

Feasibility of Teaching Public Relations Courses Through E-Learning: A Case Study in Malaysia

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Abstract

The influence of e-learning on teaching and learning has been increasing in recent years. This is obvious as more universities are embracing e-learning to supplement the course delivery than ever before. This study was conducted at various Malaysian higher learning institutions offering undergraduate public relations courses through distance learning. Research was conducted via a quantitative method through a survey. Most respondents agreed that public relations courses can be taught through e-learning. However, there must be a high degree of commitment and willingness to enhance both the teaching as well as the technology-based skills of the academician or facilitator who performs a dominant role in conducting public relations courses through e-learning.

Abstrak

E-pembelajaran dewasa ini telah memberi impak yang kuat ke atas sistem pembelajaran dan pengajaran. Kini terdapat lebih banyak universiti di Malaysia yang menawarkan pembelajaran secara e-pembelajaran. Kajian ini dijalankan di Institut Pengajian Tinggi di Malaysia yang menawarkan kursus perhubungan awam di peringkat sarjana muda melalui pengajian jarak jauh. Kajian dibuat menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif melalui kaedah tinjauan. Hasil kajian membuktikan responden bersetuju bahawa semua kursus perhubungan awam yang ditawarkan boleh diajar dan dipelajari secara e-pembelajaran. Walau bagaimanapun, untuk memastikan kursus perhubungan awam berjaya dipelajari secara e-pembelajaran, komitmen yang tinggi dan kesediaan perlu wujud dari tenaga pengajar. Tenaga pengajar juga perlu lebih arif bukan sahaja dari segi isi kandungan tetapi memahami sudut teknikal kerana tenaga pengajar merupakan fasilitator yang memainkan peranan penting dalam melaksanakan pengajaran kursus perhubungan awam secara e-pembelajaran.

Introduction

The world we live in today is changing at a rapid pace. This is evident in the field of information communication technology (ICT) which impacts every aspect of our lives. Education is no exception. The advancement of computers and communication technologies is transforming the way information is delivered, managed and received. These capabilities are being harnessed to create what we know today as online learning or e-learning.

In Malaysia, the application of e-learning in the education system started when universities introduced distance education. Distance education was developed to give working people an opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge and enhance their career development. E-learning is the emerging method of education. It offers convenient teaching and learning, available at any time and in any place, at minimal cost to both the teacher and the participant.

E-learning means learning via a network. However, many terms have been popularly used, such as e-learning, web-based instruction and learning (Khan, 1997; Abbey, 2000), network learning (Haughey & Anderson, 1998) and online learning (Harasim et al., 1997). The literature uses different definitions of e-learning. Often, e-learning is referred to as distance education or a virtual university; it is the integration of information technology, computer hardware systems and telecommunication tools which aid the education professional in teaching.

E-learning is still an infant technology and learning tool among universities in Malaysia. Its acceptance and impact are still in doubt and many people prefer the traditional classroom training. However, e-learning is touted as the platform for future quality education. The Malaysian government and universities are making huge investments in order to transform conventional beliefs about teaching and learning to include the electronic platform. This means that professors and lecturers are required to play an important role in adopting and incorporating new technology into their lesson plans.

To be a developed country by 2020, Malaysia needs to improve its education sector. The development of global education leads to a high demand for public relations courses. This is happening because in the development industry, more public relations practitioners are needed to assist with merging companies, foreign investments, branding, customer service, etc. E-learning is a good alternative to classroom teaching and fulfils the need for more public relations courses. However, there is concern regarding the effectiveness of e-learning since it might influence the quality of education delivered. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that e-learning methods cannot deliver as effectively as face-to-face methods in public relations related subjects such as the principles of public relations; public relations writing; corporate public relations; public relations case studies; governmental public relations; publicity, media and methods and public relations counselling.

Therefore, this study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of e-learning methods when introduced at the undergraduate level of public relations courses in Malaysia. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To evaluate the participants' view about public relations courses taught through e-learning.
- To investigate which type of public relations subjects can be offered through e-learning.
- To investigate the effectiveness of a public relations course taught through e-learning.

Method

This study was carried out using a quantitative method through a survey. A total of 100 respondents were selected among public relations participants engaged in the distance learning courses in selected higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

Results and Discussions

The findings have been arranged to reflect the central themes of the analysis.

High Level Public Relations Roles

Chart 1 shows the students' perceptions of high level public relations roles. The results show that 50% of students agreed that analysis and audit is a high level of public relations, 40% of students agreed that management is a high level of public relations and 10% of students agreed that the technique is a high level of public relations.

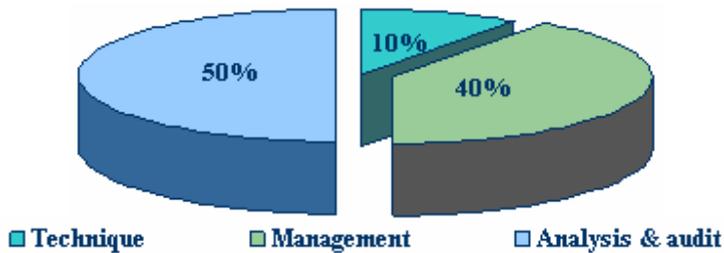


Figure 1: High Level Public Relations Roles

Low Level Public Relations Roles

Chart 2 shows the results of students' perceptions towards low level public relations roles. Results showed that 50% of students considered technical aspects to be a low level of public relations, 45% of students considered the planning aspect to be a low level of public relations and 5% of students considered analysis and audit to be a low level of public relations.

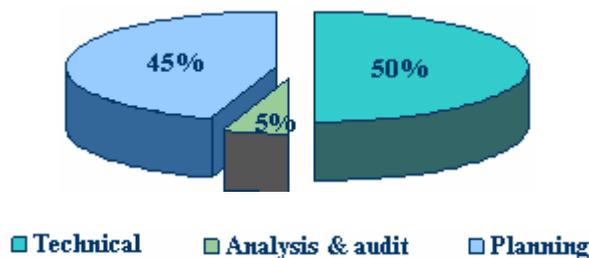


Figure 2: Low Level Public Relations Roles

Types of e-Learning Required in Public Relations Courses

Chart 3 shows the results for the style and content of e-learning that public relations students need. Six e-learning types were listed for respondents to choose from: quality and new content; attractive layout; simple graphics and illustration; flexible programme; inflexible programme; a proactive and skilful moderator. Results showed that 95% of students needed new content with good quality, such as websites and blogs; 85% of students said they needed an attractive layout design; 75% of students needed simple illustrations, graphics and simple notes; 55% of students needed a flexible programme; 75% of students wanted an inflexible programme and 95% of students said they needed a proactive and skilful moderator.

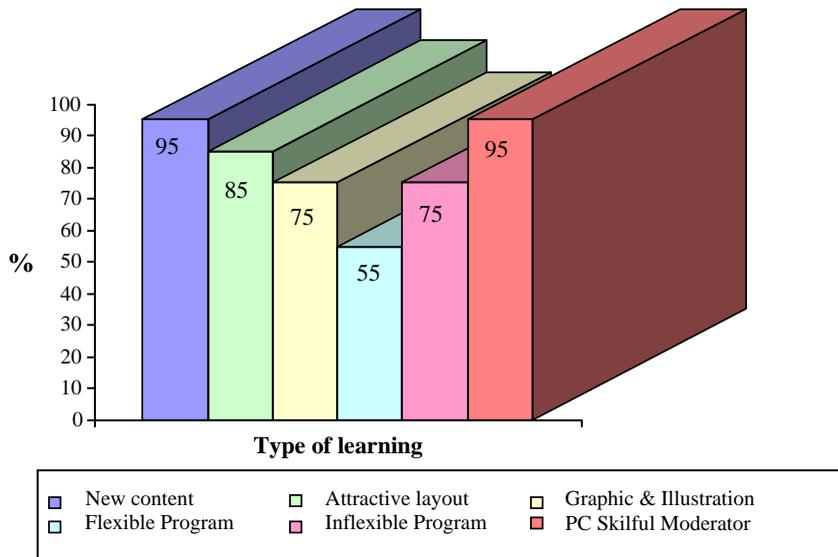


Figure 3: Types of e-Learning Required in Public Relations Courses

Weaknesses of e-Learning

In Chart 4, the weaknesses in e-learning as presented from the students' point of view are shown. These weaknesses included lack of quality of subject content; unattractive layout; less graphics and illustrations; rigid

tasks; inflexible programmes and a non-active or unskilful moderator. The results showed that 75% of students considered the subject content to be lacking in quality; 65% found the layout to be unattractive; 80% considered less graphics and illustrations to be a weakness; 55% considered e-learning to be a rigid task; 75% considered the programme to be inflexible; 85% agreed with the statement that a passive and less knowledgeable moderator is one of the e-learning weaknesses.

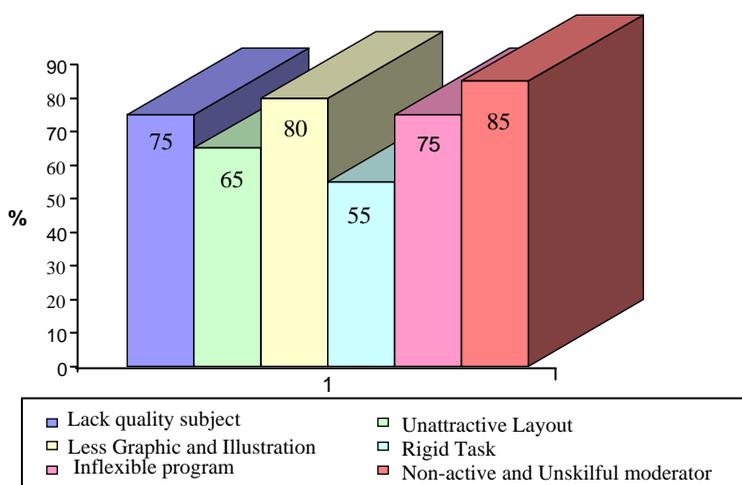


Figure 4: Weaknesses of e-learning

Roles of e-Learning

Five roles of e-learning were listed: courses; discussions with friends; a forum used to copy notes; reference source for examination preparation and paperwork in discussion with the moderator. Results showed 95% of students considered e-learning to act as a discussion forum with colleagues; 55% of students considered it a medium used to print or copy class notes; 35% of students considered it a reference source for examination preparation and paperwork while 50% of students agreed that the role of e-learning is as a tool for discussion with the moderator.

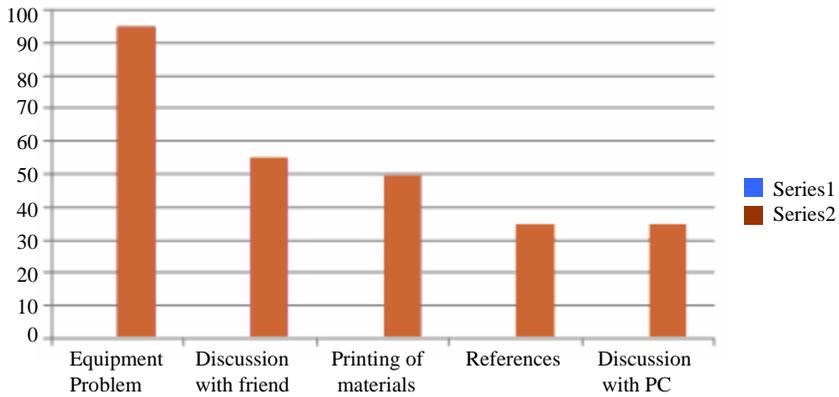


Figure 5: Roles of e-Learning

Forum Usage in a Month

Chart 6 shows the forum usage among respondents in a month. Results showed that the level of male students using the forum was less than the female students using the forum. Most of the male students used the forum to get class notes while female students used it for discussion and coursework. Aside from that, female students used the forum as a reference source for examination preparation and paperwork. Results also showed that female students had more discussions with their moderator than male students.

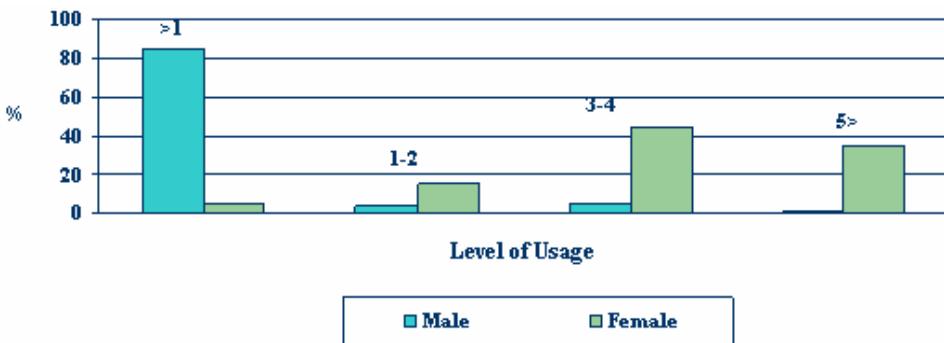


Figure 6: Forum Usage in a Month

Reasons for not Using the e-Learning Forum

Six reasons were listed to as why respondents did not use the e-learning forum: no new content; difficulty in understadning; boredom with the content; no marks for using it and not having a computer at home. Results showed that only 25% of students thought there was no new content on the forum and that there was difficulty understanding it; 85% agreed with the statement, “Male students always do last minute preparations”; only 25% agreed that male students did not use the forum at the optimum level because they felt bored with the content; 40% agreed with the statement, “The use of the forum does not carry any mark, such as class attendance”; 25% said that slow Internet service was a problem with e-learning while 30% of them said they did not have a computer at home.

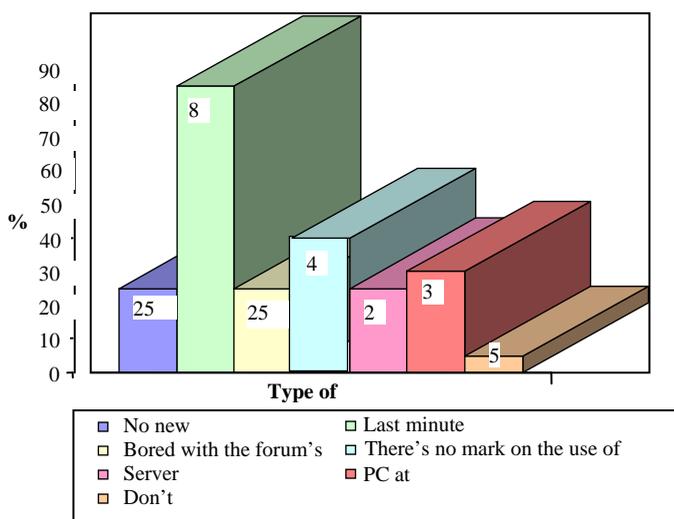


Figure 7: Reasons for Not Using the e-Learning Forum

Competencies of the Public Relations Course Moderator

Chart 8 shows the competency level of the public relations moderator in conducting e-learning courses from the students' perspective. The results showed that 55% of students agreed that their moderator had the ability to respond to the content; 35% agreed with the level of the moderator's

competency for the forum and chat while 10% agreed with his/her competency level at the technical level.

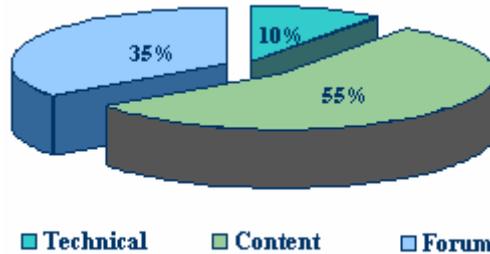


Figure 8: The Competencies of Public Relations Moderator

Types of Learning Preferred

The result showed that e-learning respondents preferred hybrid learning (combination of both face-to-face and online types) because they felt that conventional learning is the best way to understand public relations counselling courses.

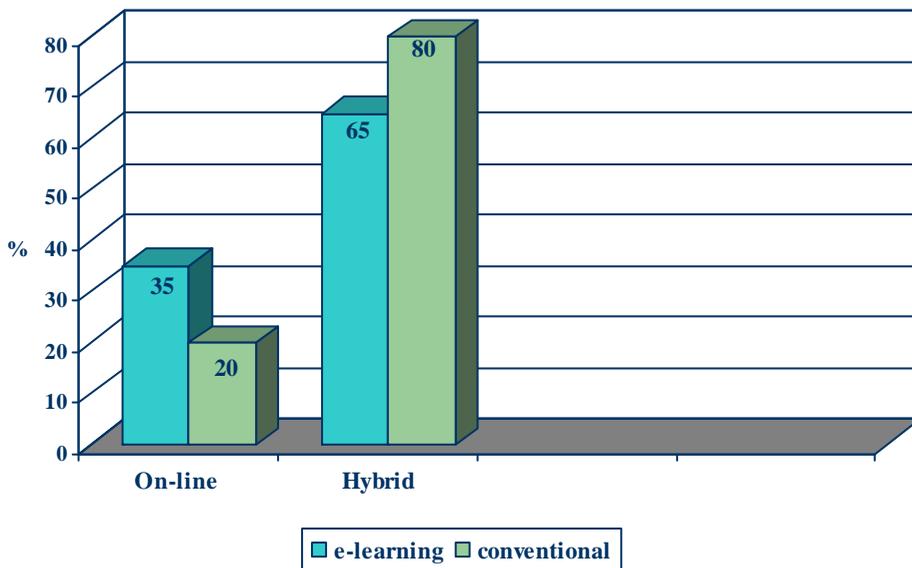


Figure 9: Types of Learning Preferred

The Appropriateness of e-Learning in Public Relations Course

Results showed that 87% of the students thought that teaching public relations principles via e-learning is suitable; 75% of students considered public relations writing to be an appropriate e-learning subject; 82% agreed that corporate public relations is suitable via e-learning; 43% considered public relations case studies to be an appropriate e-learning subject; 65% agreed that the subject of government public relations is suitable for e-learning; 40% considered the publicity, media and method course to be an appropriate subject for e-learning while 15% of them agree that counseling in public relations is a suitable subject for e-learning.

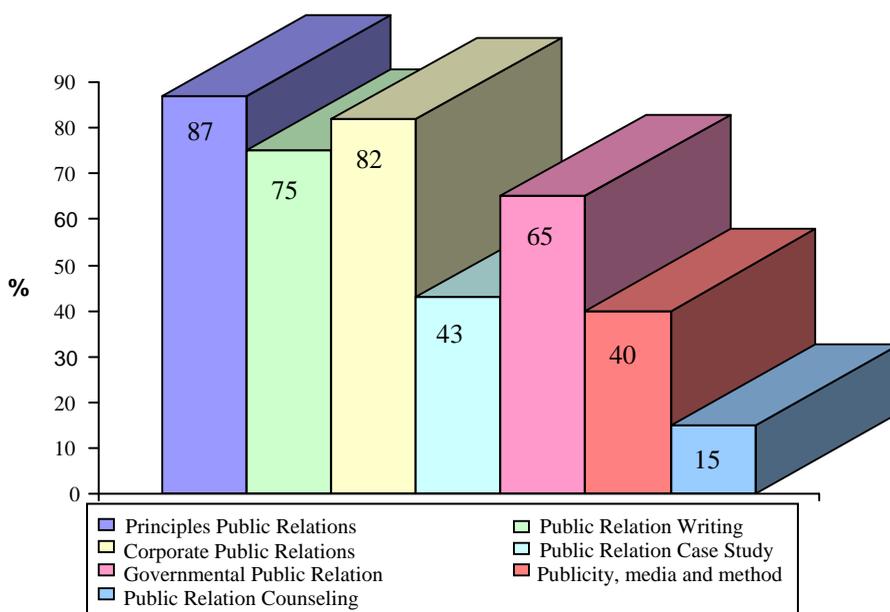


Figure 10: The Appropriateness of e-Learning in Public Relations Courses

Weekly Usage of the e-Learning Forum Among Genders

The study found that the number of male students using the forum weekly was less than the female students. Most of the male students used the forum to obtain notes while female students used it for discussions and questions regarding their assignments and as a reference tool for their

examination preparation and paperwork. The results of the study also showed that female students had more active discussions than male students.

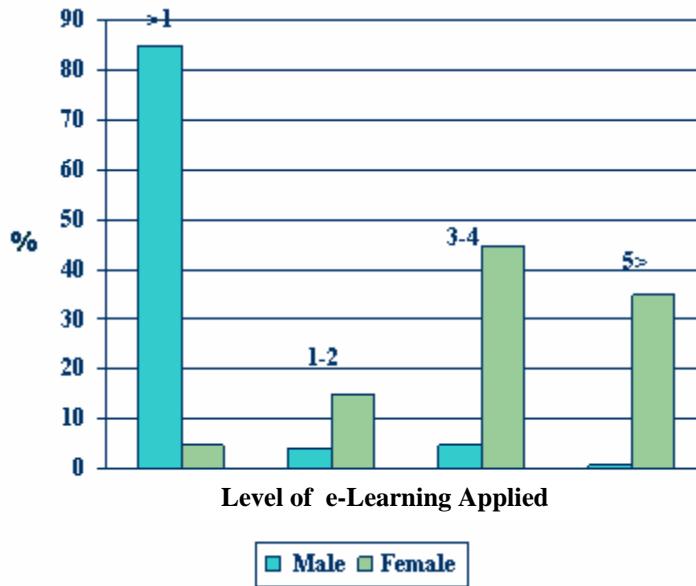


Figure 11: Weekly Usage of e-Learning Among Genders

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that the e-learning courses offered by distance education have a strong impact on the Malaysian education system. Most respondents agreed that public relations courses can be taught through e-learning. However, there must be a high degree of commitment and willingness to enhance both the teaching as well as the technology-based skills of the academician or facilitator who plays a dominant role in conducting the public relations courses through e-learning.

Modern public relations practitioners are facing more difficulties and challenges as the speed of information and globalisation alter the pace and landscape of the profession. All organisations, even non-multinational companies, are affected by globalisation. Public relations has evolved to be more challenging as the technology used becomes more and more

advanced. In Malaysia, the application of e-learning in the education system started when universities introduced distance learning education. Distance learning education was developed to give working students an opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge and enhance their career development. Since the role of public relations has been challenged by globalisation and new technologies, distance learning and e-learning are interesting new educational methods that will keep newcomers in the public relations field abreast with changing technologies and media.

The following recommendations are presented to increase the importance of e-learning in public relations courses. (1) The moderator should be more interactive with students, using chat rooms or discussion forums to respond to students' comments and ideas and not just correct spelling and grammatical errors. (2) The moderator should ensure that students are interested in using the forum to study and interact with each other; he/she should try to understand the students' needs. (3) E-learning should consider involving a third party offering services, infrastructures, moderators, technical support, management, etc. (4) E-learning for public relations courses should include a manual or a complete module for the reference of the students to ensure that they are successful in the courses. (5) Students, moderators and all parties involved should be trained on the software used for e-learning to ensure that all materials are understood. (6) Good relationships with libraries, other universities and related agencies are crucial for e-learning to be useful and on par with other conventional courses. (7) The content of certain public relations subjects should be adjusted to be available through e-learning. (8) Research should be done to investigate how future hybrid public relations courses can be offered online.

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