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Training Media Professionals For National And Media Needs:
The Role Of The Department Of Media Studies,
University Of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

By

Noor Bathi Haji Badarudin
"Training Media Professionals for National and Media Needs: The Role of the Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur"

Introduction

The present Department of Media Studies in the University of Malaya started as a Program in Creative and Descriptive Writing (Rancangan Penulisan Kreatif dan Deskriptif - RPKD) in the 1977/78 academic year with an intake of 30 first year students. The establishment of the program was the brainchild of Professor Ungku Aziz and several academic figures in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the university. At that time, they thought that the mastery of the Malay language and the quality of the students' writings were generally weak and disorganized while the field of writing is very crucial for the development of human civilization.

From the perspective of the society and the environment in the 1970s, the establishment of a program in writing was considered necessary since at that time, the development of education had created a thirst for reading materials in the Malay language, be they literary or academic. The progress in learning and knowledge of students educated in the Malay language also demanded improvement in the quality of reading materials in that language. To realize the idea, a committee was set up comprised of representatives from each department in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which included Professor Wahab Ali (Department of Malay Studies) and Dr. Lloyd Fernando (English Department). RPKD was approved by the Senate and
agreed to by the university's Council and the Conference of Vice-Chancellors on 20 December 1976. It was first put under the auspices of the Department of Malay Studies until it was finally announced as an independent department in the 1987/88 academic session. With its elevation to the level of a department, its name was changed to Department of Writing since the term Creative and Descriptive Writing was thought to be inaccurate and unsuitable because all forms of writing have both creative and descriptive features. Its name was once again changed to Department of Media Studies since writing was considered a misnomer and not representative of the range of courses now offered by the department. Initially, the objective of the program was to produce professional writers in the national language, in line with the development and the needs of the country. Later, as the program develops, the department churns out not only professional writers but also print and broadcast journalists, editors, television producers, copywriters, public relations officers, researchers, university lecturers and administrators.

The Program

The courses offered by RPKD were divided into 3 categories:

1. Language and techniques of writing;
2. Basic knowledge related to writing, such as philosophy, logic and rhetorics;
3. Arts and Social Science Courses.

The courses on language and writing techniques did not exceed 40 percent of the whole of the department's curriculum while 60 percent were allocated for elective courses constituted of basic knowledge related to writing, arts and social sciences. This breakdown in percentages was based on the proposal from the Regional Conference on Communication Teaching and
Training held by the Asian Mass Communication and Information Centre (AMIC) in Korea in 1972.

The courses in RPKD were offered for a period of three years from the 1977/78 to the 1990/91 academic year, when the University of Malaya extended its undergraduate program to four years. Students who wished to major in the field must take writing as one of the three departmental electives in the first year. For the second and third years (subsequently revised to third and fourth years), writing courses were offered as a single major covering five to seven units.

The minimum qualification to follow this course of study is a principal pass in Bahasa Malaysia in the Higher School Certificate (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia - STPM).

To date, 346 graduates from the department have completed their studies successfully. Most of them have been employed in fields that are related directly and indirectly to their coursework, namely journalism, advertising, public relations, publishing, broadcasting, teaching and administration.

Curriculum

Students who plan to major in media studies are required to take AK 103 - Mass Media Organizations and AK 107 - Literature, Rhetorics and Communications: Selected Reading I in their first year and AK 241 - Introduction to Video, Television and Film and AK 242 - Literature, Rhetorics and Communications: Selected Reading II in their second year. In their third and fourth years, they are required to take a combination of compulsory and elective courses. For the compulsory courses, they have to choose four out of the following five units in their third year:

AK 303 - Rhetorics I
AK 311 - Editing
AK 327 - Theory of Ethics
AK 326 - Communication Theories

or

AK 331 - Literary Theories

As for the electives, they can select two units from the following four categories:

**1 Unit from Journalism Writing**
AK 309 - Journalism Writing
AK 310 - Photo Journalism
AK 328 - Current Issues in Malaysia
AK 329 - Feature Writing I
AK 314 - Advertising

**1 Unit from Literary Writing**
AK 318 - Fiction Writing I
AK 319 - Writing Literary Criticism

**1 Unit from Film/Video/TV Writing**
AK 322 - Film Theory
AK 323 - Film Criticism

**1 Unit from Publishing**
AK 324 - Book Design and Production
AK 330 - The Economics of Publishing

The compulsory courses for the fourth year are as follows:
AK 402 - Rhetorics II
AK 420 - Publishing Management
AK 426 - Communication Research Methods
AK 490 - Research Project

Meanwhile, two units of elective courses can be selected from the following four categories:

**1 Unit from Journalism Writing**
AK 414 - Public Relations
AK 416 - Biography Writing
AK 429 - Feature Writing II
1 Unit from Literary Writing
AK 412 - Poetry Writing
AK 427 - Theory of Aesthetics
AK 440 - Fiction Writing II
1 Unit from Film/Video/TV Writing
AK 415 - Film Script Writing
AK 417 - Film Directing
1 Unit from Publishing
AK 430 - Basic Book Marketing

Practical Training

The department makes it compulsory for every student to undergo two months of practical training. Students are assigned to newspaper organizations (such as the New Straits Times, The Star, Berita Harian, Utusan Melayu and Karangkraf), television stations (RTM and TV3), advertising agencies (McCann-Erickson and Union Forty Five), public relations companies (Asia Public Relations Consultants), publishing houses (Berita Publishing, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Creative Enterprise, Longman and the University Press), film production units (FINAS, Filem Negara and independent production houses) as well as research units during their third year's long vacation. A satisfactory evaluation of their practical work is necessary before a student can be passed and conferred a degree.

Students who have performed well during their 'internship' and impressed their supervisors at the respective organizations are usually offered jobs upon completion of their studies.
Diploma and Masters in Publishing Studies

In the 1991/92 academic session, the department introduced a Diploma and Masters Program in Publishing Studies. Among the objectives of the program is to enable editors to acquire knowledge and skills required in their profession and to train them to do scholarly research on the publishing world in order to meet the country's needs in developing its book industry.

Candidates for the Diploma in Publishing Studies should have an honors degree or a degree with at least three years' experience in publishing and a distinction in Bahasa Malaysia and a pass in English 122 at the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level. The full-time diploma program covers a period of 12 months and comprises of three components, namely coursework, practical training and a project.

(1) Coursework

The coursework consist of 7 courses as follows, each with 42-56 contact hours:

AK 901 - Seminar on the Publishing World
AK 902 - Editing in Bahasa Malaysia
AK 903 - Marketing and Distribution
AK 904 - Management of Publishing Organization
AK 905 - Publishing Technology
AK 906 - Editing in a Second Language
AK 426 - Communication Research Methods

or

AK 907 - Selected Great Works

(2) Practical Training

Candidates for the diploma have to undergo at least four months of practical training in their second semester in the field of management, editing, business and production in publishing houses that are recognized by the department. To date, students have undergone their practicum at the
University of Technology Malaysia (UTM), the Agriculture University Malaysia (UPM), the University of Malaya (UM) Press, the National University of Malaysia (UKM) Press, Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd., Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd. and Longman Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. A candidate has to submit a report upon completion of their practical work.

(3) Project
The project must involve editing of an original or translated works that will be published or other projects that are agreed to by the department. The candidate has to submit a report within a three year maximum period from the date he/she registers for the diploma program.

For admission into the Masters' degree in Publishing Studies, a candidate has to have a Diploma in Publishing Studies from the University of Malaya or its equivalent. The Masters' program is offered on a full-time or part-time basis and entails research work and a dissertation.

The department is also considering other programs such as Post-graduate Studies in the future.

Academic Activities
The department also conducts academic activities such as seminars, talks, workshops and exercises in public speaking. Among the earlier activities were the Department of Writing Series of Public Speaking by A. Samad Ismail (a veteran journalist and the winner of the National Journalist Award), a talk by an American writer, Blance Boyd, a seminar on "Book Marketing Strategies", a seminar on "Newspaper Organizations", and a creative writing workshop in Bintulu, Sarawak.

Lecturers, from time to time, report their research findings at seminars and conferences at the departmental, faculty, university, national and international levels. Among the completed and on-going research projects by the faculty are the Project on A Dictionary of Malaysian Biographies (by
University of Technology Malaysia (UTM), the Agriculture University Malaysia (UPM), the University of Malaya (UM) Press, the National University of Malaysia (UKM) Press, Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd., Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd. and Longman Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. A candidate has to submit a report upon completion of their practical work.

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Prof. Abu Bakar Hamid and his team under the Institut Pengajian Tinggi - IPT), an IRPA project on Book Publishing and Marketing (by the instructors in Publishing Studies) and individual projects on the History of Utusan Melayu (by Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar), the Presentation and Content of Religious Magazines and Content Analysis of Advertising Copies (by Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak), Women in Journalism (a research project commissioned by the Association of Women Journalists, Malaysia), Images of Women in the Media and Textual Analysis of Television Programs and News Broadcasts (by Noor Bathi Haji Badarudin).

Research on the media are also being carried out by graduate and undergraduate students for their doctoral dissertations, masters theses and graduation exercises. Among the topics that have been investigated are the Coverage of the October 1987 Crackdown on Dissent, Political Discourse/Rhetoric, Book Marketing, Repackaging of Foreign News for Local Broadcasts and the Promotion of National Integration by Local Television Programs. Masters and Doctoral candidates who are registered with the department also present their research proposal at the departmental and faculty graduate seminars.

Presentations of professional projects, such as video production preview and book launching, are held annually by third and fourth year students. Experts from the publishing industry are often invited to give talks to students in the Diploma and Masters Program in Publishing Studies.

Recently, the university's financial committee approved RM 700,000 for the production of the film "Johnny" by the film instructor Dr. Anuar Nor Arai and students in his film production course. In conjunction with the film project, a photography exhibition was organized by the students at the Arts Concourse on 20 February 1993.
Co-curricular Activities

The department is a patron of the Ikatan Sastera Universiti Malaya (ISUM), a literary association on campus. Through this association, the students are able to organize various activities, which includes the annual inter-varsity short story writing contest, script writing workshops for radio and television drama, poetry reading, talks, discussions and literary meetings. For 1993, the department with the cooperation of ISUM held a Delegation Project to Medan from 19-26 April.

Apart from ISUM, students in the department are also involved in activities organized by the National Organization of Writers (Gabungan Penulis-penulis Nasional - GAPENA) and the Malay Journalists Association (Persatuan Wartawan Melayu).

Other activities such as visits to media organizations, expeditions to Taman Negara, the mountains and rivers in Malaysia are also organized by the department or on individual lecturer's initiatives.

A Review

In order to determine whether the programs, be they at the undergraduate or graduate levels, offered by the department meet the needs of the media industry as well as the nation, one has to appraise the philosophy, objectives and approach/es to teaching media/communication studies among the faculty.

It should be reiterated that being a department in the university (and not a vocational college), the emphasis of the programs at the Department of Media Studies is on the ability to think critically and analytically, not on the acquisition of skills and techniques that will be applied to certain professions. However, to complement the core and elective papers that are more academically oriented, reporting, writing, editing, production and marketing assignments, professional projects and practical work are
required for courses in Journalism Writing, Feature Writing, Editing, Introduction to Video, TV and Film, Book Design and Production, Basic Book Marketing, Advertising, Public Relations, Photojournalism, Film Script Writing and The Art of Film Direction.

The lack of facilities such as a news laboratory, a news "morgue", a campus newspaper, a photo laboratory as well as a recording studio for video, tv and film production are obstacles to creating a simulated working environment for students in the department. The solutions to this problem is to utilise facilities within the university, for example the video production studio at the Language Center, or outside the university, for example the film production studios at Filem Negara.

The lack of manpower and expertise are also obstacles to the departmental efforts in the training of media professionals in meeting the needs of the industry. For instance, a single course in Journalism Writing which is supposed to impart knowledge and skills in the routines and conventions of news reporting, writing and editing could not possibly produce professional journalists who are ready to enter the job market. Big newspaper organizations like the News Straits Times (NST), therefore, require potential employees to go through a six months' pre-employment training program (PET) before they are recruited.

It is undeniable that there is still room for improvement, especially in the areas of news reporting, writing and editing. More specialized courses, such as economic, political and science journalism, should be offered to enable students to be more versatile and find their niches in the job market. The courses that are taught at present (Journalism Writing, Feature Writing I & II) are too general and broad-based. If possible, the department should also attempt to set up a news laboratory, a news "morgue" and a students' newspaper. In regards to a campus newspaper, the idea has been discussed at length during the departmental meetings but the project failed...
to garner the students' active participation. One of the reasons for the lack of students' commitment could be the emphasis on "spread" rather than "depth" in the department's curriculum. Students are required to take core papers that may not be related to their interests and optional papers that encompass a wide range of fields, thus there are no opportunities for specialization in a certain area, for example news or broadcast journalism, advertising or public relations. The phenomenon of "accidental" professions, whereby students are employed in fields that are not related to their training at the university, should be avoided.

Among the solutions to the problems would be to allow students from other faculties to register for courses in the department and to extend the duration of practical training. The department has considered increasing the period of students' attachments with media organizations from two to four months or a whole semester in order to provide the opportunity for students to gain more working experience but the plan is yet to be implemented.

The shortage of editors coupled with the number of titles to be published created a high demand for professional editors in the book publishing industry. The lack of graduates trained in publishing studies ensure the marketability of students enrolled in the Diploma and Masters' Program in Publishing Studies. The program is definitely geared to book publishing, with its emphasis on evaluation, editing and production although exposure to the mechanics of book marketing is minimal. This shortcoming may be redressed by students who are interested in marketing books during their practical training with publishing houses.

Inspite of the lack of manpower and facilities within the department, students who have graduated do not face problems in getting employment at newspaper organizations, broadcasting stations, advertising agencies, and public relations companies. In fact, the lure of the corporate media sector, in terms of attractive salary and remunerations, limits the number of graduates
who seek employment with government agencies or further their studies to graduate levels at the academy. Lastly, as a feather to the department's cap, several of its graduates have made their names as foreign correspondants, editors, journalists, radio and tv producers, tv program hosts, advertising executives and winners of national awards for excellent performance in the media industry.