Training communication graduates for Singapore's media research market

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Undergraduate specialisation in research methods at the School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore doubled in 1998-99, from 12 to 24, which was about 10 to 20 percent of the annual cohort of 120 graduates. This article presents some preliminary findings from a needs assessment study of undergraduate communication and media training in Singapore. Some 372 relevant employment ads for 1998 and 1999 were found and content analysed. Nearly 60 percent were for marketing research, public opinion polling or other kinds of applied research. Another 30 percent required research skills as planners, librarians, analysts, writers, or teacher-trainers. The data revealed an exploding demand for graduates with specialised skills and experience in media and applied research methods.

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The School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore began its programme in 1992 with four divisions of specialisation for its 500 undergraduates. Three divisions followed the traditional areas of print media, electronic media, and advertising-public relations. A fourth division offered a specialisation in research methods. Graduates from the Communication Research Division doubled two years ago from 12 to 24, which prompted the School to assess the sustainability and employability of communication graduates following the fall out of the economic crisis in mid-1998 and the spectre of employment cutbacks in many Asian economies.

A survey of former NTU communication graduates (Choi et al, 1999) found the following employment patterns among the 157 of 196 graduates in the 1997 and 1998 cohorts as noted in the following table.
Does the current marketplace need more graduates trained in basic media and advanced marketing research skills? To find the answer, we began a needs assessment study based on the number of job advertisements in the Executive Appointments Section published every Saturday in *The Straits Times* from January 1998 to December 1999.

A total of 372 employment ads were drawn for a textual analysis according to 11 categories: job titles, date or time period, academic qualification, experience required, supervisory role, communication skills, preference or need for a second language, computer skills, quantitative skills or aptitudes, research methods skills, and personality characteristics. These categories were not derived from scholarly research literature but rather from repeated reading of the content that the companies chose to emphasise in their recruitment ads.

1. **Job Titles** was a difficult category to code, because more than 50 different names and combinations of names were used. After reducing the number of ads to 372, we clustered the job titles into eight sub-categories: marketing researcher, researcher (other kinds), planner, librarian, analyst, writer, teacher/trainer, and other. These sub-categories suited our colleagues’ consensus as target employment sectors for our graduates —applied research, consulting and education/training. Intuitively, we felt our courses and projects equipped them for entry level in these several categories of employment.

2. **Dates or Time Period** were easy to code because we had manually written the date on all ads as we cut them out of the newspaper. We chose the four, six-month time periods because

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Job Nature</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Broadcasting</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Print Journalism</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Marketing Communication</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Multimedia/Internet Services</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Teaching (Education Service)</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Policy and Planning</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Media/Market Research</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Library/Information Management</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Business Development/Sales</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the economic crisis that hit and subsided during these 24 months. This enabled us to identify recent trends in the number of research-related jobs available in the marketplace and to answer our primary research question.

3. **Academic Qualifications** in the Executive Appointments section were usually a minimum of degree level, though we did find a number of ads that were more specific. We identified four sub-categories of educational requirements: tertiary (which seems to include polytechnic, diploma courses, and distance learning certificates beyond secondary school or the O-level exam), degree (meaning bachelors without specified ranking), good degree/honours (which meant second-class uppers or better in ranking), or educational qualification not mentioned at all.

4. **Experience Required** was coded simply as required or not required. Experience preferred was coded as not required.

5. **Supervisory Role** was coded as yes, no, or cannot tell. Sometimes the title suggested supervision, yet the text content did not confirm any work with subordinates.

6. **Communication Skills** were either mentioned, or not. We did not find it necessary to sub-divide this category since we felt our students were better equipped than most job seekers in these skills.

7. **Second Language** was either mentioned, or not -- a qualification often required in Singapore’s multi-lingual society: Chinese, Malay, or Tamil languages especially, but Japanese, Thai and Tagalog were also mentioned.

8. **Computer Skills** were either mentioned or not mentioned. Not enough ads elaborated sufficiently on this category to make it worthwhile to sub-divide.

9. **Quantitative Skills or Aptitudes** were either required/preferred or not mentioned. Again, this was mentioned more often in a generic sense than in connection with specific mathematical or statistical competencies.

10. **Research Methods Skills** (e.g. interview, survey, focus groups, etc) were either mentioned, or not.

11. **Personality Characteristics** (including interpersonal skills) were either mentioned, or not.

After the ads were coded, we entered the data into the SPSS 10.0 software to generate simple, descriptive statistics — frequencies and percentages.

We found 60 percent of the 372 Job Titles were either marketing research or other kinds of research. Teacher/Trainer and Analysts accounted for nearly 10 percent each.

We recognised that the Managerial sub-category could overlap in classification with the Supervisory category, though
When we placed ads in the Managerial category we did not also count them in any other Job Title category.

From an analysis of the Date on which the ads were published, we found twice as many research-linked ads in the second and in the third time periods as in the first six months, and twice as many ads in the final six months as in the previous twelve, which reflected a rebounding of the Asian economic crisis.

The Jan - June 1998 sections contained only 40 ads, Jul - Dec 1998 had 84, Jan - Jun 1999 totaled 80, while Jul - Dec 1999 jumped to an amazing 168 relevant ads.

For Academic Qualification it was not surprising that almost all of the Executive Appointments required tertiary level education, though 11 percent of the ads mentioned no specific educational requirement at all. Nearly 57 percent specified a degree, either generically or in some specific disciplines. We did not quantify the specified disciplines as they were rarely mentioned. A quarter of the ads required either a “good degree” or an “honours degree”, indicating the employers’ preference or requirement that the job applicant rank higher than average in the graduating class.

Experience was required in 58 percent of the ads. We did not differentiate ads that only preferred work experience from those that made no mention of previous work experience at all. Internships provided the experience. Nearly 25 percent of the ads indicated some kind of Supervisory Role for the position. Another 40 percent clearly did not, but more than 35 percent were ambiguous about the position’s level in the hierarchy. For example, the title might have indicated management or supervisory level responsibilities, but the text was not clearly supportive. This category was coded separately from those in which the Job Title clearly contained the word Manager.

Communication Skills were mentioned either generically or with some specificity in two of every three ads. One in every four ads indicated a need or preference for knowledge of a Second Language that is a language other than English, the official language of education, government and commerce in Singapore.

Significantly, however, a second language qualified the applicant to work in other nearby countries as well as in Singapore. Surprisingly, only slightly more than one in three ads mentioned Computer Skills as required or desirable. Since the ads seldom named specific computer skills, we did not sub-classify this category.

However, only 22 percent of the ads specified Quantitative Aptitude even though research often involves numerical data analysis and interpretation. While each of the 372 ads were selected because of some clearly stated or strongly inferred link to research or corporate training, only 10 percent mentioned by name specified...
Research Methods Skills such as survey or focus group training or experience. And desirable Personality Characteristics as distinct from Communication Skills, were mentioned in two of every three ads, such as analytic or able to work independently.

The Executive Appointments category of the Recruit Section in The Straits Times doubled in number of pages during the economic crisis, time periods two and three, and tripled by January 2000. Likewise, the number of research-related employment ads doubled the number found in the first six months of this study, January-June 1998 and doubled again during July-December 1999. This was extremely good news for Communication Studies students who had specialised in the Division of Communication Research. The number of employment ads relevant to this sector of our Communication Studies curriculum was not just growing, but multiplying.

Future research should extend this preliminary study to explore how well the potential employers perceive the suitability of our graduates’ education and training for their companies’ manpower needs. Ono and Ang (1999) have completed a nine-nation study of ASEAN countries that compares the perceptions that educators and industry have of skills and knowledge needed by communication graduates. One of our ASEAN Scholars (Guevarra, 2000) has just completed her Master of Mass Communication dissertation comparing Singapore and Philippine newspaper recruitment advertisement strategies employed by organisations trying to attract the right people in an information technology, labour-scarce economy.

It would be beneficial to add another category to the analysis that identifies more clearly the percentage of those ads that require travel or analysis of research data beyond Singapore into the Asia-Pacific region. And another sphere of applied research might be how to improve the interface between needs assessment by the employers and needs assessment for curricular revision by the communication faculty.

In the larger theoretical framework of organisational socialisation, and specifically organisational entry, we will need research on how to improve the communication exchange between communication graduates and human resource personnel with regard to motivated abilities and relevant skill sets, improving job search communication as the students migrate from the academy and into the organisations of the marketplace. Perhaps some will find it beneficial to analyse employment ads in their own region’s newspapers, linking the industry with the graduates of other communication programmes in the Asia-Pacific region.
References


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