



Public Relations Education in Saudi Arabia: An Overview of Educators' and Practitioners' Perspectives

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Abstract

The rapid growth of technological advancement and changes in Saudi Arabia have significantly influenced how public relations is taught and practised in the country. Future PR practitioners must be prepared to meet the growing and changing global workforce expectations. Thus, this study explores the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. The study employed a qualitative research design using an in-depth interview method. The study informants were public relations educators and practitioners in Saudi Arabia. Resultantly, undergraduate public relations education is unstable as higher education institutions cannot equip undergraduates with the necessary skills and abilities to meet the labour market requirements in the country. The lack of shared PR education development is evident in the curricula, books, and learning resources. The study also identified critical PR education flaws, such as poor subject content and the lack of practical aspects and relevant courses. Eventually, the study provided several vital recommendations to improve undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. Future studies can comprehensively investigate specific institution-related variables that influence graduate career readiness from theoretical and practical viewpoints.

Disciplinary: Communication, Education, Public Relations.

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1 Introduction

Rapid globalisation and technological advancement have affected public relations (PR). Various PR studies have focused on Western countries (DiStaso et al., 2009; Lee, 2022). Global PR studies must obtain comprehensive data from different socio-economic and development stages

(Larisu & Mona, 2022). The PR must be investigated as PR education influences future PR practice (Botan, 2017; Cismaru et al., 2018). Moreover, cultural experiences, value systems, socio-economic, and technological development influence PR education and practice (Molleda et al., 2017; Thompson, 2018). The PR students must be equipped with significant and current PR knowledge to ensure PR progress in underdeveloped nations.

Numerous Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are high-ranking investment destinations, yet there is limited knowledge of PR education (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2019; Kamali-Chirani, 2021). Progressive KSA development, particularly the Vision 2030 attainment, requires education that addresses PR requirements. The KSA aims to become a worldwide investment powerhouse and attract foreign investors through additional PR investments (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2018). Therefore, stakeholders must substantially invest in PR to develop a positive country image.

The PR investment would attract foreign investors into the KSA and improve national and global business communication. The PR education investment influences the profession (Ferguson, 2018). The perceptions about the undergraduate KSA PR education must be investigated to determine how future PR practitioners are prepared to meet the growing and rapidly changing global workforce expectations (Gardner et al., 2011; Cismaru et al., 2018; Thompson, 2018). The PR professional growth can be defined by examining how educators prepare students for the PR profession. This study aims to determine the KSA undergraduate PR education development based on PR educators' and practitioners' perspectives. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate and find the current state of undergraduate PR education in the KSA.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Public Relations (PR) Education

In the 1920s, Bernays conducted a systematic analysis entitled "Crystallizing Public Opinion," the first PR and only PR education book (Broom, 2009). The University of Illinois launched the first PR course in the United States of America (USA) in 1920. The USA began applying systematic methods to promote PR career growth in the late 1940s. The USA established the PR Society of America to elevate the PR professionals' competence. Similarly, the United Kingdom (UK) founded the Institute of PR (Bernays, 2013). The USA observed significant PR education advancements in the first half of the twentieth century (Wright, 2011). Consequently, the tremendous USA PR growth has motivated several countries to develop comparable programs in their institutions.

The PR education evolution has adhered to a globally consistent pattern, thus leading to PR curricula commonalities in various PR programs. Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) and DiStaso et al. (2009) studies postulated that PR curricula lack global consensus, although it is locally discussed. Various states' distinct cultural, political, economic, and social characteristics led to the cultural PR disparities, significantly impacting local PR curricula (Fitch, 2016; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018). Resultantly, establishing strong worldwide PR program standards is not feasible.

Various studies indicate that continuous specialised training and education are pertinent for PR career development (Nolte & Wilcox, 2016; Theaker, 2016; Madigan, 2017; Pyros, 2017; Smudde, 2019). Additionally, Creedon and Al-Khaja (2019) study elucidated that educators have a profound effect on the PR's future direction and are responsible for instilling essential professional competencies in existing and prospective students to ensure career development. Similarly, Ewing et al. (2019) indicated that the PR discipline could only be advanced if students comprehend the excellent PR processes and obtain essential skills to contribute to PR growth positively.

Academicians critically investigate the PR curricula design. According to the literature, current PR degree programs include communications, marketing, and digital media courses. Additionally, undergraduate degree curricula include journalism, campaign strategy, ethics, and social media courses (Idid & Arandas, 2016; Yang & Qing, 2019; Hagelstein et al., 2021). In the advanced syllabi, curriculum planners have included crisis management, PR introduction, case studies, new technologies, PR research and writing, and PR internships (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). (Ewing et al., 2019) the study elucidated that rhetorical training must be included in undergraduate PR education to support ethical principles formation and assist graduate workforce recognition.

2.2 Public Relations Education in KSA

The study on KSA PR education is continuously developing. Various KSA PR studies have been employed on foreign college graduates to investigate the PR profession (Alanazi, 2013; Taha, 2017). These researchers believe that PR students are unprepared for the PR specialist profession. Nevertheless, some researchers believe that present PR education is acceptable (Munawar, 2013; Almahraj, 2017). The country lacks a standardised framework for PR education. In the 1970s, King Saud University created the first PR degree program (Al-Habeeb, 2007; Abdelhay, 2014). Four public universities in the KSA offer undergraduate degrees in public relations: King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, and Umm Al-Qura University. These colleges provide courses and credit options for PR specialties containing a variety of prerequisites, such as compulsory core courses. The courses include general topics, such as Arabic Language, Prophet Biography, KSA History, and the Holy Quran.

Furthermore, the core courses are specialised and comprise communication theories, Public Opinion, Communication Research Methods, KSA Media, and Communication Introduction. Elective courses cover various PR subjects. For example, the King Saud University students may select Strategic Communication in Advertising and the Art of Interviewing methods. In the KSA, PR education is a distinctive synthesis of Western ideas and Islamic traditions. For example, Umm Al-Qura University's curriculum covers the history, definition, introduction, PR role, and PR department role in contemporary organisations and management, standard Western curricula courses.

3 Method

This study employed the in-depth interview method with standardised open-ended questions. Social media platforms and official emails were used for communicating with eligible academics and practitioners. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The sample was divided into two groups. The first group comprised seven PR educators from four KSA universities, and the second group included seven PR practitioners from both the KSA public and private sectors.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, organise, and systematically analyse data theme patterns. The study used the following questions:

- What is the status of undergraduate PR education in Saudi Arabia?
- Do the KSA undergraduate PR education adequately equips students to pursue a PR specialist career?

4 Results Analysis

4.1 Demographics

Data were collected from 14 respondents, five females and nine males (Table 1). A total of 11 respondents were KSA nationals, while three were from other Arabic countries. Moreover, respondents with five to 30 years of experience were sampled. Seven respondents possess a PR PhD, and others have a PR Bachelor's or Master's degree.

Table 1: Respondents' Demography

Informant ID No	Gender	Nationality	Job	Years of Experience	Education Level
P1	Male	Saudi	PR-Academician	10	Ph.D. – PR
P2	Male	Saudi	PR-Academician	12	Ph.D. – PR
P3	Female	Saudi	PR-Academician	15	Ph.D. – PR
P4	Male	Sudan	PR-Academician	24	Ph.D. – PR
P5	Male	Egypt	PR-Academician	20	PhD. – PR
P6	Male	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	15	Master– Communication
P7	Male	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	12	Master– PR
P8	Female	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	7	BA – PR
P9	Female	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	13	Master– PR
P10	Female	Egypt	PR-Academician	25	PhD. – PR
P11	Male	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	14	Master–PR
P12	Female	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	5	BA – PR
P13	Male	Saudi	PR-Academician	30	Ph.D. – PR
P14	Male	Saudi	PR-Practitioner	10	Master – PR

4.2 Findings

As presented in Table 2, four themes were identified in this study concerning the current state of undergraduate PR education in KSA. These themes are curricula, course materials, learning resources, and professional qualifications.

Table 2: Study Themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Curriculum	High institution variability, significant progress and curricula quality progress, minimal curricula modifications relevance in the last five years. Lack of practical and pertinent courses, poor subject content, low curricula quality, Western practices application.
Course Materials	Outdated content The Arabic language usage The recent low book quality The lack of the local factors' attention
The Learning Resources Quality and Availability	Adequate Insufficient and outdated High institution variability Absence of motivation to utilise learning resources.
Profession Qualifications	Students are unqualified, have moderate preparation levels, and have high PR qualifications.

4.2.1 Curriculum

Conversely, most respondents highlighted the high institution variability emphasising that some universities possess relatively adequate curricula that meet the labour market requirements, while other institutions possess poorly designed curricula with outdated subjects.

"In the light of my professional practice, I think the curricula vary based on the Saudi university academic departments. The curricula are not standardised but have been presented in the traditional form similar to the programs." (Informant P11)

"Concerning the curricula, I believe that we have a problem. It is the lack of an approved standard KSA PR curriculum. Curricula differ from one university to another due to the affiliated college." (Informant P12).

Significant curricula improvement is the second most popular category. The primary PR education and profession changes have introduced other relevant curricula. In addition, several respondents postulated that the education institution often updates the curricula system to meet new external requirements.

"In the recent five years, many curricula in this field have been changed, many required courses have been included, and inappropriate courses were removed. I think the current curricula are significantly better than the previous ones and contain new study plans." (Informant P2).

"I think the curricula are developed and are subject to review almost every two years. We have also seen some universities include current communication variables in the curricula to keep up with the pace. The PR specialisation requires close modern media contact, such as social media platforms and other media." (Informant P1).

Several respondents postulated that the curricula quality is relatively high and can equip students for the PR specialist career. Nonetheless, some respondents criticised the existing curricula for poor subject content, low-quality system, insufficient practical focus, and the failure to integrate relevant topics, such as mental images and digital PR. The overall respondents' opinion on the PR curricula is controversial. The PR academicians perceived the curricula positively, while the practitioners heavily criticised educational institutions for inadequate curricula that slowly adapt to the labour market requirements.

"When I speak about the curricula, I think it covers most subjects. We are still introducing some necessary disciplines, such as international PR, institutional communication, and marketing." (Informant P3)

"As per the curricula, it is not updated and outdated as it is supposed to be produced in the same year or the previous year." (Informant P7)

Various respondents highlighted the need to update the curricula to meet the current industrial trends. Most academicians reported significant progress in curricula updates. For example, Informant P2 agreed that the curricula had improved over the past five years, while Informant P1 claimed that the academic staff often updated the curricula by integrating Western practices. Furthermore, Informant P13 elucidated that the modern curricula contain additional detail and are more practical than the previous syllabus. Informant P3 depicted that the curricula cover relevant PR subjects. Practitioners postulated that the contemporary curricula are more useful but indicate high syllabus variability. Despite curricula improvement, many practitioners perceived that the curricula heavily relied on conservative subjects.

"More practical aspects should be added into the curricula." (Informant P10)

"The practical applications are supposed to be the largest section, not the PR history." (Informant P5)

The lack of field practice in the curricula was directly derived from other discussions and was not explicitly mentioned by the interviewees. For instance, Informant P6 admitted he "has no idea" about the current KSA undergraduate PR curriculum development. Nonetheless, he postulated that graduates "urgently need field practice and workforce experience" based on his experience working with PR graduates. This viewpoint can be inferred from the statement explaining that their educational institutions do not sufficiently prepare PR specialists for their future careers.

"I have no idea about the current KSA undergraduate PR curriculum because I did not study PR as an academic major, but I have many graduates who urgently need field practice and labour market experience." (Informant P6)

The respondents also highlighted the lack of relevant curricula courses that undermine curricula quality. For example, Informant P8 indicates that the curricula lack expanded mental image courses.

"I think that PR education is currently 60% good in theoretical and scientific terms. However, some courses should be expanded and studied in theoretical and practical aspects, such as mental image courses." (Informant P8)

Poor subject content contributes to the low curricula quality. Several respondents elucidated that specific subjects have an inadequate range as theoretical courses are more emphasised than practical ones. Informant P9 criticised the poor curricula content.

"The subjects are properly selected, but their content is outdated or includes inconsistent KSA PR information. For example, some subjects address media laws and cite laws from other Arab countries, which differ from the KSA." (Informant P9)

Respondents indicated that there are Western practice accommodations in the KSA PR curricula. Informant P13 revealed that many teachers had studied abroad, contributing to the Western trend adoption in universities.

"At present, universities have a large diversity of KSA faculty members who graduated from various countries, such as the USA, UK, and Australia. This diversity will have a positive consequence on curricula design." (Informant P13)

4.2.2 Course Materials

Several subthemes were identified concerning the course materials, such as outdated content, the Arabic language usage, low quality of books, recent significant progress, and the lack of local factors attention. Most respondents perceive KSA undergraduate course materials as outdated and irrelevant. Ancient PR course materials and books are widely discussed.

"No foreign references; Arabic books have some old and duplicated content. Furthermore, there are scarce PR publications." (Informant P12)

"Books are always based on Arabic references. In my view, Arabic books and references lack many of the latest scientific theories of the field." (Informant P4)

Most PR students in KSA are not fluent in English. Therefore, educators are forced to use Arabic books. Several modern book qualities are low due to literal translations that distort content and meaning.

"Inaccurate translation significantly affects the curricula because PR is still new in the Arab regions... most curricula come from the USA. Therefore, some of the books have been translated. However, the translation is useless when you return to the authentic reference." (Informant P5)

These comments elucidate why respondents criticised the low PR teaching book quality utilised in KSA education institutions. Nonetheless, there have been significant improvements in the overall curricula, books, and course materials quality. The Informant P2 postulated that this improvement occurs as PR specialists have assumed responsibility for selecting textbooks.

"Fortunately, the current situation has improved, and the PR specialists have become the ones who assume the book selection responsibility." (Informant P2)

The books utilised by the KSA PR education institution are perceived as inadequate and lack scientific production. In addition, the texts used scarcely address the unique local PR contexts, often ignoring the social, cultural, religious, and economic KSA society background.

"There are some faculty staff contributions in writing books, but it is still inadequate." (Informant P9)

"In general, most of the books are traditional without any update due to the lack of PR books and scientific production in the Arab world." (Informant P11)

The results indicate that most respondents consider books and course materials used to teach PR in KSA educational institutions inadequate.

4.2.3 The Learning Resource Quality and Availability

Many respondents indicated that the undergraduate PR learning resource quality is adequate. Conversely, several respondents highlighted difficulties accessing learning resources and utilising modern technologies.

"As for the other learning resources used, some universities have PR student clubs where industry professionals deliver courses, seminars, and conferences to assist and boost the student-worker communication in the labour market. I also think that other learning resources are available, such as internet halls and libraries." (Informant P1)

Some respondents criticised the KSA educational institutes for utilising insufficient and outdated learning resources.

"The Arabic PR content is unfortunately minimal. The gathering of information process is done through the personal efforts of the faculty members. Therefore, an information overlay and lack of sequence and consistency can be observed." (Informant P12)

"When speaking about books and learning resources, I strongly believe that we are suffering, especially since most Arabic books are copied from each other, such as mental image books, public opinion, and repeated PR research which is considered a replica. We rarely find unique content and source." (Informant P3)

A small sample portion limits generalisation on learning resources, indicating high quality, and learning resource variability in different educational institutions.

"Some KSA educational institutions are keen to invest in modern and advanced PR learning resources. Nonetheless, there is still a need to standardise it across KSA educational institutions." (Informant P10)

The interview transcripts analysis indicates that the respondents identified access and learning resource usage problems for educators and students.

"There is a lack of materials preparation skills, and educational institutions do not motivate students to visit the library to capitalise on specialised sources." (Informant P7)

"Since it is the technology and wide digital openness era, learning resources are available in any form, but the problem lies in the inability of academic departments to utilise these technologies and resources appropriately." (Informant P11)

There is no unanimous respondents' consensus about learning resource quality and availability.

4.2.4 Qualifying Students for the Profession

Participants have no explicit agreement concerning the undergraduate PR program's ability to equip students for the PR specialist occupation. Additionally, PR educators are less sceptical than practitioners about the readiness of PR graduates for their future profession. Most practitioners reported PR graduates to have relatively low practical skills.

"Unfortunately, the qualified student percentage is deficient due to the lack of field practice and student motivation to practice outside the university." (Informant P8)

"The KSA undergraduate PR education suffers from a lack of actual practice, leading to graduates' failure to keep pace with the labour market." (Informant P14)

Several respondents highlighted a substantial gap between academia and industry. They indicated that many PR professionals could meet the labour market requirements and new PR trends. Nevertheless, educators are often guided by theoretical principles and outdated concepts that have partially lost relevance.

"We suffer from the controversy between academicians and professionals, each of them in a different world." (Informant P3)

Several respondents perceived the contemporary undergraduate PR programs as sufficient to ensure a moderate student readiness level. They highlighted that graduates have a solid theoretical basis to facilitate their success, although gaining additional practical knowledge and skills during their education can benefit these individuals.

"I believe students are qualified to a certain extent, especially when it comes to the theoretical aspect, but we still have a problem on the practical side." (Informant P2)

"In general, I think universities 60% qualify students and the balance 40% is based on professional practice, as the PR major should include a practical aspect." (Informant P11)

Some participants indicated that modern educational institutions could prepare students for a PR specialist career. According to two educators, the theoretical knowledge provided by educational institutions is sufficient to empower graduates to work as successful PR specialists in the public or private sector.

"I believe that universities equip students efficiently, especially when it comes to the theoretical side." (Informant P1)

"Through my experience teaching PR in various KSA universities, I believe students are approximately 90% qualified." (Informant P13)

5 Results and Discussion

The results depict the current unstable KSA undergraduate PR education. Educational institutions cannot prepare PR students to become PR specialists and fail to meet the labour market requirements. One pertinent PR education characteristic is the high variability across different universities. Several educational institutions experiment with modern programs, update their learning resources, hire competent teachers, interact with the labour market, and organise excellent training programs for their students. Conversely, other institutions continue adopting an outdated and conventional teaching approach focusing on theoretical PR content.

The lack of shared PR education development is evident in the curricula, books, and learning resources. Most stakeholders recognise the growing PR importance, yet there is no agreement on improvement methods. The significant differences between the academicians' and specialists' opinions elucidate the lack of consistency in PR education development. The absence of a shared vision is due to the various flaws that undermine the quality of PR education. The results indicate that several universities still employ outdated curricula, books, teaching methods, and learning resources. This study is aligned with many published studies (Al-Habeeb, 2007; Munawar, 2013; Almahraj, 2017).

The study also identified critical PR education flaws, such as poor subject content and the lack of practical aspects and relevant courses. Many books utilised at educational institutions have outdated content and do not represent local factors. The PR programs are often excessively theoretical, and the teaching methods employed by academics are primarily traditional. Most of these shortcomings are acknowledged by scholars and practitioners, illustrating their credibility and significance. Therefore, educational institutions must address these shortcomings efficiently to equip students for their future professions better and reduce the academia-industry gap.

Despite various shortcomings, undergraduate PR education has displayed evident progress in recent years. Many educational institutions introduced effective modifications to the PR curricula, incorporating Western practices, utilising modern books, altering PR programs, and improving learning resources. Moreover, educational institutions have adapted undergraduate PR education to the labour market requirements.

6 Conclusion

Despite the recent improvements in the quality of PR education in KSA, the current KSA PR undergraduate education can still not equip students with the necessary skills to succeed as PR specialists. Additionally, the study highlighted several problems that can negatively affect PR education, such as career misinterpretation, shared PR vision absence, and minimal contributions

to PR education. This paper presented A comprehensive analysis of the current KSA undergraduate PR education development in curricula, learning materials, learning resources, and professional qualifications. This study incorporated the PR practitioners' and the academicians' perspectives in recommending PR education improvement. The study proposes several recommendations to enhance KSA undergraduate PR education. The curricula must be regularly updated to adapt to labour market needs and current professional trends. Educational institutions should apply the practitioners' and competent curriculum designers' experience when developing and altering PR curricula. Additional collaboration with institutions, the labour market, and professional associations will improve the quality of curricula and PR programs. Resultantly, graduates will be more prepared for their careers. Finally, Future studies can comprehensively investigate specific institution-related variables that influence graduate career readiness from theoretical and practical viewpoints. Moreover, the KSA undergraduate PR education model can be compared to other global PR education systems, particularly in the Gulf countries.

7 Availability of Data and Material

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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