

Issues and Influences in Academic Choices among Communication Students in Oman

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Abstract : The study of communication as a fully-fledged discipline in institutions of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman is relatively young. Its evolution is associated with Oman's Renaissance beginning from 1970, which ushered in an era of modernization in which education, industrialization, expansion, and liberalization of the mass media, provision of infrastructure, and promotion of multilateral commercial ventures were considered among the top priorities of national development plans. Communication studies were pioneered by the sole government university, Sultan Qaboos University, in the 1990s, but so far, the program is taught in Arabic only. In recognition of the need to produce professionals suitably equipped to fit into the expanding media establishments in the Sultanate as well as the widening global market, the government decided to establish programs in which communication would be taught in English language. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, six Colleges of Applied Sciences were established in Oman in 2007. These colleges offer a 4-year Bachelor degree program in communication studies that comprises six areas of specialization: Advertising, Digital Media, International Communication, Journalism, Media Management and Public Relations. Over the years, a trend has emerged where students tend to flock to particular specializations such as Public Relations and Digital Media, while others, such as Advertising and Journalism, continue to draw the least number of students. In some instances, some specializations have had to be frozen due to the dire lack of interest among new students. It has also been observed that female students are more likely to be more biased in choice of specializations. It was therefore the task of this paper to establish, through a survey and focus group interviews, the factors that influence choice of communication studies as well as particular specializations, among Omani Communication Studies undergraduates. Results of the study show that prior to entering into the communication studies program, the majority of students had no idea of what the field entailed. Whatever information they had about communication studies was sourced from friends and relatives rather than more reliable sources such as career fairs or guidance counselors. For the most part, the choice of communication studies as a major was also influenced by factors such as family, friends and prospects for jobs. Another significant finding is the strong association between gender and choice of specializations within the program, with females flocking to digital media while males tended to prefer public relations. Reasons for specialization preferences dwelt strongly on expectations of a good GPA and the promise of a good salary after graduation. Regardless of gender, most students identified careers in news reporting, public relations and advertising as unsuitable for females. Teaching and program presentation were identified as the most suitable for females. Based on these and other results, the paper not only examined the social and cultural factors that are likely to have influenced the respondent's attitude to communication studies, but also discussed the implication for curriculum development and career development in a developing society such as Oman.

Keywords : career choice, communication specialization, media education, Oman

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