) and interview (N=15) approach, the overall findings revealed that the PR curriculum needed to be updated and that PR should be recognised as a practical, not a theoretical, subject and should have its own union helping to provide more training programmes in an updated setting.

Keywords: Public relations teaching, PR professionalism, Libyan PR, PR curricula

Introduction

In December 1951, Libya[1] declared its independence as the United Kingdom of Libya, a constitutional and hereditary monarchy under King Idris. In 1959, oil was discovered, which produced subsequent income from petroleum sales and transformed Libya from a very poor state to an extremely wealthy state. In September 1969, Colonel Muammer Gaddafi took power and started to improve the country's infrastructure until the Arab uprisings of 2011 (42 years). During these periods, however, there is little known that is of relevance to what we consider as public relations practices. Examples of the relationships and different communi-

* Al Ain University of Science and Technology (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates), mokhtar.elareshi@aau.ac.ae.
** King Abdulaziz University (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia), anbajnaid@kau.edu.sa.

cation forms between the rulers/authorities and their people during these times might be seen, however, as the basis of public relations (just PR practices). This paper aims to evaluate the situation of PR in higher education. It focuses on the main challenges facing PR education in Libyan universities through examining the perceptions of academic PR teaching staff and senior students. While academics have begun to examine student perceptions towards the PR field (Bowen, 2009), this paper is divided into five sections. After its introduction, a Libyan education overview offers a discussion on how Libyan education and PR have developed, especially regarding the PR curriculum and training programmes provided. This is followed by a methodology section which applies both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examining this matter. The fourth section highlights the main findings, while the last section provides a concluding discussion that links to the literature review, dealing with Libyan PR education and its implications for the field. The study attempts to fill this gap.

Libyan Education Overview

According to the United Nations and the Human Development Index, Libya has the highest literacy rate in the Arab world, which has positively affected the standard of living and also kept the country ahead of most other African countries (Reham & Miliszewska, 2010). In terms of education, for example, in the early 1970s (known as the era of Gaddafi), Libyan education infrastructure witnessed significant development and the country was seen as very progressive in terms of ensuring access to appropriate free education for all its citizens, male and female (Tamtam, Gallagher, Olabi, & Naher, 2011). The government, at that time, embarked on development programmes aimed at the growth, upgrading and modernisation of its entire fundamental infrastructure, including the education sector. For example, the number of Libyan universities increased from only two in the mid-1970s to nine major public universities in 2003, which were allocated to vibrant cities (shown in Table 1). Prior to this, Benghazi University was established in 1955, followed by the Faculty of Science which became Tripoli University in 1957 (Essays UK, 2013). Libyan higher education (HE) was seen as a key development area for the country. The main philosophy and objectives were to provide qualified local teachers and employees, as well as to provide educational opportunities which respond to market needs and which prepare graduates who possess the scientific and technological competences required for their careers. As a result, the number of public and private colleges and universities hugely increased (Reham & Miliszewska, 2010). These universities are licensed and supported by the Ministry of Education – Higher Education Affairs.

It is noted that, since early 2011, most of the education system's infrastructure has unfortunately been ruined because of Western involvement, civil war and sectarian fighting as a consequence of the Arab uprisings of 2011. This has had a serious impact on all developments in the country and affected all sectors, including higher education. For example, in early 2012 the Ministry of Education changed all elements of the national curricula which mentioned Gaddafi's era and which promoted his ideology from primary schools to universities (Libyan Organization of Policies & Strategies, 2016). This, of course, has had an impact on the future of education as it takes time to change/produce a new curriculum and the country now lacks a plan and a clear strategy to re-invest and take the next steps forward as a result of the conflict and instability. In terms of higher education, this means more delay in teaching, training courses and practising skills.

PR Education in Libya

PR education in Libya is very much younger than its historical profession or occupation field. Public relations is generally an activity performed within the community, as well as within business, and seen as one of the world's fastest growing professions even though great differences exist, both nationally and internationally, when it comes to practice and teaching programmes (Kirat, 2016; Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999). With the rapid development and expansion of communication (especially the Internet and social networks) and the large number of social activities taking place between individuals and organisations, there is a need to understand PR in the digital revolution, including the Libyan system.

It is fair to say that PR practice in Libya goes back to 643AD when Arabs first settled and started to spread Islam peacefully, based on persuasion, so as to help locals to convert to Islam as a religion and a means of communication (Abdullah, Elareshi, Robinson, & Dheyab, 2018). This developed into the relationship between the rulers (leaders/imams) and their people. In the more modern world, some businesses, individuals and even the government in Libya have used PR practices to benefit themselves by providing positive stories about themselves and also by using PR as a "propaganda platform" and "mouthpiece tool", or by manipulating the mass media so as to influence the public, in a similar way to that which Bowen (2004, 2010) indicated.[2]

Academically, during the 1990s, PR education was introduced in Libya with only a basic curriculum. Some PR practitioners undergo formal education in PR, mostly outside Libya, while others do not, as gaining a specialised degree in PR may not be a prerequisite for working in the PR field (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 2004). In 1992, the University of Benghazi launched the first PR division at the Department of Media in the Faculty of Arts (public institution). Since the Media Department started to teach and grant PR degrees, it has had a remarkable turnover with many students showing huge interest in enrolling in the subject or affiliating from other, similar subjects that fit with PR criteria and requirements, such as management and economic subjects.

Motivations for, and perceptions of, studying PR are varied and have not yet been examined in Libya. Libyan views of PR would mostly fit somewhere between those who claim that it is easier to study the subject and to gain careers in this field as it presents fewer problems and challenges (Bowen, 2004; Hajoš, 2017), those who consider the PR profession as being prestigious and glamorous (Erzikova & Berger, 2011) and those who like to plan events and who like people (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009). For example, Sorto (1990) found that PR students overwhelmingly studied PR because they liked working with people.

At the beginning of taught PR, about 25 male and female students were enrolled and these graduated in 1995 (note that the Department already had two other divisions: Journalism Studies and Radio and TV). These PR graduates became the first holders of Bachelor's degrees in PR from Libyan HE. Since then, several other Libyan public/private universities have started their own divisions and departments teaching PR programmes. Table 1 below gives the most up-to-date figure of those universities that have established PR degrees, their estimated numbers of class graduates, their current students and their teaching staff. Despite challenges in obtaining accurate statistics on PR graduates in Libya, the number is estimated to be about 2,000, graduating between 1995 and 2017, with about 2,401 students currently studying at different public/private Libyan universities.

Table 1. The Development of Public Relations in Only Libyan Public Universities.

Institution	PR Established	No. of Class Graduates	Current Enrolment	No. of Teachers
Benghazi University	Division 1992 Department 2010	22	429	11
Tripoli University	Division 1998	15	960	8
Musrata University	Division 2003 Department 2014	11	84	4
Azzaytuna University	Division 2002 Department 2015	10	340	9
Aljafarah University	Department 2016	NY	NI	7
Sirt University	Division 2014	NY	56	4
Al Zawiya University	Division 2004	9	129	18
University of Sebha	Division 2009	2	31	3
Tobruk University	Division 2015	3	163	3
Derna University	Division 2003	14	40	6
Omar al Mukhtar University – al-Bayda campus – al-Qubah campus	Division 2005 Division 2012	7 3	94 35	4 6
Al Jabal Al Gharbi University – Al Zintan campus – Badr campus	Department 2017 Division 2016	NY NY	NI 21	2 2
Al-Mergib University	Division 2017	NY	19	1

Note: NY: not yet graduated; NI: no information.
Source: information obtained from public relations divisions and departments at universities.

Having observed the early years of teaching the PR curriculum in Libya, it seems that there was a lack of proper planning and, as a result, most PR graduates were incompetent with insufficient skills – this was the case with most PR programmes at universities (Kirat, 2016). This was due to the PR programmes being unable to provide graduates with those skills need-ed for the labour market. One of the main challenges, for example, was that there were no clear curricula that the PR divisions and departments followed. Instead, they used other Arab and non-Arab curricula which were not based on the local labour market or on a clear strate-gic plan for local employment. To reflect this, some have argued that PR curricula should fo-cus more on [local] businesses in terms of financial and business management concepts (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 2004).

Another problem was that most of the Libyan universities that taught PR programmes re-lied mostly on non-local teachers who came for a short time to teach PR and who, in spite of their expertise, were not clear about the local needs and priorities in terms of PR graduation and the PR market. This was because there were no Libyan-qualified teachers of this subject.

For example, the Media Department at Benghazi University was wholly dependent on academics from Iraq, Egypt and Sudan.

Another problem is that, during this period, there were no professional PR bodies or organisations in Libya that could provide PR practitioners/students with the real practices and skills that they needed, as highlighted in the Excellence Theory (Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Kirat, 2016). Kirat (2016) states that PR is seen as a profession that suffers from misconception and misunderstanding and lacks ethics and accountability. This is because most organisations either did not believe in, or did not foresee, a managerial role for PR. Most of their PR tasks and practices were centred on daily routine activities. Therefore, sending PR students to learn from these organisations was unfortunately useless.

Further, because of the urgent need for Libyan academic specialists in PR, the University of Benghazi – followed by other universities – started to enrol and accept applicants to study PR programmes leading to a Master's degree in PR and Advertising. In 1996, the first Master's degree in PR was awarded by Benghazi University, which can be seen as a starting-point for the development of Libyan PR teaching staff. By the end of 2000, four candidates were granted Master's degrees in PR and, since then, the number has increased. In line with government plans to develop universities' educational programmes, in 2001, the government allowed and provided sponsorships for some Libyan university candidates who had been granted BA degrees to study PR abroad for Master's and Doctorate degrees either at Arab universities (e.g., Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon) or at Western and non-Western universities (e.g., the US, the UK, France, Malaysia), especially after the political problems with the West were solved, the international isolation of Libya was ended by the signing of international agreements and a good relationship developed between Libya and the West. It is now estimated that the number of Libyans who have MAs and PhDs in PR stands at about 60 and these are now teaching PR courses in different Libyan universities.

PR Curriculum and Training Programmes in Libya

Although the PR programme in most Libyan universities has been designed to educate professional PR practitioners, students receive relatively little training to be able to serve local and national needs. Knowledge to be conveyed in PR covers basic theories and concepts for practising PR. Courses are divided into basic, intermediate and advanced. Basic courses cover, for example, Introduction to PR (including theory and origin), The Principle of PR and Advertising and Marketing. The basic courses are prerequisite for intermediate courses such as PR Management, Ceremonies and Protocols, Organisational Communication and Crisis Management in PR. Advanced courses convey specialised content to enhance students' level, such as Practices for PR, Writing for PR and PR Campaigns. It is noteworthy that the language used to deliver all PR programmes is Arabic, although there are also classes teaching the English language.

These PR modules in most Libyan universities have been designed by Arab PR specialists or are taught at similar Arab universities. These modules are supposed to support the Libyan environment and the needs in this field at functional and academic levels (Kirat, 2016). The content of these modules is interdisciplinary and ranges from communication studies through business management to sociology. In the Libyan educational system, the requirements for joining any university-taught courses insist that applicants need to have at least a

high-school degree. Most students enrolled on taught PR programmes have to study other joint media modules from other media sections. PR is taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in most universities, including the Media and Arts faculties in Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata. In order to obtain a university degree in PR, the applicant also needs to achieve a number of units (123 credit hours) for a period of three years after the completion of the first year, or for four years in the case of PR departments.

Although some Libyan universities find it difficult to offer high-quality taught programmes and study plans in PR, in the Libyan educational system it is believed to be important to produce high-quality PR professionals to support the labour market (Al-Bady, 1991; Stacks et al., 1999). This means that a strategic plan is required to match such needs and that PR programmes in HE should be certified and recognised. However, in reality, the teaching of PR programmes differs from one division to another. The quality also depends on the location of the division and of the university within the country. For example, it is observed that taught PR programmes in western parts of Libya, such as Tripoli and Misrata (large and vibrant cities), are more dynamic than those in the far eastern and southern parts (e.g., Sabha, al-Bayda, Tobruk). In the latter, the applicant usually studies theoretical modules rather than practical modules. This can be due to the cost of running practical and training programmes such as students' access to media technologies (e.g., computers and the Internet) and their opportunities to go on field visits (e.g., visits to public services and commercial or industrial institutions).

Final-year students on taught programmes need to undertake work experience (internships) with professional organisations before they graduate. In this regard, the PR divisions/departments deploy students through the internships into the market to build up connections and develop skills and place them face-to-face with the real world of work. They also need to undertake a research project, likely to be based on a field visit, ranging from one to four months, under the supervision of a number of academic teaching staff. Others have to design work related to PR activities, such as booklets, brochures, newsletters or leaflets. These projects and work-experience projects are subject to evaluation and examination by a committee formed by the department/faculty in accordance with the university regulations. Once the applicant finishes all the required modules, exams and training courses, they can graduate and are ready to practise PR and to work in the field.

Methodology

Research Questions

This paper examines the perceptions and evaluations of senior PR students and PR teaching staff of the quality of the curricula and training programmes at Libyan universities, as well as the challenges facing the development of realistic practices of teaching. The research questions were therefore concerned with these views. The main questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the motivations and perceptions of senior PR students regarding the PR subject, institution, training programmes, facilities, curriculum and teaching staff?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of PR teaching staff regarding the PR curriculum, training programmes, qualifications and skills provided by the university?

Method

In order to examine the research questions against the background of existing literature on PR education (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2011; Barry, 2005; Bowen, 2010; Hajoš, 2017; Muturi, An, & Mwangi, 2013; René Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011; Stacks et al., 1999), this study inquired into Libyan professionals' and senior PR students' perceptions using mixed methods (questionnaire and face-to-face interview). The reason for using these methods was to get a wide range of different responses, to be able to produce generalisable results from students' perceptions (survey), and to provide us with a more accurate interpretation of reality (interview). For these reasons, both methods were important means of obtaining direct information from respondents about their experiences and understanding of PR in Libyan higher education (e.g., the questionnaire was more for confirmatory evidence and the interview was for more exploratory reasons). The questions (survey and interview) were translated into Arabic, the country's official language, with back translation undertaken to ensure consistency and clarity. Consent forms from all respondents were obtained. All the 16 PR divisions and departments in Libyan universities teaching PR courses (Table 1 above) were targeted. The universities chosen were determined by the academic networks (interpersonal contacts and email requests) among collaborating colleagues at these institutions. The set-up of the mixed methods was as follows:

Student Survey

The questionnaire was administered to senior PR students (final year/semester) in classrooms between December 5, 2017 and January 30, 2018. A random sample of respondents were recruited by asking different PR academic staff to hand the questionnaire to their senior students and encourage them to participate in the survey. Respondents were made aware of the aims of the study and of how the results would be used (research purposes only). Respondents were thanked and given course credit for their time. After initially discarding questionnaires from 20 respondents who did not finish the questionnaire, the sampling resulted in a group of 367 respondents, a 94.84% response rate.

To set up the survey, a set of different questions and statements concerning the academic PR courses and training programmes provided by these universities was developed, aimed at obtaining an instrument for measuring students' perceptions and experiences of studying PR (e.g., Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009; Hajoš, 2017; Kirat, 2016). The questionnaire consisted of nine questions and was divided into two main parts. Part (1) was about the demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and year of study). Part (2) was designed to collect data regarding: respondents' main reasons for studying PR ("What is the main reason(s) for studying PR?"); university capacity ("Do you think your university is capable to teach PR?"); university facilities and resources ("How much do you benefit from the university library in your PR study?"); field visits and internships ("Does your Department organise any field visits to organisations related to PR?"); if so ("What was the main reason(s) for the visit?"); and statements evaluating PR programmes. These were categorised as nominal questions, while the statements were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree). Respondents took part voluntarily and were free to withdraw at any time.

Professionalism Interview

For the purpose of this study, a total of 15 participants from different PR departments was recruited (nine males and six females) who were qualified as PR teachers (colleagues and friends in different universities). The face-to-face interview was carried out at the same time as the student survey. To complement the note-taking during the interviews, all the interviews were audio-recorded to enable us to revisit the data again for any further consideration. The interview sheet included details about respondents' personal demographics with questions related to PR teaching using a structured interview guide that allowed for open-ended responses regarding their perceptions of the PR curriculum, the training programmes and the challenges that they faced. In detail, respondents were asked to state to what extent they had benefited from their university PR studies in their professional practices, to make statements about PR courses and training programmes and the future of PR training, PR legislation and regulations, performance, course usefulness and any obstacles facing the teaching of PR and to make any further suggestions for improving the quality of PR education. The interview typically lasted for between 20 and 30 minutes. The data were analysed by the two authors by reading and listening to each record and transcribing the important information regarding the research question.

Findings

Student Survey (Q1)

The results reported in this paper were drawn from a survey of a random sample, which was administered to senior PR students at Libyan universities. The results might not be generalised but provide clear indications of perceptions about PR education in Libya. Out of the 367 respondents, 63.3% were male and 36.7% female, with ages ranging from 18 to 28. A total of 90% indicated that they lived in a city, while 10% lived in a rural/village area.

The general response to the question "What is the main reason for choosing to study PR?" indicated that most respondents joined a PR programme for the following reasons: "I wanted to work in PR sector" (35%); "I like to deal with different people" (30%); "I have personal ambition and PR talent" (26.7%); "I am good at personal and communication skills" (13.3%); "Family desires and friends' recommendation" (8.3%); and "To gain money and market needs of this career" (5%). These findings showed the respondents' motivations for studying the PR programme and their ability to understand the function of the PR industry. The expectancy motivation theory suggests that the behaviour [of students] is caused by a belief that it will result in a desired reward or goal, e.g., a job. These reasons could have an important impact on PR students' motivations to learn and practise PR in the future (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009; Hajoš, 2017), as well as helping us to understand and enhance students' mind-set regarding PR functions (Bowen, 2010; Erzikova & Berger, 2011). Brunner and Fitch-Hauser (2009) found that most students chose PR as a subject because they liked to plan events, communicate with people and work with PR consultancies and corporations.

When asked whether their PR division/department was able to teach PR courses, 81.7% of respondents said "Yes", while only 6.7% "did not think so". This finding was supported by respondents clearly indicating that, when it came to university teaching facilities, the majority agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements (Table 2): "Teachers effectively interact with students in training/teaching programmes"; "PR curricula can serve specialists after graduating"; "PR curricula are sufficient"; and "Studying PR is more practical than theoretical". Some indicated that "The university provides financial, admin and technical re-

sources for training programmes". However, some general views favoured disagreement or neutrality, with some disagreeing that the university was able to provide suitable facilities for teaching PR. These findings are consistent with prior research which shows that the current practise of PR graduates is inadequate (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009; Kirat, 2016). These views are key factors in determining students' attitudes, as well as their satisfaction levels and motivations for studying PR as a subject and what they expected to gain from their studies (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009; Hajoš, 2017; Muturi et al., 2013). This understanding is necessary for faculty and university administrators to develop effective services and programmes.

Table 2. Respondents' Views on PR Programmes in their Universities (n = 367) (%).

	Agreement	DK	Disagreement
– Teachers interact with students	76.7	11.7	11.7
– PR curriculum can effectively serve specialists	65	25	10
– PR curricula are sufficient	61.7	20	18.3
– Studying PR is more practical than theoretical	60	13.3	26.7
– Classrooms are suitable for teaching PR	45	20	35
– The university has sufficient resources	40	30	30
– The university provides facilities for training	33.3	20	46.7

Respondents were also asked whether their university's library had enough PR resources (textbooks, books, journals etc.) and whether they made use of these during their PR studies. A total of 51.7% complained that the main library lacked Arabic textbooks on major PR topics, while 33.3% thought that their libraries lacked "some" or "a lot" of resources (15% respectively). These findings are not surprising as this can be seen as a common challenge affecting most subjects in Libyan universities where resources and knowledge are either very limited or old and out-dated (Al-Bady, 1991; Stacks et al., 1999).

Field visits and internships are quite important in any education system, offering opportunities for students to get involved and learn from the real world by visiting workplaces to see how jobs and activities are run. The majority of respondents (58.3%) indicated that their divisions/departments did not organise any field visits or internships, while some (26.7%) said "Sometimes" or "Yes", they did organise such visits (15%). Those in favour of having field visits indicated that the visit programmes were about (Table 3): "Training in actual PR skills and activities"; "How to do press releases and communicating with the public"; "How to deal with the company's external and internal audience"; "How to report PR activities"; and "How to write for the press". It seems that some PR divisions/departments were able to provide opportunities for their students to experience the real world, building up connections and understanding the standards of market requirements.

Table 3. Reasons for Field Visits and Internships (n = 367) (%).

To know about	Yes	No	DK
– Training in actual PR skills and activities	72.7	5.5	21.8
– Press releases and communicating with the public	69.1	12.7	18.2
– Dealing with the company's external audience	62.3	5.7	32.1
– Dealing with the company's internal audience	56.4	16.4	27.3
– Reporting PR activities	56.4	18.2	25.5
– Writing for the press and media	45.5	16.4	38.2

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to evaluate the PR curriculum and the academic teaching staff. There were nine evaluated statements associated with the PR curriculum and the teaching staff (Table 4). When analysing the statements, the highest scores were as follows: "Academic teaching staff encourage students to open discussion and dialogue"; "They are able to deliver information efficiently"; "They are tender, tasteful and kind in dealing with students"; "They urge students to search and read outside the lectures"; "They have sufficient knowledge of modern and applied PR"; "They have experience in dealing with modern technology used in PR"; "They believe in practices in PR"; and "Using old forms of lectures in PR are better for delivering information". These findings highlighted the level of satisfaction of respondents with their teaching-staff members (Hajoš, 2017).

Table 4. Evaluation of PR Curriculum and Academic Staff (n = 367) (%).

Academic staff	Agreement	DK	Disagreement
Encourage students to open discussion and dialogue	91.7	6.7	1.7
Be able to deliver information efficiently	88.3	10	1.7
Urge students to search and read outside the lectures	83.3	6.7	10
Seen as tender, tasteful and kind	81.7	11.7	6.7
Have sufficient knowledge in applied PR skills	78.3	15	6.7
Have experience in dealing with modern PR technology	75	13.3	11.7
Believe practices in PR are important	66.7	20	13.3
Use old forms of lectures in PR	61.7	8.3	30
Visual aids used during the lectures	48.3	25	26.7

Professionalism Interview (Q2)
A total of 15 academic teaching-staff members were voluntarily interviewed. Their expertise in PR ranged from four to more than 23 years' working experience. When asked about their level of education before enrolling in teaching PR, most indicated that they had benefited from their undergraduate PR programmes at their universities. This is a clear indication

that they were keen to study PR, aware of PR studies and already qualified to teach and practise the subject.

Their views on the current PR teaching programmes in Libya were varied, despite the relatively recent launch of PR programmes in most Libyan universities. Responses to this question highlighted that their PR divisions/departments were "concerned about the training aspect in teaching PR". Two interviewees added that "most of the curriculum was based on the theoretical aspect and that there was a lack of practical-skills courses". A few raised "the importance of developments in the field" and the question of whether "the current PR teaching-staff members were competent or trained to teach PR courses". One mentioned the challenges that PR faced in Libyan universities. It seems that these findings are inconsistent with the surveyed students who agreed that studying PR programmes was more practical than theoretical. The reason for this could be that PR students in some universities do not have the same facilities, such as field visits, as those in larger universities.

PR Teaching and Effectiveness

Respondents were asked to determine the best way to deliver effective PR teaching skills. Some interviewees were clearly able to highlight several factors that could help to improve the teaching and quality of PR. These factors included: "It is important to get students involved in training and work experience during their studies by engaging them in some companies". Three interviewees said that "Training students after graduation at major specialised PR institutions can help", or mentioned "Developing PR courses in line with progress in the field of PR". One interviewee described effective teaching as "Providing different facilities to students, such as getting them to access workshops, computers and the Internet in order to help them to design leaflets, catalogues etc.". Three interviewees mentioned that "Having a modern library with up-to-date textbooks and resources would also be important". "Organising field visits, or communications between PR students in different universities, so that they exchange experience and knowledge" and "PR courses/modules should be evaluated by external scientific bodies who specialise in PR developments" were also mentioned several times during the interviews.

PR Legislation and Regulations

When asked about PR legislation and regulations, very few academic teaching-staff members were fully aware of these. This is an indication that there is a real lack of knowledge about the ethical aspect of PR in terms of legislation and regulations (Bowen, 2004; Kirat, 2016). This can be seen in the fact that, in Libya, most institutions do not have written legislation and regulations concerning the practice of PR. Similarly, Brown et al. (2011) found that the majority of PR students were not familiar with PR as an academic subject and were misinformed about the profession. This is one of the main challenges that PR usually faces when it comes to practising in reality and it may be because most of those who work in PR in institutions lack PR qualifications (Kirat, 2016). This might not be surprising, however, as there is a lack of understanding of the parameters of the PR profession, confusion exists among

Libyan organisations when it comes to its practice and there are differences between hospitality and customer relations (Kirat, 2016). For example, Bowen (2009) found misconceptions about PR among university students, as they perceived it to be "selling an image" or "spin".

This was also clear when interviewees indicated that the university did not provide them with copies of such legislation, or did not make them aware of it. Four interviewees said that "Our department has not got procedure or rules on how to train PR students" and "I used my own knowledge and understanding of regulations to deal with some matters". Legislation and regulations are considered vital factors for the success of any PR activities. PR practitioners must follow ethical practices, such as being honest, respectful and trustworthy, as well as acting at all times in the public interest – of course – alongside the interests of their institutions (Bowen, 2010; Kirat, 2016). This situation has arisen because the university itself lacks such rules, which makes it difficult to set up a practice programme for PR students. To some extent, this can be seen as a problem with the whole idea of PR, with some considering PR as having a strategic goal of influencing public opinion via persuasive information, whereas some argue that there can be no such thing as ethical PR because the practice itself is akin to manipulation and propaganda (Bowen, 2004; Kirat, 2016; Stacks et al., 1999).

Some interviewees were likely to undertake some training courses to improve their PR skills. For example, a few recognised such programmes, saying: "I had undergone some training and courses after I graduated, which had helped me to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to face the escalating demands of PR". The main aims of this training, as listed by interviewees, were:

> "Developing skills in the field of modern technologies and PR communications"; "Enabling the management of PR administration communication"; "Learning about PR design and advertising"; "Learning another foreign language"; "Learning about marketing and promotion"; "Learning how to teach PR skills"; and "PR social-media interaction".

The final question explored what strategies were needed to determine the best performance in improving the quality of PR qualifications and to prepare PR graduates to perform in the profession. It was clearly highlighted by most interviewees that several elements were necessary and should be offered by any university: "The curriculum should accord with the latest developments in the PR industry, including online PR activities". As expected, some summarised the importance of preparing professional PR graduates, saying:

> "Focusing on management, marketing and advertising modules"; "Having a clear focus on ethics and labour laws"; "Improving research and methods skills"; "Paying attention to feedback image programmes and reputation courses"; and "Having advanced strategic-planning programmes".

Conclusions

A mixed-method approach was carried out to investigate the perceptions and evaluations of the quality of training programmes in public relations curricula in Libyan universities by asking senior PR students (survey) and PR teaching-staff members (interview). It is clear that higher education in Libya is one of the sectors that has witnessed significant developments in terms of quality and quantity, especially between the 1970s and the late 2000s (Essays UK, 2013) when several new universities (public/private) were launched to meet and support the local labour-market demands and these were based on national education standards, includ-

ing divisions/departments teaching and granting PR qualifications. However, the recent civil war and subsequent factional fighting has ruined most of the country's infrastructure (since 2011). As a result, more time and effort is needed to reform the education sector and to reproduce new teaching programmes that meet the current change in Libya.

In terms of public relations pedagogy, taught PR programmes in Libya began with little experience of teaching and training programmes due to a lack of experience and a lack of qualifications for teaching this discipline. With the appearance of PR in the Arab world, more Libyan universities have started to grant PR qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, evidence has emerged that some elements of the PR curriculum and its teaching methods were outdated and lacked new developments in the field (Kirat, 2016). The delivery of programmes was based more on a theoretical approach than on a practical approach, especially in small universities. Looking at current PR curricula, although they look similar to standard taught programmes in Arab countries, they are still based on routine PR tasks and activities and are not supporting the current demand for labour.

To work in the PR sector and to be able to deal with people were the main reasons/motivations given by the surveyed students for enrolling on PR programmes. This is a good indication of how Libyan PR graduates perceive this subject. Previous studies determined that students would rather study subjects with greater expected future revenues (PR) rather than subjects that have greater initial earnings (Bowen, 2004; Brown, White, & Waymer, 2011). However, there is still little known about why Libyan students pick PR as a future career (Brown et al., 2011). Their views were clear about their divisions and departments when it came to the ability to teach PR programmes, as the majority interestingly agreed that some of their universities' teaching staff members interacted with them in teaching/training programmes. They also mentioned that current PR curricula could serve them effectively after graduation, that they were sufficient and that they took a practical approach. This finding is, of course, based on a university's location and size. On the other hand, not surprisingly, some complained that their university's library (or lab) lacked up-to-date Arabic textbooks on PR and related topics, or used only the Arabic language for teaching. This highlights the main challenges facing most Libyan universities where academic resources are very limited or outdated.

Some respondents also mentioned that there was a lack of field visits or internships provided by their divisions and departments, while others indicated that they were able to visit some institutions for work experience and training programmes. The aims of these visits ranged from training in actual PR skills and activities to learning how to write press releases, campaigns, communicating with the public and dealing with the company's external and internal audiences.

The evaluation of academic PR teaching staff indicated that they encouraged students to take part in open discussion and dialogue, they were able to deliver information efficiently and they encouraged students to search and read outside lectures and to have sufficient knowledge of modern and applied PR, as well as modern technologies. These findings were supported by the teaching staff's responses (interview). For example, most teaching staff indicated that they had benefited from studying PR before starting to teach the subject. So, they can pass on knowledge to their learners. They also agreed that their divisions and departments were concerned with using training programmes in teaching PR, as they were aware of the need to compete in teaching PR programmes, although they admitted that most of the curriculum was based on the theoretical aspect.

PR education in Libya, as in some Arab countries, has not reached the level of real practice for several reasons and excellence in PR cannot be reached without getting students involved in training and work experience during their studies by engaging them in some companies, training graduates at major PR institutions (internship), developing taught PR courses in line with progress in the field, or providing facilities for accessing information technologies (lab), up-to-date textbooks and resources (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009; Hajoš, 2017). These factors are seen as the best ways to teach PR and to provide the best practice (René Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011).

Previous studies have emphasised the importance of ethics and regulations as main components of practising PR (Al-Bady, 1991; Bowen, 2004; Kirat, 2016; Stacks et al., 1999). Teaching staff indicated, however, that they were not fully aware of PR legislation and regulations. This lack of knowledge may be because most institutions do not have clear written legislation and regulations about practising PR. Although this is not the case in Libya, unfortunately most Arab countries face the problem of PR being seen as a strategic means of influencing public opinion and akin to an agenda for manipulation and propaganda (Bowen, 2004; Freberg, Remund, & Keltner-Previs, 2013; Kirat, 2016). Brown et al. (2011) mentioned that PR in popular culture is often depicted as being of limited scope. For example, a PR practitioner is often known by other names such as "publicist" or "spokesperson". This is because most institutions do not believe in a managerial role for PR and those who work in the PR sector lack professional qualifications.

Furthermore, since it started in 1992, public relations in Libya has become a popular subject at universities across Libya and is seen as a fast-growing discipline with more divisions and departments providing different programmes. Those who have graduated will have an impact on the future of the labour market in this field (Hajoš, 2017; Kirat, 2016). It is fair to say that PR education and training opportunities in Libya still suffer from confusion in their teaching methods and modules and time is needed before the quality of PR in theory and practice is improved, as the country at the moment lacks a development plan. This suggests that immediate changes are needed regarding specialised education preparation. In the first place, this applies to the curriculum which must be developed in parallel with what is needed in the real world of PR. In this context, PR graduates must have effective skills, such as press-release writing, management, planning, new media and marketing. It is important to set up a strategic plan to address the topic of teaching PR within the framework of the current digital revolution (Barry, 2005; Kirat, 2016; Stacks et al., 1999), starting with a review of current PR education. This means that more training and skills programmes, which include the latest IT developments in the field, are needed.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, although this data has provided interesting outcomes for discussing PR in Libya, it represents only a small proportion of the total number of PR students and staff members as, unfortunately, only a small number took part in this study. As a result, it was difficult to run more sophisticated statistics from analysing the data. As with all qualitative studies, the results are also not generalisable. The only limitation of this study, therefore, is that the majority of the views of other PR students and staff members remain unknown. To remedy this would, of course, require further studies so as to obtain a clearer picture of PR in Libya. The current demographic variables of the respondents in this study also need to be taken into future consideration.

Funding

Notes

[1] Libya, as a Latin name, referred to the region west of the Nile (Egypt) and centred in North Africa, which was historically visited/settled by many Mediterranean cultures, such as the Neolithic people in around 8000 BC, the Phoenicians (who settled in Tripolitania, in the western part of Libya, during the 7th century BC) and the Ancient Greeks (who settled in Cyrenaica, in the eastern part of Libya, during the 6th century BC). Later (74 BC), the Roman Empire ruled both areas (western and eastern parts). Before this period, Libya was inhabited by the Afro-Asiatic ancestors of the Berber tribes during the late Bronze Age. Around 643 AD, the Arabs conquered Libya, led by Amr ibn al-As and spread Islam. Moreover, in the 16th century, Libya was ruled by the Ottoman Empire before being seized by the Italians in 1911 and becoming one of Italy's main colonies in Africa.

[2] For example, local figures (social and political) use PR skills (politeness/kindness) when communicating with others for spreading ideas or solving problems. It is usually the case, for instance, that the head of any local tribe is well known for their PR skills in influencing local and non-local people regarding tribal matters. This applies to some Libyan officials who use PR to persuade citizens regarding their agendas and interests.

References

Abdullah, M. I., Elareshi, M., Robinson, J. A., & Dheyab, A. (2018). From persuasion to propaganda: A shift in political public relations in the Arab World. In A. Theofilou, T. Watson, T. Le Roux, J. Costello, E.-A. Dolea, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *Paper presented at the 9th International History of Public Relations Conference (IPRC 2018)* (pp. 1–2). Bournemouth: Bournemouth University.

Al-Bady, M. (1991). The problem of practical training in the public relations' education in universities. *Journal of Arts and Human Sciences; King Abdulaziz University*, *4*, 3-32 [in Arabic].

Al-Kandari, A., & Gaither, T. K. (2011). Arabs, the west and public relations: A critical/cultural study of Arab cultural values. *Public Relations Review*, *37*(3), 266-273.

Barry, W. I. A. (2005). Teaching public relations in the information age: A case study at an Egyptian university. *Public Relations Review*, *31*(3), 355-361. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.PUBREV.2005.05.020.

Berkowitz, D., & Hristodoulakis, I. (2004). Practitioner roles, public pelations education, and professional socialization: An exploratory study. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *11*(1), 91-103. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr1101_04.

Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian Theory and Model for managing ethical issues. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *16*(1), 65-92. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr1601_3.

Bowen, S. A. (2009). All glamour, no substance? How public relations majors and potential majors in an exemplar program view the industry and function. *Public Relations Review*, *35*, 402-410. Retrieved from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0363811109000848.

Bowen, S. A. (2010). *An overview of the public relations function*. New York: Business Expert Press.

Brown, K. A., White, C., & Waymer, D. (2011). African-American students' perceptions of public relations education and practice: Implications for minority recruitment. *Public Relations Review*, *37*, 522-529. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.09.017.

Brunner, B. R., & Fitch-Hauser, M. E. (2009). I'm a people person! A look at public relations majors' perceptions of why they chose public relations as their major. *Teaching Public Monograph*, *76*, 1-4. Retrieved from http://aejmc.net/PR.

Erzikova, E., & Berger, B. K. (2011). Creativity vs. ethics: Russian and US public relations students' perceptions of professional leadership and leaders. *Teaching Public Relations Journal*, *5*(3), 1-24.

Essays UK. (2013). A study on Libya and its education system. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from https://www.ukessays.com/essays/education/a-study-on-libya-and-its-education-system-education-essay.php?vref=1#citethis.

Freberg, K., Remund, D., & Keltner-Previs, K. (2013). Integrating evidence based practices into public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, *39*(3), 235-237. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.03.005.

Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (2008). Excellence theory in public relations: Past, present, and future. In A. Zerfass, B. V. Ruler, & R. Sriramesh (Eds.), *Public Relations Research* (pp. 327–347). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-90918-9_22.

Hajoš, B. (2017). Student motivation for enrolling in public relations studies and their perception of the public relations profession and study in Croatia. *Journal of Innovative Business and Management*, *9*(1). Retrieved from http://journal.doba.si/repec/pdf/9_2017_1_student.pdf.

Kirat, M. (2016). Public relations professionalism and excellence in the Arab world problems and drawbacks. *Revue Albahit Al Ijtima'i*, *12*, 5-27.

Libyan Organization of Policies & Strategies. (2016). Public education in Libya: Problems, challenges and solutions. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from http://loopsresearch.org/media/images/photox68nwocvmb.pdf.

Muturi, N., An, S., & Mwangi, S. (2013). Students' expectations and motivation for service-learning in public relations. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, *68*(4), 387-408. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695813506992.

Reham, A., & Miliszewska, I. (2010). Towards E-learning in higher education in Libya. *The Journal Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology*, *7*, 423-437.

René Benecke, D., & Bezuidenhout, R. (2011). Experiential learning in public relations education in South Africa. *Journal of Communication Management*, *15*(1), 55-69. https://doi.org/10.1108/13632541111105259.

Sorto, K. (1990). What some students expect from a career in PR/communications. *Communication World*, *7*(1), 0-32.

Stacks, D. W., Botan, C., & Turk, J. V. (1999). Perceptions of public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, *25*(1), 9-28. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(99)80124-6.

Tamtam, A., Gallagher, F., Olabi, A. G., & Naher, S. (2011). Higher education in Libya, system under stress. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *29*, 742-751. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.SBSPRO.2011.11.300.